

READING GROUP GUIDE

THE ART OF RACING IN THE RAIN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Some early readers of the novel have observed that viewing the world through a dog's eyes makes for a greater appreciation of being human. Why do you think this is?
- Enzo's observations throughout the novel provide insight into his world view. For example:
 - *"The visible becomes inevitable."*
 - *"Understanding the truth is simple. Allowing oneself to experience it, is often terrifically difficult."*
 - *"No race has ever been won in the first corner; many races have been lost there."* How does his philosophy apply to real life?
- In the book's darkest moments, one of Zoe's stuffed animals — the zebra — comes to life and threatens him. What does the zebra symbolize?
- Can you imagine the novel being told from Denny's point of view? How would it make the story different?
- In the first chapter, Enzo says: *"It's what's inside that's important. The soul. And my soul is very human."* How does Enzo's situation—a human soul trapped in a dog's body— influence his opinions about what he sees around him? How do you feel about the ideas of reincarnation and karma as Enzo defines them?
- Do you find yourself looking at your own dog differently after reading this novel?
- In the book, we get glimpses into the mindset and mentality of a race car driver. What parallels can you think of between the art of racing and the art of living?
- The character of Ayrton Senna, as he is presented in the book, is heroic, almost a mythic figure. Why do you think this character resonates so strongly for Denny?

AUTHOR Q&A

Q: Where did the idea for the book come from?

The first seed for this book was planted in my mind about ten years ago. I was no longer working in documentary films, but a friend asked me to consult on the U.S. distribution of a film he knew about from Mongolia, called "State of Dogs." I took a look at the film and the press material they had on it. I didn't end up getting involved with the film, but the idea really stuck with me. In Mongolia, there is a belief that the next incarnation for a dog is as a man. I thought this was a cool concept and I tucked it away thinking I might some day do something with it.

Then, in 2004, I saw Billy Collins speak at Seattle Arts and Lectures. He's a great poet and a terrific reader. He read a poem, *The Revenant*, which is told from the point of view of a recently euthanized dog as he addresses his former master from heaven. The poem begins, "I am the dog you put to sleep...come back to tell you one simple thing: I never liked you—not one bit." I loved this poem. When Billy Collins finished reading, I knew I had to write a story from the point of view of a dog. And my dog would know the truth: that in his next incarnation, he would return to earth as a man.

So I had the character and the goal, but I still needed the framework of a story. A close friend of mine, who is a semi-professional race car driver but who supplements his racing by working behind the counter at an upscale automotive repair shop, was going through some personal difficulties. His plight wasn't Denny's, but it gave me some ideas about what happens to families when one member suddenly passes away. I developed a story that would really put my main character, Denny, through his paces, and then it was all there for me.

Q: What inspired you to tell the story from a dog's point of view?

Using a dog as a narrator has limitations and it has advantages. The limitations are that a dog cannot speak. A dog has no thumbs. A dog can't communicate his thoughts except with gestures. Dogs are not allowed certain places. The advantages are that a dog has special access: people will say things in front of dogs because it is assumed that a dog doesn't understand. Dogs are allowed to witness certain things because they aren't people and have no judgment.

I was able to work with this idea a lot in terms of giving the reader a unique viewpoint into the action of the book. Enzo goes off with Zoë, and while Denny, her father, doesn't know what happens, we see through Enzo's eyes and so we do know. In that sense, it was a lot of fun playing with this "fly on the wall" point of view. Especially since the "fly" in our case, is Enzo, who has very keen powers of observation.

Q: Is there any significance to the name Enzo?

Yes! Denny's dog, Enzo, is named after Enzo Ferrari, who built one of the greatest car trademarks in the world. Ferrari automobiles are famous everywhere. And Ferrari is a dominant player in the world of Formula One racing.

But I have a funny story about how I arrived at Enzo's name....

When I first started writing this novel, Enzo was not named Enzo. He was named Juan Pablo, after Juan Pablo Montoya, the race car driver. When my wife read the first few pages, she said that she loved what I was writing, but the name of the dog wasn't quite right.

"How about Enzo?" she asked. We had two sons already, and were expecting our third. I had always wanted to name one of my boys Enzo. I thought it was the ultimate cool name: Enzo Stein. But my wife very much disagreed. "We have a lot of different nationalities in our combined backgrounds," she reasoned. "Russian, German, Austrian, Tlingit Indian, Irish, English...but we have no Italian."

“But then we won’t be able to name the baby Enzo,” I said.

“I thought of that,” she said, nodding slowly.

“I really wanted to name him Enzo,” I said. “Enzo, the dog, is your new baby,” she replied. “And when our new baby comes, we’ll find the right name for him.”

(For those of you who are interested: We named our son Dashiell.)

Q: Are you a dog owner yourself?

Yes. Our dog, Comet, is a Lab/poodle mix. She’s goofy and silly and sweet.

Q: The racing scenes deliver a real adrenaline rush and a feel for the intricacies of the sport. Is this seemingly expert knowledge based on personal experience or extensive research?

When I moved back to Seattle in 2001, I got involved in “high performance driver education,” which is a fancy way of saying I learned to drive a car really fast on a race track. That soon led to my getting my racing license with the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA). While I did fairly well as a driver (I won the points championship in the NW region Spec Miata class in 2003), I didn’t really have the skill as a mechanic or the time and money needed to really excel. When I crashed my car pretty badly—ironically, while racing in the rain—I decided to semi-retire from racing, and now I only race enough to keep my license current.

The funny thing is that while I love cars, I never really thought of myself as a “car guy.” When I finished the draft of this book, my wife said, “So *that’s* why you were racing. You were doing research!” I guess, on a subconscious level, that’s what I was doing.

Q: The custody battle between the widower Denny and the parents of his late wife is ugly and horrible, with the latter trying to manipulate the outcome by any means necessary. Is this over the top portrayal meant to be colored by Enzo’s strong feelings of loyalty?

Any narrative point of view is biased—the narrator has his opinions—and Enzo is extremely biased toward all things Denny and family. So what Enzo relates to us is filtered through a couple of things: first, being a dog, he’s limited in what he is allowed to see; second, being so devoted to his master, his opinions are all highly skewed.

That being said, I have spoken with attorneys who have assured me that in custody and visitation battles, especially ones involving grandparents, things can get extremely ruthless, and it is not inconceivable that, for instance, one side might try to drag things out in order to put the other party into extreme economic distress.

Q: The book contains many wise phrases. Which is your favorite? Why?

Oh, I can't do that. I love all my children equally! (Okay, I'd have to pick: "Somewhere, the zebra is dancing." There's just something so funny and incongruous about the zebra! I know it's not one of the "wise" phrases, but it's my favorite one-liner.)

Q: Why was racing your sporting analogy of choice? Do you expect that a novel about a race car driver, told from his dog's viewpoint, will be more appealing to men than women?

Honestly, the idea for this book grew organically from a Mongolian film about reincarnation I saw nearly 15 years ago. I didn't set out to write about racing or cars; the racing came into it because of my own racing experiences and the great people I met while I was doing it. While men typically are more into cars than women, the response I've gotten from women is just as passionate about racing as the response I've gotten from men, and I think that's due to Enzo's unbridled passion.

Q: What lessons can we all learn from Enzo?

I'm not sure that's for me to judge. But I would say the important things for me are twofold.

First, Enzo's mantra: "That which you manifest is before you." I think it's very important to take charge of your life, not to feel like you're a victim of circumstance or fate, but that you are an active participant in your future. It's not a new idea: "And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." (Lennon/McCartney) Where I focus my energy always matches what comes back to me in my life.

Secondly, Enzo's epiphany—the thing he learns at the end of his life—is that his assumption that race car drivers have to be selfish to be successful, is incorrect. In fact, he determines, in order to be successful, a race car driver has to be completely selfless. He must cease looking at himself as the brightest star in the solar system, and begin to see himself as simply a unique aspect of the universe around him—and, most importantly, as an extension of the universe around him. In this way, a race car driver sheds his ego; his actions become pure and as powerful as the entire universe, which in turn leads to success.

All athletes speak about the mental element of athletics, and it usually boils down to the same thing: if you can remove your ego from the game, you can function with much more clarity and you are more likely to succeed. Wouldn't it be interesting if we all began speaking about the mental element of our lives in this way? How would our lives change if we did?