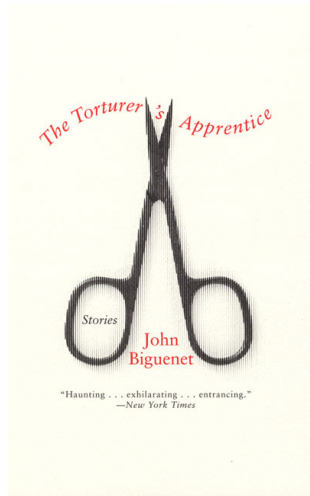


The Torturer's Apprentice

By John Biguenet
ISBN: 9780060007454



Introduction to the Reading Group Guide

Whether recounting the predicament of an atheistic stigmatic in "The Vulgar Soul" or a medieval torturer who must employ his terrible skills upon his own apprentice in the title tale, the stories of John Biguenet's debut collection, *The Torturer's Apprentice*, decline to settle for ready sentiments or easy assurances.

Rather than add to the massive canon of the victimized, for example, "My Slave" takes the perspective of the victimizer. In "The Open Curtain," a man achieves intimacy with his family only when he watches them dine as he sits in his car at the curb in front of his house. Menaced by a gang of skinheads in a Jewish cemetery, an American tourist in Germany placates the Neo-Nazis with a formula he continues to repeat even after he is safely back home in "I Am Not a Jew." And as for love, it makes demands, in such stories as "Do Me," that shake our very notions of what it means to love.

If these stories engage the world in sometimes shocking ways, though, they are virtuoso engagements, eloquent in their prose, surprising in their plotting, sly in their humor. Shifting among voices and narrative strategies, Biguenet imposes neither a single style nor a repeated structure as he depicts the ecological catastrophe of "A Plague of Toads," the problem posed by a ghost in the nursery in "Fatherhood," and the ghostly discovery a grieving widower defends as "another kind of memory" in "Rose."

Such mastery of craft may come as a surprise in a first-time author, but even more impressive is the object of his art. For whether it seeks to prick or to tickle, each story in *The Torturer's Apprentice* addresses its subject with an authority unusual in contemporary literature, as it entices the reader beyond the boundaries of the expected and the accepted.

Questions for Discussion

1. In such stories as "Rose," "Lunch with My Daughter," "Fatherhood," and "The Open Curtain," parenting is examined from a father's perspective. What do these stories add to the literature of family life?
2. Religion is another theme explored in stories such as "The Vulgar Soul," "I Am Not a Jew," and "The Torturer's Apprentice." What questions do these stories raise about the role of religion in contemporary life?
3. How do fantastic tales like "Gregory's Fate," "Fatherhood" or "A Battlefield in Moonlight" manage to address the reader just as seriously as the realist stories in *The Torturer's Apprentice*?
4. The ghost stories in the collection, "Fatherhood," "And Never Come Up," and "Rose" all involve the ghosts of children. Do these young phantoms differ from the sort of spirits one expects to encounter in a traditional ghost story?
5. What is the effect of mixing realist and fantastic stories in the same collection? Does it disorient the reader, or does it lead to insights not otherwise available?
6. The characters depicted in Biguenet's stories pursue a wide range of occupations from slave owner to high school English teacher to medieval torturer to sailor. Do these occupations shape the characters in essential ways?
7. "A Plague of Toads" and "And Never Come Up" are both, at least in part, about the nature of stories and storytelling. What questions about the experience of reading fiction are raised by these and other stories in the collection?
8. All of the stories turn on moments of moral crisis. Did you find moral dilemmas in the stories that surprised you?
9. How is the nature of love defined in such stories as "The Vulgar Soul," "The Work of Art," "Gregory's Fate," and "Do Me"?
10. What is your favorite story in the book? Why?

About the Author:

John Biguenet, winner of an O. Henry Award for fiction, has published his stories in such journals as *Esquire*, *Granta*, *Playboy*, *Story*, and *Zoetrope*, as well as in various award anthologies. He is currently the Robert Hunter Distinguished Professor at Loyola University in New Orleans.