

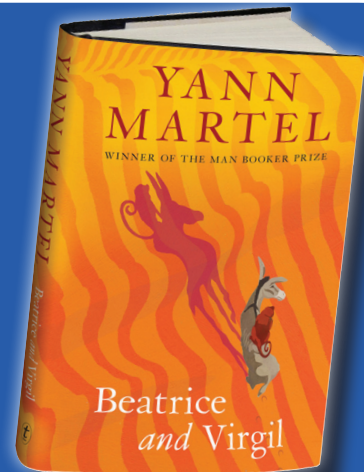
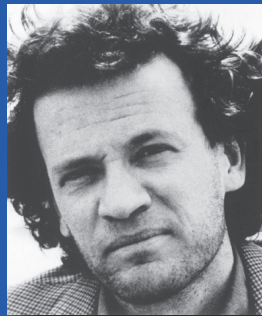
Beatrice and Virgil

Yann Martel

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Praise for *Beatrice and Virgil*

'Yann Martel is a vivid and entrancing storyteller.'
Sunday Telegraph

'Like *Life of Pi*, it shows the incredible imaginative reach of the author. Part-fable, part-meditation on the nature of art and the imagination, Martel's effortless prose and wild imagination is evident.' *West Australian*

About Yann Martel

Yann Martel was born in Spain in 1963. He is the author of the internationally acclaimed 2002 Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *Life of Pi*, which has been published in 45 territories, sold 7 million copies worldwide, and spent 57 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. Yann's collection of short stories, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, and his first novel, *Self* were published internationally to critical acclaim. He lives in Saskatoon, Canada.

A reader's introduction to *Beatrice and Virgil*

Henry is a successful writer who lives a largely anonymous life. When he does encounter one of his readers it is a pleasure. 'The contact had an intimate quality; two strangers were meeting, but to discuss an external matter, a faith object that had moved them both, so all barriers fell.'

The success of his novels does not change Henry. It is the failure of his third manuscript that does this. He is told that his novel about the Holocaust, a mix of fiction and essay, is not publishable in its current form and so he gives up writing. Together with his wife, he moves to a new city.

Here, in a place that could be anywhere, Henry receives a large envelope from one of his readers. It contains three things. The first is a photocopy of a short story by Gustave Flaubert, where animals are slaughtered in great numbers. The second is the scene from a play, where two characters discuss the qualities of a pear. The last is a brief note asking for help, signed Henry. Curious, Henry replies in person and meets the sender

and author of the play scene: a taxidermist. Everything changes.

Inside Okapi Taxidermy, Henry finds animals of all kinds, 'predator and prey'. He helps the taxidermist with his play and becomes attached to the two characters, Beatrice and Virgil: a donkey and a howler monkey. As these characters discuss food and hunger, love and violence, Henry begins to suspect that the work is dealing with the themes of his failed manuscript. The taxidermist is using the Holocaust as allegory.

This is not a case of strangers meeting to discuss a faith object that has moved them both, though. Henry is drawn onto a bizarre and dangerous stage. He does not see the danger he is in until it is too late.

Beatrice and Virgil is a startling exploration of violence and love and redemption. The relationships explored, between Henry and the taxidermist, between Beatrice and Virgil, and between these two authors and the characters they discuss, raise questions that are difficult to answer but essential to ask.

How can there be anything beautiful after what we have been through? Virgil asks Beatrice. Questions like these, preoccupied with what it means to be human, make this book a brutal joy to read.

Questions for discussion

1. The novel explores what it is to be human through the friendship of a donkey and a howler monkey. It is a story of pain and beauty. What scenes in the play *Beatrice and Virgil* had the greatest impact on you?
2. Beatrice and Virgil are the names of Dante's guides through hell. Henry shares his name with the taxidermist. Discuss the significance of names in the book.
3. Virgil's howl is 'the earth itself in crisis'. The novel is more than a metaphor for the Holocaust. It is, as Yann Martel commented, 'a portable metaphor'. Discuss.

4. 'Virgil: How can there be anything beautiful after what we've been through? It's an insult. (*He stamps the ground with a foot.*) Oh, Beatrice, how are we going to talk about what happened to us one day when it's over?' Discuss the questions these animals raise and why the answers are so important.
5. Discuss Beatrice's explanation of what happened to Virgil when he was brought in. Discuss the impact that Virgil's response had on you. How can the human capacity for overwhelming brutality and overwhelming compassion be explained?
6. The description of the pear is so beautiful. 'Eating it is like kissing. The sound of its skin is like the diamond of a record player entering a groove.' Why do Beatrice and Virgil discuss the pear in such detail? Discuss the pear scene in light of where it falls in Henry's play: after the women drown their babies and then themselves.
7. Are some experiences so brutal that they are beyond language? Or is it essential that we try to find words even if they can't come close to the experience? Is art always a 'vaccine'? Why is there so little fiction about the Holocaust?
8. Henry's publisher wants to know what his book is all about. Henry wants to understand the taxidermist's play. The sewing kit is poetic and confusing. Can everything be known and understood? What is the significance of the character's need to understand? What is the significance of Henry wanting some 'narrative logic'?
9. In *Beatrice and Virgil* there are stories within stories. There are many actors and stages. There are many works referenced. What is the effect of structuring the novel in this way?
10. 'In that, being famous was no different from being gay, or Jewish, or from a visible minority: you are who you are, and then people project onto you some notion that they have.' Do you agree? Is this confirmed for Henry at the end of the novel? He states he is essentially unchanged by the success of his novel. What changes him?
11. There are many parallels in the novel. Henry shares a name with the taxidermist. He moves to a city, which could be anywhere and reads a play set on a shirt that could be any place. Discuss other parallels in the novel and possible reasons for them.
12. Why does Martel use animals to comment on human nature? Is this effective? Or is he using animals for another reason other than to comment on humans?
13. Henry the taxidermist, like Julian in the story by Flaubert, is a character that raises many questions. Why does he send Henry the story by Flaubert? Why does he write *Beatrice and Virgil*? He says he could never harm animals and yet he harms people. Does he have a 'moral compass'?
14. The taxidermist 'sews back'; he works with 'creation stuffed into one room'. Why has Martel chosen this profession and workspace?
15. Yann Martel has commented: 'I always have sympathetic narrators, who will be easy for readers to slip into.' Is Henry a sympathetic character? Why does he take so long to see the truth of the taxidermist when Sarah sees it immediately? What is the significance of his blindness?
16. Discuss the character, Sarah. How is her pregnancy symbolic? How is her reaction to the death of Erasmus and Mendelssohn significant?
17. Discuss this scene where Henry finds that Erasmus has attacked Mendelssohn. In what ways does it foreshadow the events to come? What themes does it highlight?
18. The scene where Henry is stabbed is brutal and disturbing. What questions do you have as a result of this scene? Are there any neat answers?
19. Discuss the role fate plays in the novel.
20. 'He thought they were a wedding party. In fact they were a firing squad.' So much of the language in the novel reflects the Holocaust and other acts of genocide. For example Henry's lunch with his publisher and the description of the taxidermist. Discuss.
21. 'But behind serious non-fiction lies the same fact and preoccupation as behind fiction—of being human and what it means...' What does the novel suggest about what it means to be human?
22. The novel makes references to truth and lies. Beatrice and Virgil comment that the truth is 'bright'. Discuss the idea that after atrocities such as the Holocaust, truth is the most important thing of all.
23. 'My story has no story. It rests on nothing but the fact of murder.' Do you agree? Or does the story rest on more than that?
24. Discuss the impact of Games for Gustav as an ending for the novel.