



BELLEVUE LITERARY PRESS

READING GROUP GUIDE

The Jump Artist

By
Austin Ratner

“A beautifully scrupulous, intricately detailed novel about joy and despair, anti-Semitism and assimilation, and like a great photograph, it seems to miss nothing, and to catch its subject in all his complexity.”

—Charles Baxter author of *The Feast of Love* and *The Soul Thief*



INTRODUCTION

The Jump Artist is evocative psychological fiction based on the true, and largely unknown, story of renowned photographer Philippe Halsman, a man Adolph Hitler knew by name, who Sigmund Freud wrote about in 1931, and who put Marilyn Monroe on the cover of Life magazine. Surviving an episode that presages the horrors of WWII, Halsman transforms himself from a victim of rampant anti-Semitism into a purveyor of the marvelous.

The story begins in September 1928, when Halsman and his father were hiking in the Tyrolean Alps. While Halsman went ahead on the trail, his father was attacked and murdered. The Jewish 22 year old from Latvia found himself alone in hostile territory; Nazism was on the rise and Innsbruck's foremost forensic pathologist, Karl Meixner, saw to it that Halsman would be tried for killing his father. It was a miscarriage of justice that foreshadowed the many horrors to come in Austria, and though the events are now lost in the shadow of the Holocaust, they were then known across Europe as 'The Austrian Dreyfus Affair.' Many intellectuals, including Albert Einstein, came to Halsman's aid in a public battle that pitted reason against irrational prejudice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why the references to dog breeding in the opening chapter? How does the Prince's attitude to his dogs relate to some of the ideas of the Nazi movement?
2. Why do you think Philipp's father was so determined to charge ahead through the mountains at any cost?
3. Karl Meixner asks Philipp in so many words (p. 117), 'If you're innocent, why did you attempt suicide?' Why might an innocent person in Philipp's position experience feelings of guilt and self-loathing? How might his relationship with his father account for those feelings?
4. The historical Karl Meixner did in fact keep Max Halsmann's head in a jar at the University of Innsbruck, where it remained against the family's wishes until 1991, when it was interred. There is reason to believe that during World War II, Meixner made further use of human remains without consent. On March 18, 1939 he affirmed with his personal signature a Reich-Minister decree entitled "re: Transfer of Corpses of the executed to the Institutes of Anatomy." While the University of Vienna in 1998 acknowledged its medical faculty's use

of the bodies of executed Nazi prisoners for scientific study, the University of Innsbruck has not. Should the University of Innsbruck be called to account? Why? What about the “Bodies” exhibits now showing in many cities. Is the provenance of those Chinese corpses known? Is the display of human remains without consent morally acceptable? What about the scientific uses of the biopsied cells of Henrietta Lacks, which took place here in the United States without permission or compensation?

5. The Spanish painter Francisco de Goya titled one of his etchings, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.” How does this statement relate to the sleepy Innsbruck judge? To the trial overall? To the story of the Judenstein? To the historical Jewish experience of persecution? To the Holocaust?
6. The title of Chapter 1 in Part II is “The Root of All Evil.” In the Christian Bible Jesus says “love of money” is the root of all evil. The German poet Friedrich Holderlin wrote a poem called “The Root of All Evil” which says, “Being at one is god-like and good, but human, too human, the mania / Which insists there is only the One, one country, one truth, and one way.” What do you think the root of all evil is? What does the Halsman story say about the roots of evil?
7. Franz Pessler, Philipp’s attorney, says (p. 73), “Death can play tricks in the mind.” What do you think he means? How are the words relevant to Philipp?
8. Why does Philipp push Ruth away? Did he treat her fairly? Why do you think he at first acts much the same way towards Yvonne?
9. In the Hebrew Bible, Noah casts out his son and grandson for very ambiguous reasons. How are Philipp and Noah’s banishments of loved ones similar? How does guilt influence human relationships?
10. Why does Philipp change the spelling of his name from Philipp Halsmann to Philippe Halsman?

11. Transformation occurs in many ways. How does the character of Philipp change (and not change) over the course of the story? What role does art play in his transformation? What role does love play? What role does introspection play?
12. Several times in the novel Philippe encounters people or places that remind him of people or places from the past. For example, the sleepy Paul Painlevé in the chapter “The Minister of the Air” reminds Philippe of someone (p. 165). Who? In what ways does Jean Painlevé’s laboratory resemble and contrast with the laboratory of Karl Meixner or the Innsbruck prison? What’s the significance of Philipp’s visit to the prison cells of the Conciergerie (p. 151) in the chapter where he decides to become a photographer? What’s the general significance of ‘revisitation’ in his coming to terms with the past?
13. Austin Ratner writes (in the guise of the fictional Andre Gide, p. 182): “The courageous thing is to be who one always was and to find in the world those people and places that are like oneself!” Is that true? To what extent does it apply or not apply to Philippe?
14. The real Philippe Halsman took many photographs of his subjects jumping in the air. What’s the significance of jumping in this book? In Philippe’s life?
15. The Jump Artist is based on a true story. Why do you think the author chose to intermix fact and fiction and write the story as a novel? Is that a controversial choice? What might have been gained or lost by telling the story as non-fiction?
16. Austin Ratner is a medical doctor who does not practice medicine. Do you think his medical training shaped the book in any way? In what ways do you think medicine may have shaped his attitude to human suffering?

PRAISE FOR *THE JUMP ARTIST*

“This elegantly-written tribute makes as beautiful a use of the darkness and light of one man’s life, as a Halsman photograph of a pretty young woman.” —*GQ*

“A remarkable work.” —*Harper’s Magazine*

“Ratner knows how to use rhythms and metaphors to evoke a sensory, psychologically grounded reality that writers with vastly more experience than him would envy.” —*The Jewish Daily Forward*

“Fortunately, in Ratner’s hands, all this material is transmuted into engaging fiction, not pedantic reportage. The novel’s protagonist feels like a thoughtful presence; we understand the historical material through Philipp’s perspective, which is well measured, complicated, convincingly dark.”

—The Rumpus.net

“Ratner. . . vividly depicts his character’s ordeal and amazing recovery from the trauma of the event.” —*The Morning News*

“Ratner uses a historical figure to discuss the trepidations felt throughout a Europe aware that the future was unknowable yet around the corner. It is this confusion, on an individual and collective level, that allows the novel to transcend the bounds of historical fiction. Ratner describes the era well, but his more substantial achievement is in the creation of a character that history already knows.” —*Booklist*

“Ratner weaves a psychologically arresting fiction from these facts, imagining the creep of Nazism in 1928 Europe.” —*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“The book is a beautiful, if dark, psychological portrait of a man suffering under the weight of his own doubts, as well as the world events that have deeply personal consequences for him.” —*Cedar Rapids Gazette*

“Ratner’s brilliant first novel . . . presents a fascinating tribute to the “jump artist” through the prism of a dark and horrific time in European history.” —*Cleveland Jewish News*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Austin Ratner’s short fiction has appeared in numerous literary magazines. He was awarded the *Missouri Review* Editors’ Prize in Fiction and a fellowship to study at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Before turning to writing he received his M.D. from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. This is his first novel.