



# Reading Group Gold

## The Confessions of Max Tivoli

by Andrew Sean Greer

“Heartrending...beautifully written...this is a rich and mesmerizing fable. Time will not reverse its impact.”—*People* (4-star Critic’s Choice)

### Reader’s Guide Synopsis

An utterly original love story, *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* incorporates an intriguing plot twist that is by turns fascinating and horrific. The beguiling protagonist, Max Tivoli, is born with the appearance of a man of seventy. As his body grows younger, Max ages intellectually and emotionally—granting him a painful and alienating existence that allows him one pleasure (or curse): to fall in love with the same woman, Alice Levy, over and over again. But she is not the only recurring figure in his world. His childhood friend, Hughie Dempsey, appears in Max’s life at its most intense turning points. Hughie always knows Max’s true age and identity, though it takes years before Max realizes that his best friend is also the greatest love of Alice’s life.

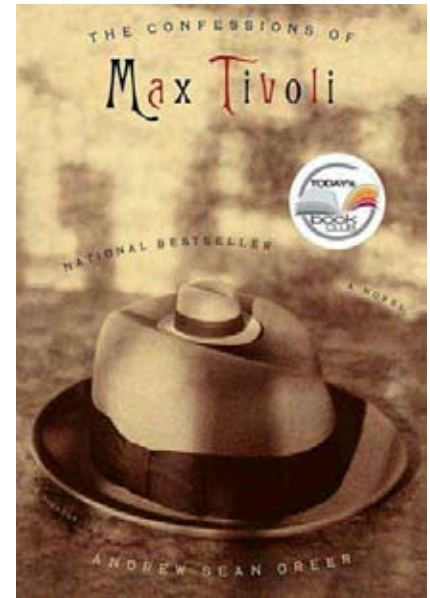
Set against the vibrant backdrop of turn-of-the-century San Francisco, *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* challenges our assumptions about the nature of love, of time, and of the difference between appearance and reality. Daring and imaginative, it’s a novel that is sure to spark lively conversation.

### About The Author

Andrew Sean Greer is the author of the story collection *How It Was for Me* (Picador) and most recently a novel, *The Path of Minor Planets* (Picador). His work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Ploughshares* (Emerson College’s literary journal), and *Story*. He lives in San Francisco, California.

### Discussion

1. What did the novel’s epigraph and opening sentence mean to you when you began the book, and what do they mean to you now? Are they romantic notions, statements on the hopelessness of love, or perhaps something in between?
2. When you began this book, did you consider growing younger to be only positive? Do you believe that now? Looking at Max’s life, what are some of the advantages of old age?



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3. In his focus on Alice, has Max missed the one person who truly loved him his whole life—Hughie? Is it ever easy to recognize such devoted people in our lives?
4. What is society's basis for determining whether a lover is an appropriate age? In what ways does Max's condition actually help illuminate his true character?
5. Max loves Alice as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother. How does this echo the various roles a lover plays in our lives? Which of Max's roles is he best suited to? Do we always take on recurring roles when it comes to love?
6. Are Max's fears of infancy—the inability to walk independently, care for himself, and articulate his needs—very different from the traditional fears of growing old?
7. Max's first role in Alice's life is as her "Shabbos goy." Does Max later continue to be the "houseboy of her heart" in some way—an aid in her life?
8. Is Max's reverse aging the only thing standing in the way of his happiness? How much of his outcome is affected by his personality, fate, and other factors?
9. Max's condition gives him unusual opportunities—for instance, having access to his son's life that few fathers have ever had. Does it deepen or erase his role as a parent? Though they both appear to be boys, is there still a generation gap between Max and his son?
10. The word confession carries connotations of wrongdoing or scandal on the part of the speaker. To what is Max Tivoli confessing in his "memoir"? Is first-person narration crucial to this plot?
11. Alice is not a typical Victorian woman. She is hotheaded and freethinking; what do you think of her as a match for Max? Is she merely selfcentered and flaky, or do you agree with Victor Ramsey's theory that she changed her life through the only means available to women during that time period: marriage? What is Alice's ultimate reason for leaving Max?
12. Max struggles to make his outward appearance both socially acceptable and less at odds with his psyche. Describe what your external appearance would look like if it were a pictureperfect representation of your psyche.
13. How did you feel when you read of Hughie's death? Why do you think he killed himself? Did the modern idea of a "gay man" exist back then? Given that at the time even openly gay Oscar Wilde had a wife and children (as Hughie did), what options did gay men and women have for happiness or love?
14. What would you have done with a life like Max's? Is he an idealist, an artist in a world not made for him, or a brute who squandered a potentially happy life? What are the sources of a truly happy life? In what ways have you "grown younger" in your own life?



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## Praise for *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*

“A truly original voice...Greer is a devastating new writer, and [this book] marks the beginning of what I suspect will be a significant and lasting career.” —Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*

“A fable of surpassing gravity and beauty.” —David Kipen, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Enchanting, in the perfumed, dandified style of disenchantment brought to grandeur by Proust and Nabokov.” —John Updike, *The New Yorker*

“Gossamer prose, vivid characterization, and historic snapshots of a fabulous American city.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Greer is one of the most talented writers around, feeling and funny, with a genuinely fine prose style and a sensibility to match.” —Michael Chabon, author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*