

READING GROUP GUIDE

The American: *A Special Edition of A Very* *Private Gentleman*

by Martin Booth

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The American* 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 American*.

About the Book

The locals in the southern Italian town where he lives call him Signor Farfalla--Mr. Butterfly: for he is a discreet gentleman who paints rare butterflies. His life is inconspicuous--mornings spent brushing at a canvas, afternoons idling in the cafes, and evening talks with his friend the town priest over a glass of brandy.

Yet there are other sides to this gentleman's life: Clara: the young student who moonlights in the town bordello. And another woman who arrives with \$100,000 and a commission, but not for a painting of butterflies.

With this assignment returns the dark fear that has dogged Signor Farfalla's mysterious life. Almost instantly, he senses a deadly circle closing in on him, one which he may or may not elude. Part thriller, part character study, part drama of deceit and self-betrayal, *The American* shows Martin Booth at the very height of his powers.

About the Author

Martin Booth wrote the nonfiction histories *Cannabis* and *Opium* and the novel *Hiroshima Joe*, among many others. He died shortly after completing this manuscript in 2004.

Discussion Questions

1. Farfalla talks about the village life in England as opposed to village life in Italy. In Italy they leave him alone and allow him his privacy, but in England they are nosy and suspicious. What accounts for this difference?
2. Farfalla tells us on p.32 in effect that it is better to change the way the world is perceived than to change the world itself. Why does he believe this? Do you think he would still feel that way if he were not in his line of work?
3. Is Farfalla cynical? Or is he just realistic?
4. Early in the novel, Farfalla talks about being indifferent to death, referencing Ancient Greek philosophy. He claims that death is not to be feared because it is just nothingness, merely a door between existing and ceasing to exist. Do you believe him when he says this? Or is this just something he tells himself because he is afraid?
5. Why do you think that Clara takes such an interest in Farfalla? Is she just scheming after him like Dindina, or does she really love him? What do you think she loves about him? Does she see something in him that he does not see himself?
6. What do you think initially appealed to Farfalla about this kind of life on the run? He seems to have embraced it and even to take a certain pride in it. What is it about his personality that makes him suited to such a lifestyle?
7. On p.100 Farfalla says: "Everyone is a terrorist. Everyone carries a gun in his heart." What do you think he means by this statement? Is it a rationalization for what he does or is it a legitimate moral indictment of our society?
8. As a narrator Farfalla seems to want to tell us the truth. He wants to share his mind, and certainly to share his opinions. But can we trust him as a narrator? There are so many details which he will not reveal. Do you think there's a part of him that actually enjoys fooling people and remaining aloof?

9. What is Farfalla's attitude towards history? How does it differ from that of Father Benedetto? The two seem to return to the topic of history constantly even though they are in complete disagreement as to what history means. Why do you think they enjoy talking to one another about history so much? Do they just love to debate?
10. Why does Farfalla have so much contempt for crimes that involve passion, revenge, cruelty, or hatred? Why does he feel comfortable with crimes that are calculating, political, and precise?
11. Farfalla talks about the danger of allowing himself to feel emotions, of allowing himself to get attached and to risk giving something away about himself. Why does he let himself feel for Clara? Does he really love her? Or would he shoot her if he needed to?
12. Why doesn't Farfalla have any ideological principles? Why does he want to play a role in history, yet does not advocate any political position?
13. What would have happened if Farfalla had been able to talk with Father Benedetto the day he was killed? Do you think that Farfalla was on the verge of a change? Could Benedetto have gotten Farfalla to repent of his crimes?
14. Where do you think Farfalla is now? Do you think he ever found the peace he was looking for? Or is he in the loveless "hell" that Father Benedetto described to him?

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