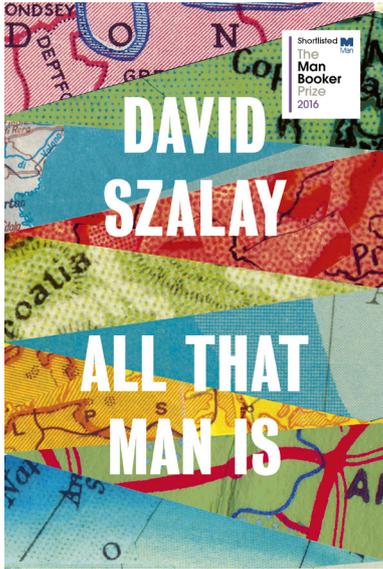


VINTAGE READING GUIDE



SYNOPSIS

Nine men. Each of them at a different stage of life, each of them away from home, and each of them striving – in the suburbs of Prague, beside a Belgian motorway, in a cheap Cypriot hotel – to understand just what it means to be alive, here and now.

Tracing an arc from the spring of youth to the winter of old age, *All That Man Is* brings these separate lives together to show us men as they are – ludicrous and inarticulate, shocking and despicable; vital, pitiable, hilarious, and full of heartfelt longing. And as the years chase them down, the stakes become bewilderingly high in this piercing portrayal of 21st-century manhood.

QUESTIONS

- The novel contains nine very different characters: did you have a favourite? If so, why?
- The protagonists in *All That Man Is* ascend in age from beginning to end. To what extent are they characterised by their stage of life above anything else?
- How is the act of crossing borders and boundaries significant to the narrative?
- Discuss the theme of masculinity in the novel. Do you think that Szalay feels positively about the state of masculinity today? If so, why?
- Would you agree with Edward Docx's claim in the *Guardian* that Szalay's central theme in the novel is the phrase 'Life is not a joke'? Discuss how Szalay explores this theme differently in each chapter.
- 'Far from celebrating's man's infinite variety, the book reveals his endless repetitiveness.' *Observer*. Do you agree with this?
- 'Uncharitable readers may be tempted to dismiss Szalay as a misogynist.' *TLS*. Many reviewers took issue with Szalay's presentation of women in the book, stating that they were barely sketched out and given very little dialogue or space. Do you agree with this view? Do you think the perceived lack of women is a problem in the narrative?

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IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: STORIES

- 'In his new book David Szalay tells nine stories about nine different men of six different nationalities in settings that sweep across 13 different countries, and he has the temerity to call it a novel. Well, not so much temerity as audacity – because Szalay actually pulls it off.' Duncan White, *Daily Telegraph*

'But does it in any sense work, as Jonathan Cape wants us to believe, as a novel? Yes, there's a thematic consistency that makes this more than a collection, and Szalay even throws in the odd narrative link (the 73-year-old, it transpires, is the 17-year-old's granddad). But still, a novel? I don't think so.' William Skidelksy, *Observer*

Did you feel that the book is best categorized as a novel, or short stories?

- What qualifies a book to be a novel rather than a collection of short stories? Is it character, plot, or something more amorphous? Discuss, using the quotes above as a starting point.

IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: LIKEABILITY

- Many reviewers picked up on how unpleasant the protagonists are in the novel. Some even linked it to the wider trend for unlikeable narrators in thrillers such as *Girl on the Train* and *Gone Girl*. Do you agree that the protagonists are universally unpleasant? Do you think this matters? How does likeability affect the reading experience, and is this experience different when reading a literary novel as opposed to a thriller?

IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: TEXT ON THE PAGE

- Look again at p.28, 94 and 316, and discuss how Szalay uses the appearance of letters on a page, and the blank space around them, to describe the experience of his characters. What do you think this adds to the narrative, if anything? Can you think of other novels and writers who employ similar techniques?

IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: WRITING TECHNIQUE

- 'Mr. Szalay has a good deal of what the critic Alfred Kazin once called "the marginal suggestiveness which in a great writer always indicates those unspoken reserves, that silent assessment of life, that can be heard below and beyond the slow marshaling of his thought."' *New York Times*

Discuss Szalay's writing technique with reference to the above quote. How does he indicate those unspoken reserves? Do you agree that this is the hallmark of a great writer? What other hallmarks make a writer great, for you?

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IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: BREXIT

- The novel was written and published immediately before the Brexit vote of 23 June 2016, and the 9 characters of the novel travel all over Europe. How do you think the book would have changed in the post-Brexit world? Do you think that the message of the book, or the characters, appear differently in a post-Brexit light?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Szalay is the author of three previous novels: *Spring*, *The Innocent* and *London and the South-East*, for which he was awarded the Betty Trask and Geoffrey Faber Memorial prizes. Raised in London, he has lived in Canada and Belgium, and is now based in Budapest. In 2013 he was named as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists.