

READING GROUP GUIDE

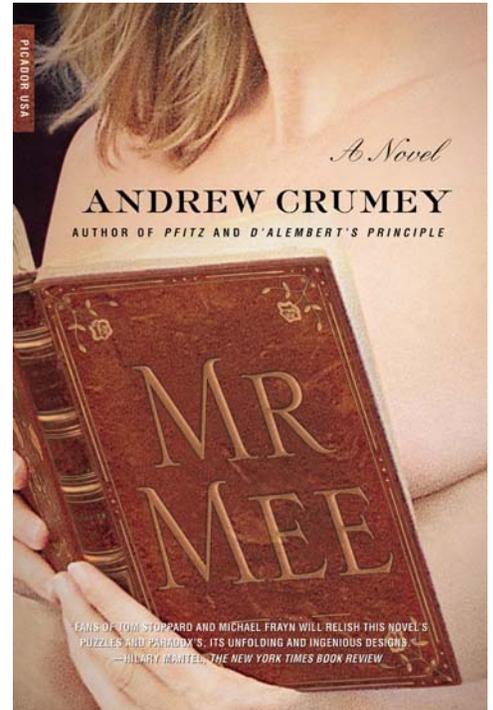
Mr. Mee

A Novel

by Andrew Crumey

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Mr. Mee* 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 *Mr. Mee*.

About the Book

Mr. Mee is a highly inventive, often funny, and always thought-provoking novel about life, love, learning, and the twirling of all three within the vortex of literature. Though it is a complex story of big ideas and esoteric details, unknown philosophers and forgotten theories, cutting-edge technology and centuries-old literary gossip, this book never takes itself too seriously. Indeed, as several critics have observed, novelist Andrew Crumey's writing is witty, imaginative, and knowing in the manner of Calvino or Borges. Presented in three distinct, only slightly connected story lines, *Mr. Mee* primarily concerns the mysterious creation—and the even more mysterious disappearance—of a enormous and incomparable “alternate theory of universe” known as *Rosier's Encyclopedia*. From the Paris of Rousseau to that of Proust, from a university campus in

contemporary Scotland to a pornographic site on the World Wide Web. Crumey's novel is a dependably digressive and delightfully diverting field trip to the borderland between historical reality and literary imagination. Reading and discussing this novel—and developing answers to the many questions it poses, both internally and externally—will appeal to book lovers of all tastes.

Praise

“Enriching, enlightening, and highly entertaining.”—The Boston Globe

“A good-humored, intelligent, very up-to-date novel whose narrators, like physicists, shape reality by observing it.”—The New York Times

“Like a trompe l’oeil painting, or a puzzle that invites us to draw at least two contradictory, yet equally plausible conclusions, *Mr. Mee* disturbs as it diverts, charms as it challenges.”—Washington Times

“Clever, puckish, and artfully complicated...[Crumney's book] raises seductive questions about the nature of experience...Fans of Tom Stoppard and Michael Frayn will relish this novel's puzzles and paradoxes, its unfolding and ingenious designs... Janty and sometimes enjoyably silly... Crumey is a confident narrator, and his book has a heart as well as a brain. It is not only an intellectual treat but a moving meditation on aspiration and desire.”—Hilary Mantel, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Crumey tells [his] tale with elegance and humor, and in rich detail. His immense talent reveals itself most potently in his ability to find remarkable connections in otherwise disparate intellectual concepts conceived over the course of several centuries, and then to turn those connections into a coherent and lively story... The many surprises and twists [in this book] provide a rare and spectacular reading experience... *Mr. Mee* is a challenging book, but it's one to savor.”—Andrew C. Ervin, *The Washington Post Book World*

“An intellectual romp... Crumey has spun a delightful brain-tickler of a novel that undermines its own pretensions, a subversion that is in fact at the heart of the book's very real debate over the power of literature to redeem or corrupt—or do anything at all.”—Maureen Shelly, *Time Out New York*

“Crumey has written another novel of ideas in the grand tradition of Calvino, Borges, and Kundera...Delightful.”—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

About the Author

Andrew Crumey is the author of three previous novels: *Music, In a Foreign Language*, which won Scotland's Saltire Prize for Best First Novel; *Pfitz*, which was a New York Times Notable Book; and *D'Alembert's Principle*, which *The Wall Street Journal* praised as “at

once elegant, provocative, and thoroughly entertaining.” Crumey lives in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England.

Discussion Questions

1. Identify the three separate narrative strands that run through *Mr. Mee*, describing the characters, settings, goals, and conflicts that comprise each strand. How do these three strands relate to one another? Also, in your judgment, has author Andrew Crumey successfully interwoven these strands? Explain why or why not.
2. First and foremost, this is a comic novel. Name and locate the various types of comedy—satire, farce, slapstick, parody, and so on—that appear in these pages. Which did you consider the most effective, and which the least? Defend your answers with references from the book.
3. What did you, as a reader, come to learn—over the course of this novel, in each of the three different narratives—about Jean-Bernard Roseir and his elusive Encyclopedia? Why do you suppose the character of Rosier is never encountered directly? What other such “ghosts” are important to the direction or design of this novel?
4. Of the main characters in this book—Mr. Mee, Ferrand, Minard, and Dr. Petrie—at least two of them are avid readers and one of them, Petrie, is an author. Explain Petrie’s unorthodox notions, as culled from Proust and elsewhere, on the complex relation between autobiography and fiction. How do these ideas inform his doctoral thesis (and book) entitled *Ferrand and Minard*? And how do such ideas inform *Mr. Mee* more generally? Finally, consider *Mr. Mee* as a piece of writing that is itself about writing—both art and craft, impulse and creation, expression and communication, lie and truth.
5. In Chapter 11, the jovial and cubby 18th-century Parisian copyist known as Minard encounters another character who is known as Minard. How do you (as a reader) explain this occurrence? Where and why does this meeting happen? And how does this scene fit in with the novel’s thematic blurring of literary, historical, and personal identities? Also, why do Ferrand and Minard keep insisting that “these are not [their] real names”? Discuss the nature of selfhood as it is illustrated in *Mr. Mee*.
6. While trying to seduce his beloved Louisa, in Chapter 12, Dr. Petrie talks to the pretty young co-ed about his personal life (his wife, her job, their lack of children, etc.). In doing so, he is reminded of a similarity to the family life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Louisa’s reply is brief but telling: “Yes. Back to Rousseau.” Why does she mean by making this remark? Does it seem justified to you—or sarcastic, impatient, or the like? Fully explain your view in light of Dr. Petrie’s behavior.
7. As a group, explore the novel’s manifold philosophical aspects. The syllogisms of Aristotle, the paradoxes of Zeno, probability theory, and quantum physics are but a few of the actual philosophical concepts at least touched on in these pages. Explain these ideas, citing outside research as necessary, and point out where and why the surface in the novel. Can you identify other such “real” constructs? What about the make-believe theories and philosophies running throughout *Mr. Mee*? What are these, and where do they show up?
8. One of the major themes in this book is the human mind’s ongoing struggle between information and wisdom. Identify those phenomena in *Mr. Mee* (fictional, historical,

technological, or otherwise) which might symbolize information, and those which might stand for wisdom. How is this struggle framed and presented within the novel? And how, if at all, is it resolved?

9. Several of the chapters in *Mr. Mee* are rendered as letters. As readers we can identify the author of these letters, but rarely do we know who exactly is reading them. Where else is this awkward, lopsided, and mysterious relationship discernible in the novel? Also, discuss this book's properties as a literary labyrinth or textual jigsaw puzzle. Compare it with any other works you have encountered in this genre (such as those by Eco, Kundera, Stoppard, Borges, and so on).
10. Describe the Epilogue of *Mr. Mee*. Who is narrating this passage, and when and where does it take place? How is each of the novel's three narratives changed and/or concluded by this ending? And how does the "Théâtrophone" device described in the Epilogue relate to the novel's information-versus-wisdom theme (especially as discussed earlier, in question #5)?

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