



## One Man's Bible

By Gao Xingjian  
ISBN: 9780060936266

**Introduction** Like *The 1001 Nights*, Gao Xiangjian's powerful and at times harrowing new novel takes the form of a story -- or stories -- within a story. The framing narrative begins in Hong Kong in 1996, where Gao Xingjian, a Chinese writer and artist now living in France, has come to oversee a production of one of his plays. Sharing his hotel room high above the city is a German-Jewish woman named Margarethe. Sexually uninhibited, insatiably curious, she is both Gao's mistress and his Mnemosyne, his goddess of memory. She wants him to remember. And although she mostly wants to know about the women who came before her, Gao cannot answer her questions about them without revealing -- and at times reliving -- his past in Mao's China, a past he has tried very hard to forget. His stories and memories of that past make up the inner narrative of *One Man's Bible*. They recount Gao's growth from the bookish child of middle-class communist sympathizers to a student, writer and activist during the Cultural Revolution, forced to practice his art in secret and to become a ruthless political intriguer in order to survive. Since the revolution makes absolute claims on people's passion, there is no such thing as casual sex. Each of Gao's sexual relationships -- from one-night stands to a misconceived marriage -- is an implicit challenge to the state, entered into with doomed abandon. Many of them end in

betrayal, but so do many of his friendships. How can it be otherwise in a society where everybody spies on everybody else and children regularly denounce their "Ox Demon" parents? That Gao survives and eventually escapes this million-eyed hell is admirable; that he does so while preserving his moral and aesthetic integrity is a small miracle. Part of this novel's achievement is the way it renders the texture of everyday life in totalitarian China, from the workplace criticism meetings that end in an orgy of confession and remorse to the spectacle of teenaged Red Guards beating an old woman to death. But beneath the documentary realism is an elegant structure of related images and episodes: the verticality of the Hong Kong skyline and the swarming density of Beijing's *hutongs*; red banners flying above a besieged building and the red blood on the thighs of a deflowered virgin; Gao's father hiding an outlawed Maoist text in a shoebox filled with silver dollars and Gao himself, years later, burning incriminating snapshots of his parents. At the center of that structure is Gao Xingjian himself -- a character by turns innocent and cunning, selfless and imperially self-centered, ardent and icily detached. But of course Gao the character is a creation of Gao the writer, who with *One Man's Bible* has given us a novel of great sophistication, sensual vividness, and emotional power. **Discussion Questions**

1. The protagonist of *One Man's Bible* is alternately called "you" and "he." Why might Gao have chosen to split the character in this way? In view of the fact that Gao is writing about himself, why doesn't he simply use the first person?
2. Discuss the relationship between the author's framing and inner narratives, its "present" and "past." In Chapter 10, for example, Gao makes love with Margarethe, while Chapter 11 begins with his memories of making love with the married Lin. Elsewhere Margarethe's relentless questioning is echoed by an interrogation by Red Guards. Where else do you encounter such mirrorings?
3. How does *One Man's Bible* treat death? How does Gao relate his mother's drowning or the many suicides and political murders that he witnesses? Does this book seem to view death as a tragedy, as a random and relatively inconsequential event, or even as a form of liberation?
4. Margarethe accuses Gao of exploiting her sexually. Do you agree? Is *One Man's Bible* a sexist book? Do you find its graphic erotic scenes gratuitous? Does sex have a different significance in communist China than it does in capitalist Hong Kong? Do the novel's European and Chinese women experience sex differently? Does Gao ever appear to judge their sexuality?
5. At one point Margarethe and Gao argue over the difference between Maoism and fascism. Does the author's description of Mao's China remind you of accounts you've read of Hitler's Germany or the U.S.S.R. under Stalin? In what way does it seem different? Note, for instance, the relatively low profile of the army and secret police and the way repression seems to emanate not from above but from below, that is to say from students and even, horribly, from children. How has living in such a society affected the novel's characters? Does *One Man's Bible* contain any similar critique of the capitalist West?
6. *One Man's Bible* may be seen as a contest between two views of the past. Gao wants to cut himself off from it completely -- a markedly un-Chinese attitude -- while Margarethe, departing from the stereotype of the pragmatic, present-oriented westerner, insists that the past must be remembered, honored, understood. Which view ultimately seems to prevail?
7. Gao describes himself as being like "a free-flying bird. The inner freedom," he says, "had no attachment, was like the clouds, the wind. God had not conferred this freedom upon him, he had paid dearly for it, and only he knew how precious it was." How is this born out by events in the book? How would you sum up the author's view of freedom?
8. In an imaginary conversation with Mao, the author argues that "although it was possible to kill a person, that person's human dignity could not be killed. A person is human because this bit of self-respect is indestructible." What does that dignity consist of? How does Gao manage to preserve his self-respect in a society that not only imprisons its people, but also degrades them? How are the novel's notions of human dignity and freedom related to those set forth in various philosophical traditions -- especially Chinese Taoism and European Existentialism?
9. How does Gao appear to see his role as a writer? Does he believe that art has a social or political function, or that the artist has a responsibility to his society? Do art and literature have a different significance in totalitarian and democratic societies?
10. Do you see the novel's protagonist as its author's alter ego or as a fictional creation who happens to share his name and basic biography? What kind of character is Gao? Does the author ever present him in a less than favorable light?
11. What is the significance of the book's title? What might Gao have intended in calling it a "bible" instead of a novel, memoir or autobiography?

**About the Author:** Gao Xingjian (whose name is pronounced gow shing-jen) is the first Chinese recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Born in 1940 in Jiangxi province in eastern China, he studied in state schools, earned a university degree in French in Beijing, and embarked on a life of letters. In 1987 he became a voluntary exile and settled in Paris, where two years later he completed his first novel, *Soul Mountain*. In 1992 he was named a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. In addition to writing fiction and criticism, Gao is also a noted playwright and painter. A collection of his paintings has been published under the title *Return to Painting*.