



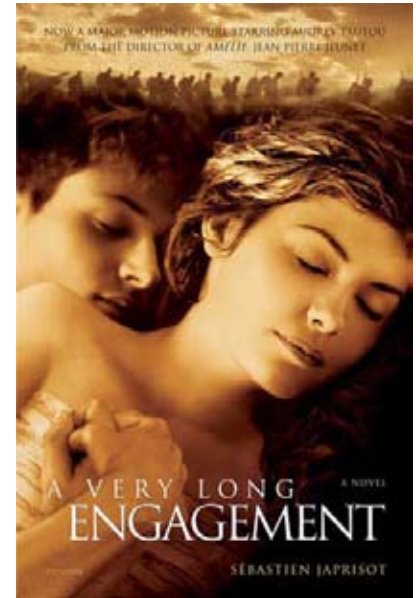
Reading Group Gold

A Very Long Engagement

by Sébastien Japrisot

About this Guide

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



ISBN: 978-0-312-42458-9 | 2004

About the Book

Set during--and for many years after--the First World War, *A Very Long Engagement* tells the gripping and unforgettable story of a young woman's search for her fiancé, whom she believes might still be alive despite having been officially reported as "killed in the line of duty." Unable to walk since childhood, the fearless, sardonic, and wonderfully imaginative Mathilde Donnay is undeterred in her quest for information about five wounded French soldiers who were heartlessly abandoned by their own troops in January 1917--left to die, their hands bound behind them, in a no-man's-land between the French and German armies at the Picardy front.

A runaway bestseller in France when it first appeared in the early 1990s, *A Very Long Engagement* is at once a love story, a detective yarn, a meditation on both the brutality and beauty perhaps unique to modern times, and an extraordinary portrait of life in France before, during, and after the Great War.

"Riveting...A fierce, elliptical novel that's both a gripping psychological thriller and a highly moving meditation on the emotional consequence of war"—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"This book has been a best-seller in France, and it's easy to see why. Japrisot writes with warmth, and has a gift for rendering almost every character instantly likable."—*The New Yorker*

"A powerhouse novel with an unforgettable character – Mathilde Donnay – at its core. This book...discloses an artist of considerable strength and maturity. Japrisot has a narrative style that in its handling of detail reminds one of Flaubert."—*The Boston Globe*



Reading Group Gold

About the Author

Sébastien Japrisot was the pen name of Jean Baptiste Rossi. He wrote seven novels, including *One Deadly Summer*, *The Sleeping Car Murders*, *The Passion of Women*, and *The Lady in the Car with Glasses and a Gun*.

Discussion Questions

1. The first sentence in this novel ends with the following phrase: “that’s the way of the world.” Indeed, this phrase appears several times throughout Sébastien Japrisot’s tale. Discuss how this phrase functions over the course of the novel, the meanings or connotations it takes on. Would it be fair to call this phrase a key theme--perhaps the key theme--of the book? Explain why or why not.
2. “The White Widow” gives us ample background information on Mathilde Donnay: when and where she was born, what her parents are like, why she is confined to a wheelchair, what sort of personality she has, etc. But once the protagonist has “introduced herself” in this manner, we find that the narrative must move onward since Mathilde is “not here to tell the story of her lives.” What do we learn of our heroine’s various “lives” over the course of *A Very Long Engagement*? How might they be defined, described, differentiated? And what about the life that Mathilde leads as an artist--how does this life in particular grow or change?
3. Near the outset of the “Queen Victoria’s Tuppence” section, Mathilde is told by Pierre-Marie Rouvière (her family’s lawyer) that a certain letter she has thinks might be incriminating is actually “a fake, like the forged document that had convicted Dreyfus.” Explain this reference to the so-called Dreyfus Affair; in preparing your explanation, feel free to conduct outside research as needed.
4. Discuss the character of Germain Pire, the “private eye” of the novel. What sort of attitude does Pire seem to inspire in Mathilde when their acquaintance begins --mocking, sarcastic, ironic, confused, wary, otherwise? And yet these two seem to share a genuine bond, a real friendship, by the novel’s final pages. How did--and why--did this come about?
5. Much of this novel is told in epistolary form; the narrative often unfolds in new or old letters, in written correspondence. Pick out of a few of the letters from throughout the novel that you, as a reader, especially appreciated, and then share your choices with the others in your discussion group. When making your choices, consider such aspects as tone, style, humor, candor, clarity, and grace or sharpness of expression.
6. What does “MMM” stand for? Where were these initials carved? Who carved them, and when? Also, explain the significance of the beloved “mahogany box” in this novel--that is, explain what it means to the story physically, intellectually, emotionally, symbolically, even spiritually.
7. Describe the relationship that develops between Mathilde and Célestin Poux, especially in the “Terror of the Armies” section. Are they merely friends? Is there ever a chance of something more than friendship existing between them? Explain your views. Years later, what name does Célestin Poux give his daughter?



Reading Group Gold

8. Discuss the all-important role of colloquial speech in *A Very Long Engagement*: slang, jargon, nicknames, pet terms, off-beat or colorful expressions, informal place names, casual (or even crude) yet expressive language, etc.
9. Given the title, consider the various definitions or facets of the word “engagement” that might pertain to this novel.
10. Who--if you could only select one person--is ultimately most helpful to Mathilde in her far-flung quest for the truth, her long search to uncover what really happened to the five French soldiers left to die in no-man’s-land in January 1917? Defend your selection with relevant citations from the text.
11. Critique this novel as a work of mystery writing, as a piece of detective fiction. What are the major clues that push the narrative forward? What--if any--are the red herrings? Also, explain the telltale code employed by That Man.
12. What did you learn about the Great War when reading *A Very Long Engagement*? Also, compare and contrast this book with a few other World War I-themed novels, stories, or films you are familiar with. While setting this work alongside others of its military ilk, you might wish to give special consideration to the theme of governmental/official corruption.
13. The novel ends with an epilogue, the very brief “Monday Morning” section. What did you discover in here, at long last? How was your understanding of the book’s core narrative enriched, enhanced, or otherwise changed by these final pages? Or wasn’t it? Explain.
14. Finally, revisit the Lewis Carroll epigraph that begins this novel. How does this snippet of dialogue between Alice and the King relate to the story and/or subject matter of *A Very Long Engagement*?