



## April Fool's Day

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### Introduction

Born in Croatia, on April Fool's Day in 1948, Ivan Dolinar begins life as an overbearing schoolyard bully who is nonetheless mocked by classmates, an enthusiastically patriotic child of Yugoslavia who is accused of undermining the country, and an ardent fan of President Tito, who is however, quite unloved by the dictator. His father keeps the arm and leg he lost in WWII in a potato sack in the basement, secure in his faith that some day science could, "put his limbs back on," and his art teacher declares painting to be, "paint-smearing: a waste of time."

Despite success as a medical student, he's sent to break rocks in a labor camp for joking about assassinating the president. While there, President Tito and Indira Gandhi happen to visit, and after cordially sharing a Cuban cigar with Ivan, sentence him to four more years since prison is "the best thing for a man to go through -- you steel your will." Later conscripted by the wrong army to kill his

fellow Croats, Ivan becomes a murderer, a rapist, an adulterer, a cuckold, a thief, and a ghost. Harrowing and hilarious on hairpin turns, *April Fool's Day* marks an important contribution to the literary annals of war, suffering, and the human condition.

### Questions for Discussions

1. With titles such as "A Chapter Containing Not Much More Than One Extended Metaphor: The State is an Organism With Many Organs," how do the chapter headings provide commentary, perhaps even an authorial voice, as the story unfolds?
2. How does the title reflect the absurdity around Ivan? If his whole life is one long April Fool's Day joke, then who or what is playing the joke on him?
3. Compare and contrast Bruno's view of nationality, identity and patriotism ("the whole thing is doubly sad when you live abroad, far from home -- for me, this is still my homeland, *rodna gruda*") with Ivan's. Do you think Bruno would still feel the same way if he had not migrated to Germany?
4. Ivan "fell in love with power as soon as he learned how to crawl," but in his over-zealousness, does he fail to see what everyone already realizes about how power corrupts and the pointlessness of being a good citizen? How does Aldo's brother illustrate the magnetic qualities of power, no matter how crass the office-holder?
5. *April Fool's Day* depicts a people who appear remarkably resilient despite the horrors that rain down upon them. Where do you think this resilience comes from? Could Ivan's ghostly existence be seen as an extended metaphor for not giving up?
6. Consider the jokes, witticisms, scatological episodes, sexual farces, ironies and absurdities that permeate the novel. How would you describe the humor in *April Fool's Day*? In times of political oppression and despair, how can humor function as a powerful antidote to despair?
7. President Tito says, "I don't approve of that kind of humor" in response to the assassination joke that derailed Ivan's life. Is he right to fear the subversive power of humor?
8. When Ivan is shot, a biblical verse (from Isaiah, ch. 24) resounds in his head, "the earth is utterly broken, the earth is clean dissolved." How is this moment a turning point in the story? What role does religion play when Marko, the most outspokenly religious character, is "serving Adam's sentence -- a life of labor," and "while appearing to be a man of steel, he had been a man of iron, rusted inside"?
9. *April Fool's Day* contains elements of political satire, bildungsroman, realism, magic realism, and black comedy. How do these disparate styles serve to emphasize the horror and hope at the heart of the story?
10. How would you characterize Ivan Dolinar? Did your opinion of him change when he revealed the truth about Tanya's paternity to Selma? Could an explanation for his ghostly existence lie in his words to Tanya -- "that's why we grow older -- to learn, to become good, to do good at least for a few hours before the end"?