

PICADOR

# Reading Group Gold

## HHhH

by Laurent Binet

1. “Inventing a character in order to understand historical facts is like fabricating evidence,” Laurent Binet writes. “What could be more vulgar than inventing a character?” Do you agree? Have you learned more about history from novels or textbooks?
2. Of Reinhard Heydrich, Binet writes, “His motto could be: Files! Files! Always more files!” And the mission of the SD he describes as: “To know everything about everyone.” The narrator, too, is obsessed with his own obsessive information gathering. Do you think he admires Heydrich’s thoroughness, or is he taken with this strain of Nazi or German efficiency? Is there a parallel motive here—is the drive behind Heydrich’s thoroughness similar to the drive behind the narrator’s?
3. The subject matter here is profoundly serious. Not just the horrors of the Holocaust, and the significance of the Second World War in general, but also Operation Anthropoid specifically—as Binet puts it, “one of the greatest acts of resistance in human history.” Do you think its historical significance is diminished, or perhaps enhanced, by the book’s playfulness? Did you find yourself wishing that this was a traditional work of history—or a novel? In other words, did you think the book was successful?
4. The narrator says that he wanted to call his book *Operation Anthropoid*. Do you think that would have made a more appropriate title? Is the book more about Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, or Heydrich—or is it about the narrator himself? He writes that “Heydrich is not supposed to be the main character. [. . .] The target, not the protagonist.” What do you think the difference between the two is? Would you consider Heydrich the “main character” here? And if not, what is he instead?
5. When asked by friends or family, what did you say the book was “about”? Did you call it a novel? Why, or why not?
6. What do you make of Binet’s use of the second person, as in “you are now entering Auschwitz”? Or his technique of putting the past in the present tense: “We are in the heart of the forest, north of Berlin.” Of course, we’re not there and neither is he. The narrator writes that he wishes he could “take his mattress to the gallery in the church”—to transport himself, and thus his reader, literally into another place and time. Do you think he succeeds at this, or do the metafictional (or metahistorical) qualities of the book keep us always on the page?
7. Binet calls his book an “infranovel.” What do you think that means?
8. What is the difference between a novel and a history book? Binet writes, “my story has as many holes in it as a novel.” It’s full of doubt, in other words—peppered with “I don’t know” and “maybes.” Does the book become more or less “fictional” as it progresses? Did it change in your mind from novel to history, or from history to novel, as the climactic assassination scene approached?
9. The good thing about writing about something that really happened, Binet says, is that “you don’t have to worry about giving an impression of realism.” Instead, he worries about being too unreal, about being, in other words, fictional. Binet writes that he hopes the reader “will still be able to see through it to the historical reality that lies behind.” Did you feel that you were able to do this? Binet maintains that, in other historical novels, “fiction wins out over history.” Did you find that the more novelistic aspects of the book outweigh the facts and figures?



10. “I would pay dearly to feel what they felt then,” Binet writes. But then later wishes he had “the minutes of that conversation.” He wants both to feel and to know. Which impulse do you think is stronger for him? For you?
11. Binet writes errors and then corrects them—“actually no, that’s not how it is”—and describes writing, deleting, and rewriting the same sentence. Why do you think he does this?
12. “The dead don’t talk,” Binet writes. “For you to remember them, I would have to turn them into characters. [. . .] [A] name is just a name,” he says, but a character is memorable, larger than life—like Heydrich himself, who lives on in legend, as opposed to Gabčík and Kubiš who are merely names, “simple men.” Creating characters, then, isn’t vulgar—indeed, it might even be noble. Do you think Binet succeeds in bringing the past to life, in turning Gabčík and Kubiš into something more than a name in the history pages? Will you remember them as characters, or as historical facts? And, perhaps the most important question of the book: Does it matter?

### About the Author

**Laurent Binet** was born in Paris, France, in 1972. He is the author of *La Vie professionnelle de Laurent B.*, a memoir of his experience teaching in secondary schools in Paris. In March 2010, his debut novel, *HHhH*, won the Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman. Laurent Binet is a professor at the University of Paris III, where he lectures on French literature.

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Reading group guide written by William Bostwick