

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

READER'S GUIDE

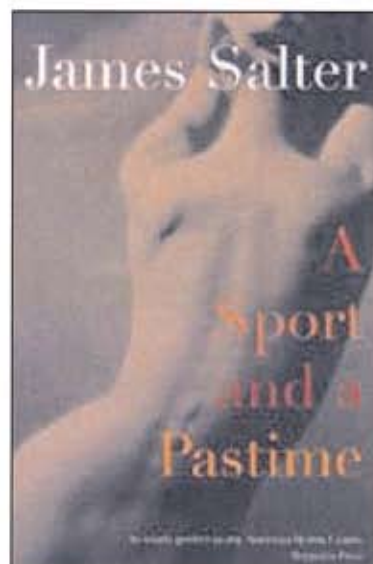
A Sport and a Pastime

by James Salter



"A tour de force of erotic realism,
a romantic cliff-hanger."

—*The New York Times Book Review*



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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to enrich your experience of reading James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime*. A beautiful, lyrical tale of an ill-fated love affair set against the backdrop of a myriad of small French towns, this stunning novel is observed through the eyes and imagination of a narrator who, in the story of Dean and Anne-Marie's relationship, captures some essential aspect of what it means to be truly alive.

When we first meet Dean, a handsome Yale dropout possessed of great charm and a certain confident aloofness, he seems a man for whom life is easy and effortless. During what is intended to be a brief holiday in France, Dean pursues a passionate affair with Anne-Marie, an alluring, beautiful young shopgirl who is wise beyond her years and experience. Driving across the countryside in his elegant, somewhat dilapidated Delage, they stop at picturesque hotels and engage in romantic trysts that build in intimacy and ardor. Issues of class prove a stumbling block for Dean, however, and as Anne-Marie begins to shed her doubts about him, he vacillates between envisioning a comfortable life with Anne-Marie and wanting to escape from her suffocating proximity. The narrator keenly and acutely observes and imagines the lovers' public sojourns and private embraces, interpreting both his own voyeurism and their affair as criminal acts. In *A Sport and a Pastime*, Salter has created a perfect gem of a book, at once an erotic masterpiece and a haunting, transcendent examination of humanity and sexual desire.

1. The book opens with a train trip across France. What images are used to describe the landscape? What underlying emotion is communicated? How does the trip help to set up the story that follows? The narrator states, "I've said Autun, but it could easily have been Auxerre. I'm sure you'll come to realize that" (p. 17). What does he mean by this? What role does France play in the narrative? Why does the narrator address the reader directly?
2. In the first chapter there are many vivid, alluring portraits of women the narrator does not know. Why did Salter include these descriptions? What effect is achieved?
3. What does the narrator feel about being a foreigner in France? What is Dean's response? Do Dean's amorous adventures make him more at home in this foreign land?
4. The narrator says, "I am only the servant of life. He [Dean] is an inhabitant" (p. 58), and "I breathe to the rhythm of his [life] which is stronger than mine" (p. 65). What does the narrator mean by these statements? What do they tell us about the narrator's relationship with and attitude toward Dean?
5. The narrator often quotes other writers to help illustrate the points he wants to make. He paraphrases Rainer Maria Rilke: "There are no classes for beginners in life, the most difficult thing is always asked of one right away" (p. 49). Later he states, "Great lovers lie in hell, the poet says" (p. 100). What do we learn about the story and the characters from these passages?
6. Repeatedly the narrator refers to himself and Dean as criminals: "I search for the exact ciphers which serve to open it all as if for a safe combination" (p. 65); "It's like the start of a crime of passion" (p. 80); "The simple mechanics of crime" (p. 182); "It's as if I've been in prison" (pp. 184–85). What are their crimes? How do their crimes affect our opinions of them? Does Dean view himself as a criminal?
7. The narrator says that Dean is "aware, for the first time, that she [Anne-Marie] is fully able to speak, to create images strong enough to alter his life" (p. 69). The narrator also imagines that Anne-Marie "understands effortlessly. Life is all quite clear to her. She is one with it. She moves in it like a fish, never wondering if it has a bottom, shores, worlds above it . . ." (p. 73). Salter once stated, "In my books, the woman is always the stronger." Is this true in *A Sport and a Pastime*? What are Anne-Marie's strengths and weaknesses?

8. The narrator declares, "Some things . . . I saw, some discovered, and some dreamed, and I can no longer differentiate between them" (pp. 57–58), and admits, "I am not telling the truth about Dean, I am inventing him. I am creating him out of my own inadequacies, you must always remember that" (p. 85). What does this tell us about the story? In light of this, is the narrator reliable?
9. After Dean is pulled over by the police, the narrator says, "He knows he's been a fool" (p. 86). Soon he buys his first present for Anne-Marie; why? How has the incident with the police affected Dean?
10. Violent images sometimes appear in *A Sport and a Pastime*: "Worn knives with the edge of a razor have flensed them while their eyes were still fluttering" (p. 27), and "They seem to be carving the flock" (p. 111). Why? How do these kinds of images inform the story?
11. What happens when Dean finally meets Anne-Marie's parents? What does it mean for him and for her? The narrator observes of Dean: "He feels the unhurried gaze of the father on him. He tries to return it, is determined to, but involuntarily his eyes flicker away for an instant, and that is enough. It's finished" (p. 123). What has finished? What has transpired? Why does Dean not want his parents to meet or even know about Anne-Marie?
12. The narrator foreshadows Dean's death in numerous ways: "Suddenly it is quite clear how acrobatic, how dangerous everything is. It seems not to be his own life he is living, but another, the life of some victim" (p. 164), and "It is only after the door to the room closes and he turns the key that Dean feels anything other than death" (p. 172). Is Dean's death sudden, or is it the result of a slow dissolution, the logical conclusion to the way that he develops in the narrative?
13. In the end, Dean promises to return for Anne-Marie. Does the narrator believe that Dean will come back? Does Dean believe it? If not, why does he say that he will? How does the narrator feel about Dean's departure?
14. What holds Dean and Anne-Marie together? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship? How does their relationship compare to those of the married couples in the story? What are Dean's failings in his relationship with Anne-Marie?
15. Why did Salter choose the title *A Sport and a Pastime*? How does the opening epigraph serve the book? Which of the characters would view life as a sport and a pastime?
16. Throughout the book are images that blend the crude and the sublime, such as "They fuck in lovers' sunshine" (p. 128). What do these images accomplish? What was Salter trying to say about the sexual relationship between Anne-Marie and Dean?

17. *The New York Times Book Review* said of *A Sport and a Pastime*, "Archingly graceful like a glorious Fourth of July rocket, it illuminates the dark sky of sex," and called it "a tour de force of erotic realism." What makes the story so erotic?

18. In a recent interview, Salter discussed *A Sport and a Pastime*: "Usually in books the erotic passages are an aria, and the rest is recitative. I wanted to do the reverse, in which the eroticism was the recitative and just went on all the time, since it's so much a part of life." Does Salter achieve this goal? If so, how?

FUTHER READING

Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*; John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*; Colette, *Collected Stories*; Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night*; Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Moveable Feast*; William Maxwell, *The Chateau*; Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*; Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAMES SALTER was born in New Jersey in 1926. He graduated from West Point in 1945 and joined the Army Air Force. Serving as a fighter pilot, he flew more than one hundred missions during the Korean War. He is the author of the novels *The Hunters* (1957), *The Arm of Flesh* (1961), *Light Years* (1976), *Solo Faces* (1981), and *Dusk* (1988), as well as the memoir *Burning the Days* (1997). He has also written stories, articles, and screenplays. In 1982 he received a grant from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He lives in Long Island, New York, and Aspen, Colorado.