“The greatest of living travel writers...an amazingly complex and subtle evocation of a place that is no more.” —Jan Morris

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Expelled from secondary school in the midst of his final year for a chaste flirtation with a local girl (and not for one of his numerous other crimes and misdemeanors), Patrick Leigh Fermor headed for London to launch a literary career. Soon enough he abandoned the city to set out on a singular quest: starting in December 1933, he would travel on foot across snowy Europe, along the Rhine and the Danube, to Constantinople, an excursion that was to take him until 1935 to finish. It was the adventure of a lifetime, and half a lifetime later, in 1977, he published A Time of Gifts, describing the first stage of the journey, which took him from Holland to Prague.

One of the most beloved travel books ever written, A Time of Gifts is a book that defies classification. Leigh Fermor recaptures the innocence of being young and footloose, tromping through the biting cold of a northern European winter, scraping to earn a few pennies by going door to door in Vienna apartment buildings and making sketches of the residents, or accepting the sometimes lavish hospitality of friends, innkeepers, and barons that he meets along the way. Some of the portraits in this book—of German bargemen, postmaster’s widows, or Central European aristocrats—are incomparable set pieces of travel writing, capturing a character or a whole way of life with a few deft strokes. But Leigh Fermor is also a writer of remarkable, if always lightly worn, learning, and hidden within A Time of Gifts is an astonishing overview of European art and history, full of fascinating excursions into medieval Germany, Danube School painting, Austrian horsemanship, Shakespeare’s Winter’s Tale, and the histories of dozens of people and places in Europe. Above all, Leigh Fermor’s gusto for experience, friendship, knowledge, giving and receiving hospitality, and capturing it all in his lush and masterful sentences and paragraphs make this book a glorious evocation of all of life’s gifts.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. In his introductory letter and later in the book, Leigh Fermor describes his parents and the way he was raised. How did Leigh Fermor’s upbringing prepare him—or destine him—for his later adventures? Do you approve of how he was raised?

2. The author constantly looks both backward and forward in time; for instance, in the first paragraph after “the formal start of my journey,” he walks into a Rotterdam church, is reminded of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, and comments that the whole city would be destroyed in the war a few years later [pp. 27–28]. Do you find one or the other more enriching, his histories or his foreshadowings? How would the effect of the book be different if there were one without the other?

3. Leigh Fermor often gives miniature lectures, or “a theory...I may as well get off my chest” [p. 96]. Do you think these more sweeping topics interrupt his personal story, or vice versa? Do you think of this book as a memoir or a history of Europe?
4. Part of young Leigh Fermor’s excitement is finding himself cut off from his checkered adolescence and with a clean slate: “In the past, I had always arrived on any new scene trailing a long history of misdeeds and disasters. Now, the continuity was broken” [p. 283]. Were you surprised to read this in a book so obsessed with historical and geographical continuities? Are there other parts of the author’s personality which seem to pull in the other direction from the main story he tells?

5. Which place described in the book would you most want to visit? Why? Because of what Leigh Fermor says or how he describes it, or because of something in your own history?

6. Jan Morris’s introduction says that Leigh Fermor’s “Cretan adventure of 1942 pervades the narrative of 1933, because it obviously pervaded the mind of the author in 1977” [p. ix]. Do you agree? It comes up twice in the book [pp. 85–86 and 220–221]; do those passages seem central to you? How are the events of 1942 relevant to the story of Leigh Fermor’s walk?

7. In one of his modest asides about his own personality, Leigh Fermor writes that people were nice to him “because I was the youngest and because genuine rashness, linked with a kind of clownish exhibitionism, whose secret I had learnt long ago and sedulously cultivated, always won a dubious popularity” [p. 126]. Does the author of the book—Leigh Fermor 42 years later—come across the same way as the younger man he describes? Do you respond to him now the way people responded to him then?

8. As the journey progresses, Leigh Fermor spends less and less time sleeping in barns and consorting only with peasants, and more time with new friends in castles and cities. Do you think this is a failure of his original plan, or a good deviation from it? How do his city adventures in Stuttgart, Vienna, Bratislava, and Prague compare with his time in the country, in inns and farmers’ houses?

9. “The link between journeys and painting, especially this sort of journey, is very close” [p. 156]. What do you think Leigh Fermor means by this? How are paintings important to him? Do you feel that his travels have a closer connection with painting or poetry? What does he get from one that he can’t get from the other?

10. With writing as rich and rhythmic as Leigh Fermor’s, it’s a different experience to hear it out loud. Have each member of the group pick a paragraph and read it out loud; what do you notice, or how do you feel, that’s different from when you read it to yourself? Here are some suggestions for paragraphs to read: the ice-yacht [pp. 27–28], castle architecture [p. 72], the Danube [pp. 89–90; 92–94; 145; 299], mealtime in Germany [pp. 104–105], the snowy forest [pp. 116–117], a lonely sunset [p. 120], paintings of martyrs [pp. 151–152], the Giant Catfish (“People say they eat babies” [p. 164] to “amazement” [p. 165], widow Hübner’s monologue [pp. 182–183], Fermor’s first customers in Vienna [pp. 203–205], two Czech nuns [pp. 249–250], entering and leaving Prague [pp. 254 and 273], memories of fashionable Europe [p. 284], the coming of spring [first half of p. 287 and pp. 301–302].

11. The book ends with Leigh Fermor “poised in mid-air” on the middle of a bridge with Easter services about to start [p. 313]. How is this an appropriate ending to the book? What is he about to cross; what is about to be reborn? Are you disappointed that the book ends before he gets all the way to Constantinople, or do you think the incompleteness works well?