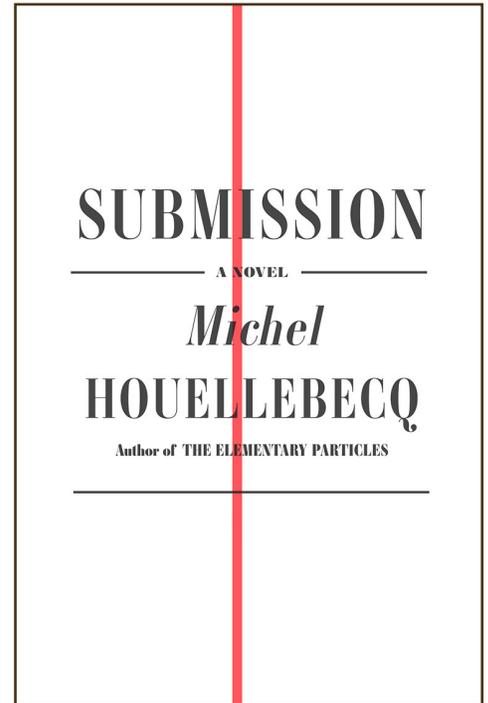


Reading Group Gold

Submission

A Novel

by Michel Houellebecq



ISBN: 978-0-374-27157-2 / 256 pages

A daring, captivating tale from France's most famous living literary figure, *Submission* imagines a French presidential election in which a Muslim candidate emerges victorious—not through a coup but through a peaceful runoff. Narrating this turn of events is a middle-aged literature professor whose passions include sleeping with his students and studying J.-K. Huysmans (the Decadent author who eventually converted to Catholicism). As he watches Islamic law come into force, our sex-obsessed scholar misses seeing women in short skirts, but he is intrigued by polygamy. Ultimately, he must decide whether to convert in order to advance his career.

Brimming with satirical wit and provocative what-ifs, *Submission* poses essential questions of our time, examining the changing face of Europe and the role of religious fundamentalism in global politics. We hope the following guide will enhance your reading group's experience of Michel Houellebecq's comic masterpiece.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As you read the epigraph from J.-K. Huysmans's novel *En route*, what route did you expect *Submission* to take? What makes Huysmans an ironic choice for François's research, despite the many parallels in their lives? What makes a professor of literature an ideal person to narrate this novel?

Reading Group Gold

2. How did your opinion of François shift as he recounted his experience? What traits make him an effective storyteller?
3. In *Submission*, is Michel Houellebecq satirizing only the French intelligentsia? Do you notice the same points being raised in American political life?
4. If *Submission* had been set in America, would Ben Abbes's election have produced the same cultural transformations? How would higher education change if Harvard were owned by a Saudi prince?
5. What does sex mean to François before and after the election?
6. When Myriam considers immigrating to Israel despite not knowing Hebrew, what does her situation illustrate about the precarious position of assimilated Jewish citizens in France's rapidly changing society? What has French culture meant to her, besides good cheese?
7. Is it possible to truly separate religion and politics? Does this question have a different answer in America and in western Europe? Could the French policy of *laïcité* ever be implemented in America?
8. Does Ben Abbes's economic plan appeal to you? Would you vote for a candidate who supports distributism ("neither capitalism nor communism—a sort of state capitalism . . . [in which] the basic economic unit was the family business")?
9. Over dinner, Alain Tanneur tells François that Ben Abbes's foreign policy is to "shift Europe's center of gravity toward the south," integrating perhaps Turkey and Morocco, and then Tunisia and Algeria, into the European Union. What do you predict for the real future of Europe's identity? Do you agree with the Sorbonne's fictional new president, Robert Rediger, in his belief that Western society is obviously doomed?
10. When François flees to the southwestern countryside in his Touareg, what does he discover about the limitations of his survival abilities?
11. How would the novel be different if it had been told from a female professor's perspective?
12. In each of the book's story lines, what remains consistent across time, regardless of place? Discuss François's ultimate decision. Would you have made the same choice? Is conversion always synonymous with submission?
13. Is the novel realistic about the democratic process? Is Ben Abbes really a moderate? In reality, will his brand of rhetoric become the status quo in elections around the globe, or will extremism become the key to winning?

Reading Group Gold

14. Did you enjoy Houellebecq's sense of humor? What techniques does he use to draw out the ironies in Francois's narration? How does *Submission* enrich your understanding of the author's previous books?

PRAISE FOR *SUBMISSION*

"Houellebecq is not merely a satirist but—more unusually—a *sincere* satirist, genuinely saddened by the absurdities of history and the madneses of mankind." —Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*

"Strange and surprising . . . [*Submission*] is a classic novel of European cultural pessimism that belongs in whatever category we put books like Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*." —Mark Lilla, *The New York Review of Books*

"*Submission* is a fine, deeply literary work . . . No recent English-language novel compares." —David Sexton, *The Spectator*

"Michel Houellebecq shares with Aldous Huxley a fascination with religious phenomena, and with George Orwell a horror of political correctness and an acute sense—which one rarely credits him for—of common decency. Furthermore, and God knows that I love Huxley and Orwell, he is an even more powerful novelist." —Emmanuel Carrère, *Le Monde des Livres*

"Is France's most celebrated controversialist offering a splenetic vision of the Muslim threat to Europe or a spineless 'submission' to gradual Islamic takeover? Actually, neither. It's much more interesting than that . . . The real target of Houellebecq's satire—as in his previous novels—is the predictably manipulable venality and lustfulness of the modern metropolitan man . . . [A] darkly clever and funny book." —Steven Poole, *The Guardian*

"It would be easy to object to [*Submission*] based on hearsay alone, but Houellebecq is both too skillful as a novelist to be saying anything merely polemical, and far too intelligent to ignore." —Gaby Wood, *The Telegraph*

"A melancholy tribute to the pleasure of surrender." —Adam Shatz, *London Review of Books*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michel Houellebecq is a French novelist, poet, and literary critic. His novels include the international bestseller *The Elementary Particles* and *The Map and the Territory*, which won the 2010 Prix Goncourt. He lives in France.

Guide written by Amy Clements