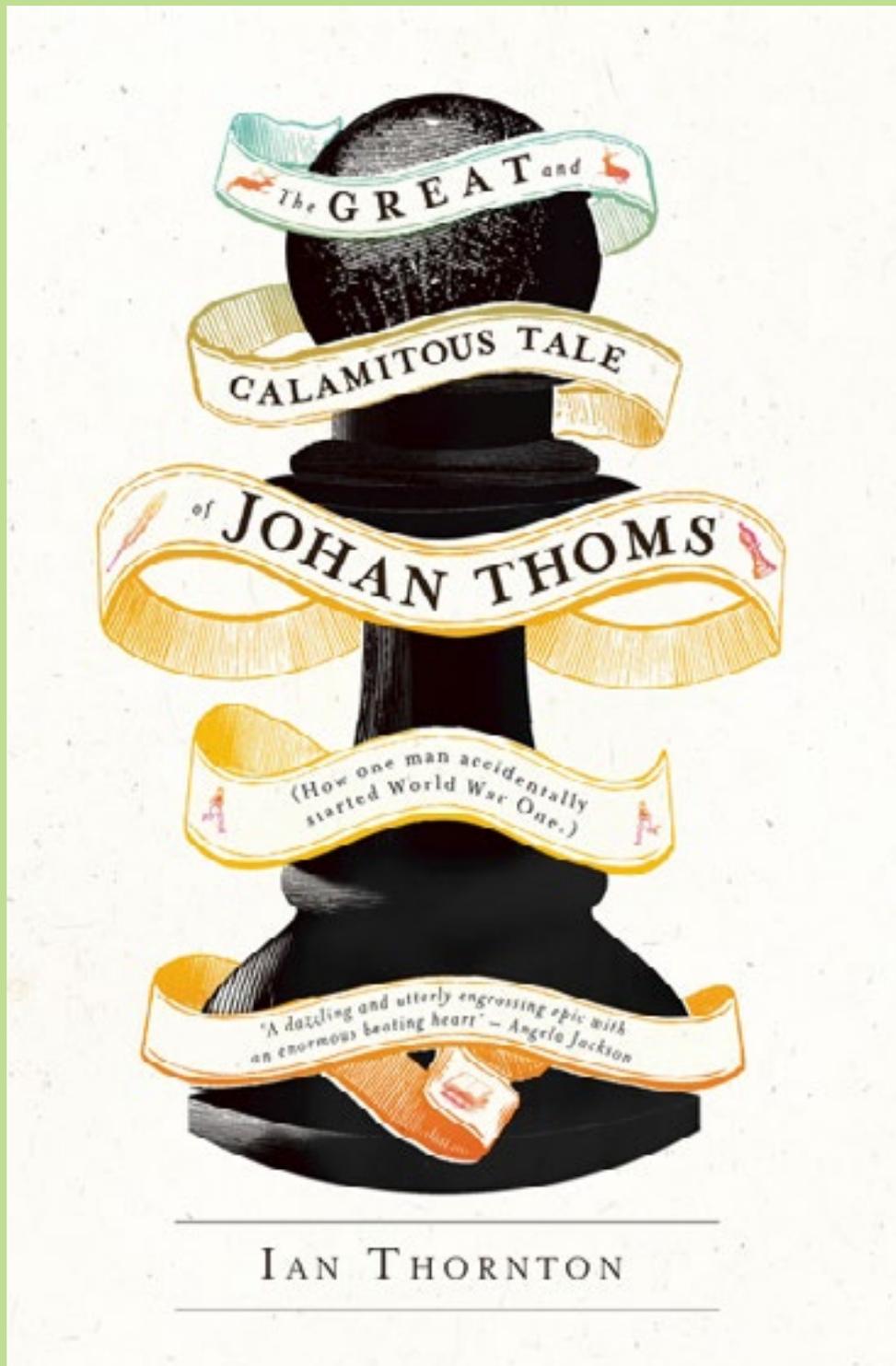


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO



About the Book

Johan Thoms (pronounced Yo-han Tomes) is poised for greatness. A promising student at the University of Sarajevo, he is young, brilliant, and in love with the beautiful Lorelei Ribeiro. He can outwit chess masters, quote the Kama Sutra, and converse with dukes and drunkards alike. But he cannot drive a car in reverse. And as with so much in the life of Johan Thoms, this seemingly insignificant detail will prove to be much more than it appears.

On the morning of June 28, 1914, Johan takes his place as the chauffeur to Franz Ferdinand and the royal entourage and, with one wrong turn, he forever alters the course of history. Blaming himself for the deaths of the archduke and his wife, Johan hastens from the scene, and for once his inspired mind cannot process what to do next. Guilt ridden, he flees to Sarajevo, abandoning his friends, family, and his beloved. He watches in horror as World War I unfolds, every death settling squarely on his conscience.

Johan seeks solace in his writing and in the makeshift family he has assembled around himself. With everyone from emperors to hooligans at his side, Johan winds his way through Europe and the 20th century, leaving his indelible mark on both.

About the Author

Ian Thornton read Business Studies and German at Sheffield University. He lived in a number of places including California, Costa Rica, Mexico, London, and his native and beloved Yorkshire before moving to Toronto in 2009. He is a co-founder of the global television industry publishers, C21 Media. Ian has written for *The Guardian* and other magazines. *The Great & Calamitous Tale of Johan Thoms* is his first novel.

Discussion Questions

Prologue & Part 1

- The narrative of the novel is told as a *mise en abyme* (story-within-a-story). What is the effect of this structure on the nature of the narrative?
- Because of the kind of structure the novel has, the themes of memory and doubt are introduced early in the text. As readers, how do we come to believe the story being told to us?
- Is the stag attack on Johan, which allows him to meet Kauntiz, a fortunate or unfortunate one?
- How does Johan's disposition as a child inform the kind of person he becomes as an adult?
- In what ways does the game of chess work as a metaphor throughout the text?

Part 2

- Bill Cartwright quickly becomes Johan's best friend. In what ways are the two characters complementary?
- When Johan meets Lorelei (p. 46), he very quickly falls in love. How does love affect him?
- Kaunitz is able to secure Johan his job as a driver, but Johan fails to mention his occupational shortcomings. As readers, do we forgive him this lie of omission?
- After Johan makes his disastrous wrong turn and the archduke and his wife are assassinated, Johan's instinct is to run away. Why?
- Johan's error raises the theme of responsibility in the text. Who is responsible for the archduke's death? How much of that responsibility falls on Johan?

Part 3

- In hospital, Johan asks, "Does my name mean anything to you?" (137). How does Johan try to reshape his identity by living his life on the run?
- The hospital is where Johan meets Cicero. What are the similarities that make these two become fast friends and kindred spirits?

- While on the run, Johan develops a writing habit and writes novels under the name de plume Blanche de la Peña. In what ways is the creation of this authorial figure helpful for Johan? What does it allow Johan to do that being himself cannot?
- While in Portugal, Johan and Cicero create the Young Hooligan's Chess Club. Why is this club so important to both of them?
- Throughout this section, we see letters that Lorelei wrote Johan, many of which he never received contemporaneous to when they were written. What is the impact of these letters on the narrative? Does it make the failed love story between Johan and Lorelei seem somehow more tragic?

Part 4 & Epilogue

- After a spell in London celebrating the Allied victory in World War II, Johan, Cicero, and Catalina return to Sarajevo. The city is destroyed after the wars. In what ways does this physical destruction affect Johan?
- On pages 268-70, Elena shows Johan all the letters from Lorelei that have only just reached Johan and he reads them. For Johan, how does the loss of love compare to the loss of lives from war for which Johan feels responsible?
- When both Cicero and Catalina die, Johan and Elena raise their daughter, Blanchita. In what ways does she become Johan's second chance at life and leaving a different kind of legacy?
- Eventually, it is Ernest who is able to make Johan see he was not solely responsible for events that unfolded on June 28, 1914 and thereafter. Do we get the sense that Johan truly believes that and that his sense of personal guilt is truly assuaged?
- The novel ends with Ernest's grandson beginning his own expedition to Portugal to retrace some of the steps of Johan and Cicero. How many different ways does this novel take on the theme of adventure?

Writing Prompts and Research Projects

- Two significant words in the novel's title are "great" and "calamitous." Think about how you would define those two terms. Using your definitions, in what ways is the story of Johan Thoms great and calamitous?
- The meeting between Ernest and Johan, which serves as the catalyst for the novel, happens largely by accident. Accidental, unintentional occurrences happen frequently throughout the novel to many characters, usually with great impact. Choose one or two characters and explore the theme of happy/unhappy (or both!) accidents.
- As discussed, one of the most significant themes throughout the novel is that of personal responsibility. How does the story's main thread, fictionalizing the start of World War One as one man's misdirection and error, affect how we see such global conflicts?
- Throughout Part 3, we get glimpses of the kinds of battles raging throughout WWI, like that of the Battle of the Marne, or knowing that Bill Cartwright was killed at the Somme. Research one of these historical battles. With that knowledge, how would such circumstances influence Johan and his psyche?
- On page 171, Johan tells Cicero the story behind his immense sadness and the reasons for him running away. He says, "I'm a mass murderer, but I didn't mean to be." In what ways is the moment of self-definition so significant for Johan?

About This Guide's Author

Kim Racon holds a BA in English and Gender Studies from Cedar Crest College and an MA and is ABD in English from Lehigh University. A contributor to the websites [Notches: \(re\)marks on the history of sexuality](#) and [The Buzz About](#), she is currently an adjunct lecturer in first-year writing programs.

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