



Dog Fighter, The

By Marc Bojanowski
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Introduction

"Do you believe the decisions a man makes make him his own God?" asks the unnamed narrator's father upon learning that his son just drowned a bag of kittens. Mistaking his father's thoughtfulness for weakness, the boy instead dwells on his grandfather's secret stories of valorous men who fight jaguars in the night, of power that lies in raw strength, of the merciless, mythic blood that flows in his own veins.

So begins Marc Bojanowski's **The Dog Fighter**, a riveting story of an adolescent's quest to prove his manhood in 1940s Mexico. After his mother dies in childbirth, he abandons his father to grief and madness and migrates north, working as a laborer along the way. In California, a married woman seduces him into killing her husband, but since the victim is also Mexican, he is merely deported back to Veracruz. Again following the demand for manual labor, he turns up at Canción, a picturesque

seaside town in Baja, to work on the construction of a new hotel. Here he discovers the local tradition of dog fighting, which pits barely armed men against bloodthirsty dogs, some with teeth filed to lethal points.

Yet, as the Herculean protagonist finds a calling true to his grandfather's whispers and dreams, becoming a legend of the dog pits, he finds himself enmeshed in a complicated, surreptitious struggle for the future of Canción. A struggle that pits wealthy businessmen, intent on developing the town for rich American tourists, against a shadowy underground organization of locals determined to keep Canción for themselves.

Facing deception and moral dilemmas at every turn, **The Dog Fighter** clings to his love for the wealthiest developer's mistress, a love that threatens to undermine friendships, loyalties, and his grandfather's darkest secrets.

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the style in which the novel is written. Why does the author ignore conventional rules of grammar and punctuation in **The Dog Fighter**? Do you think he is successful in this regard?
2. How would you characterize The Dog Fighter's grandfather? How would you characterize his father? Who wins the fight to control him? Do you agree with the grandfather's assessment that, "in this world there are men of books, and men who know what is not in books?" Do the two men represent polarized views of masculinity? Who are some of the father figures encountered by The Dog Fighter?
3. Following his grandfather's dictum that "great strength does not feel for anything but itself" what are some of the acts committed by The Dog Fighter until his arrival in Canción? Would his grandfather have approved of fighting dogs? After his first dogfight, The Dog Fighter looks at the dead, mangled dog before him, "the result of my grandfathers hiss," and feels "ashamed of myself." Why?
4. When the insurgents set the hotel tractors on fire, The Dog Fighter notes that, "for all its peace and beauty Canción was at war. The businessmen constructing their dreams in the daylight they shared with los Cancioneros also dreaming but different dreams." What do the businessmen dream of? What do los Cancioneros believe? Does this sound like the familiar battle between progress and tradition? Do you find the motivations of one group to be more noble, or more practical, than the other? By the end of the novel are such descriptions still applicable? Could the dogfights be seen as a metaphor for the struggle in which the winner decides the future of Canción? Are the dogfights fair?
5. Although the local people of Canción enjoy the dogfights, the businessmen also bet on which mistress would cry first because, "to put money only on the fighting of dogs was never enough for them." Why? How else do they add extra excitement, for themselves, in the dogfights? Why does The Dog Fighter feel ashamed when he sees "the sight of my extra in the businessmen's sunglasses?" What houses the nightclub that the businessmen frequently attend? Do you think this symbolizes their amoral decadence?
6. Why is Rodriguez, a businessman, so eager to fight dogs? How does he view dogfighting, and how do The Dog Fighters regard their work? Does Rodriguez ultimately get his wish? Why do you think Cantana's instructions for his demise were so brutal?
7. Outside the cathedral, the poet says, "this is a small game I play with God. I am always wanting Him to walk out and He is wanting me to walk in." What do you think he means? By the end of the novel, The Dog Fighter also says of God, "He waits for me, and I wait for him." Is his meaning the same as the poet's? How does their understanding of God affect the characters' actions?
8. The night before he takes a ferry to Cancion, The Dog Fighter watches a man fight a shark in a tank. How was the fight rigged? In what sort of atmosphere, and venue, does the fight occur? Do the dogfights of Cancion resemble this fight? Why or why not? At his first dogfight, what does the dog fighter mean by, "it was as if I had dropped the knife just as I was lowering myself into the tank of water?" Do you think people naturally enjoy the spectacle of imminent pain? Are the fights different from Jorge the dentist's performances for the children outside, as he springs back from a patient, "with a bloody tooth raised above his head bowing to the children's applause?"
9. What are the circumstances surrounding The Dog Fighter's last fight? How does he resolve the sadistic dilemma posed by Cantana's proposition -- "you kill the dog you live and I let you go. But your friend the poet here and my niece? They die?" Ultimately, did his decision make a difference, or was the outcome preordained? In what other instances did The Dog Fighter make a choice, only to realize later that he was deceived? Is his situation at the end of the novel the result of his own character, or fate, or something else? Why does he say, "God has nothing to do with this?"
10. How does the author establish The Dog Fighter's character? How has The Dog Fighter changed by the novel's end? At what points in the book do we see him change? How do Javier and Jorge affect this change? How does he feel as he watches Jorge's tenderness towards his blind mother? Where does he begin to understand that knowledge is more powerful than brute strength? Which character, do you think, symbolizes that idea the most?
11. How are Americans presented in **The Dog Fighter**? Consider The Dog Fighter's encounter with the blonde young man in

California, as both men checked their reflections in the same window. Why does he later shatter that window? Do you think los cancioneros fear of "rich American tourists" is warranted? What does it reveal about the American businessman when he calls the old men "cowards," just as Cantana reveals his plan to murder his mistress/niece and blame the old men for the death? Is he, possibly, the only man more powerful than Cantana in **The Dog Fighter**?

12. Is **The Dog Fighter** a violent book? How do the novel's characters feel about the deaths they cause? How did you react to the scenes of brutality and carnage? How would you describe the author's approach in describing the dogfights? Do you find the graphic incidents gratuitous, or does the author succeed in restoring to violence its ancient qualities of pity and terror?

13. **The Dog Fighter** contains a strong mythical component. How, and where, does the author introduce this? Are you reminded of any other novels, myths, or fairy tales by this novel?

About the author

Marc Bojanowski graduated from the University of California at Berkeley and received his MFA in creative writing from The New School. His writing has appeared in *The Literary Review*. He lives in northern California.