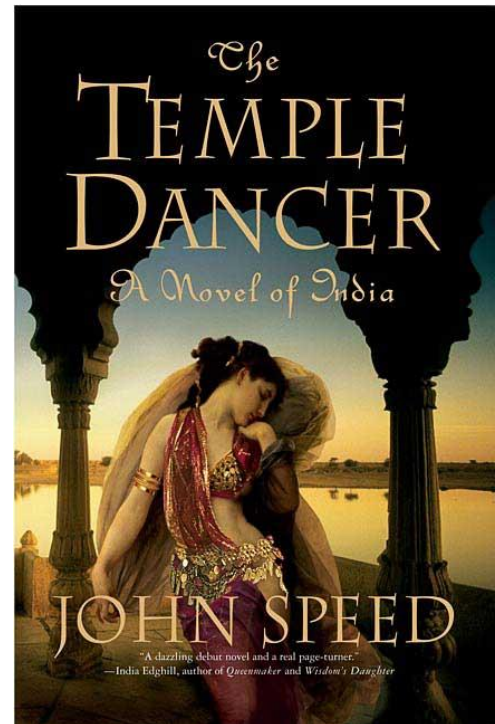


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Temple Dancer *A Novel of India*

By John Speed

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Temple Dancer* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Temple Dancer*.

About the Book

India, 1657.

When Maya, a graceful, young temple dancer with a mysterious past, is sold into slavery, she enters a world of intrigue, violence, and forbidden love. Bought by a Portuguese trader and sold as a concubine to the dissolute vizier of Bijapur, she embarks on a treacherous journey.

In a caravan led by the dangerous settlement man Da Gama, she travels by elephant on the hostile road to Bijapur, joined by Geraldo, a Portuguese adventurer, and Pathan, a handsome prince who carries a dark secret. Together with Lucinda, a beautiful, spoiled young Goan heiress, and the manipulative eunuch Slipper, they climb the windswept mountain road through the Western Ghats.



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When their caravan is attacked by bandits, the travelers' lives are turned upside down. In the aftermath, Maya and Lucinda suddenly find themselves stranded in a strange, exotic world, a world filled with passion, romance, and deception, pure love and lurking evil, where nothing is as it seems and the two women are faced with great temptation as well as heart-wrenching decisions that will affect the rest of their lives.

Greed, politics, commitment, courage, love, and intolerance mesh to form a vibrant Indian tapestry. With spectacular settings, unforgettable characters, fierce sensuality, and intense scholarship, this adventure-packed novel marks the debut of an exciting new storyteller.

The Temple Dancer is the first volume of John Speed's Indian trilogy, a three-book journey that will cover the final years of the Mogul Empire and the rise of the Marathis under the highwayman Shivaji. It will leave you breathlessly awaiting his next novel.

About the Author

John Speed began studying Indian history, art, and religion while still in high school. For more than thirty years, his explorations deepened as he became absorbed in tales of the fall of the Mogul Empire and of the rise of the rebel prince Shivaji. During his many visits to India, he has stood on crumbling battlements, crawled through lightless caves, bathed in sacred rivers, wandered through forgotten gardens, prayed at old mosques and ancient temples, joined in night-long *kirtans* and *qwalis*, cheered on ecstatic temple dancers, and laid his head at the feet of hundreds of saints both living and dead, Hindus and Muslims. Speed is a freelance political consultant and journalist who cofounded a successful on-line newspaper. He now lives with his dogs in a very small house overlooking Swami's Beach in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, California. *The Temple Dancer* is his first novel.

Discussion Questions

1. From the first line of *The Temple Dancer* to the final scene, poison plays a central role. How many different ways do the characters use arsenic? For some characters, poison represents power. In what ways does simply possessing a poison affect their actions? What other poisons are at work as the story unfolds?
2. The author says that the Hindu concept of Dharma figures highly in *The Temple Dancer*. Dharma is "individual conformity with the principles that govern the universe." Dharma doesn't necessarily mean "goodness" in the typical sense. The dharma of a thief might be to steal. Part of the human condition is to try to understand one's dharma. Which *Temple Dancer* characters follow a path of dharma? How do their fates differ from those that fail to follow dharma? Does a character's dharma change as the story progresses?
3. Evil plays a key role in the action of *The Temple Dancer*. How does evil differ from misfortune? Which characters are truly evil? Which characters are most affected by evil?



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4. Some of the cultures and classes of *The Temple Dancer* are obvious: Hindus, Muslims, Portuguese; rich and poor; men, women, eunuchs. Others are less clear: classes defined by family, vocation, and so on. As you read *The Temple Dancer*, what classes and cultures did you encounter that were new to you? Which seemed familiar? Most *Temple Dancer* characters fall into numerous classes. How do the cross currents of class and culture affect their interactions?

5. All the primary *Temple Dancer* characters are transformed. Which characters grow, and which merely change? Which character do you believe undergoes the biggest transformation? What accounts for this change? Will the change be permanent?

6. Women are often seen as passive, but in *The Temple Dancer*, women take active roles. How do the actions of women characters compare to those of the men? In what ways are the women more restrained? More free? When she reviewed one of his earlier works, Speed's agent, Jean Naggar, complained that "those women are made of cardboard!" Speed says he felt compelled to write *The Temple Dancer* in part to prove that he could write "believable women". Can any man really write "believable women"? How well does Speed manage to accurately reflect the thoughts and feelings of women?

7. *The Temple Dancer* went through a number of title changes. Some of the earlier titles considered were: *The Settlement Man*, *Poison*, *Web of Light*, and *Bijapur*. How does a title affect a story? How would *The Temple Dancer* seem different with one of the rejected titles?

8. Novelists use Point of View (POV) to guide the reader through a story. In *The Temple Dancer* the author carefully chooses which characters think, and which characters sense. With Da Gama and Lucinda, for example, the story describes both their thoughts and their sensations (what they see, hear, etc.). Some characters have their thoughts described but not their sensations; others have sensations but no thoughts. How do you think the author chose the characters that would think and those that would sense? How do those choices affect how the story is told? Would the story be different if it were told from the point of view of Geraldo and Pathan? What about Maya? She first expresses her thoughts quite late in the story. Why did the author choose that moment to begin to reveal her thoughts?

9. John Speed was an actor and a playwright before becoming a novelist. He says he was inspired by Shakespeare's history plays, which borrow freely from other sources. Can you identify books, plays, or movies that might have influenced him as he wrote *The Temple Dancer*?

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