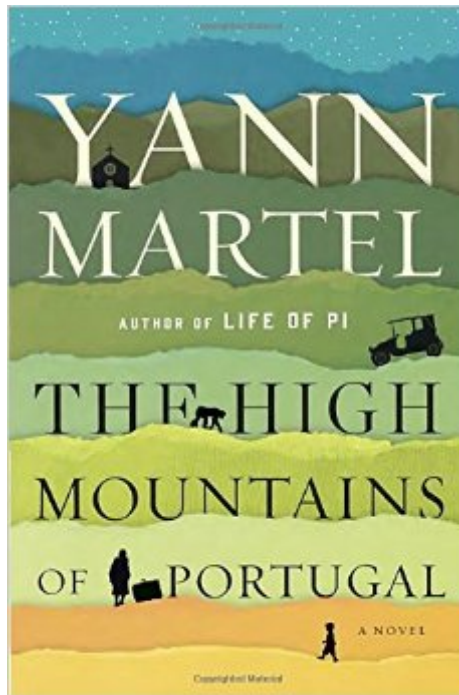


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# The High Mountains Of Portugal: A Novel



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Fifteen years after *The Life of Pi*, Yann Martel is taking us on another long journey. Fans of his Man Booker Prize-winning novel will recognize familiar themes from that seafaring phenomenon, but the itinerary in this imaginative new book is entirely fresh. . . . Martel's writing has never been more charming. • Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

In Lisbon in 1904, a young man named Tomã's discovers an old journal. It hints at the existence of an extraordinary artifact that "if he can find it" would redefine history. Traveling in one of Europe's earliest automobiles, he sets out in search of this strange treasure. Thirty-five years later, a Portuguese pathologist devoted to the murder mysteries of Agatha Christie finds himself at the center of a mystery of his own and drawn into the consequences of Tomã's quest. Fifty years on, a Canadian senator takes refuge in his ancestral village in northern Portugal, grieving the loss of his beloved wife. But he arrives with an unusual companion: a chimpanzee. And there the century-old quest will come to an unexpected conclusion. *The High Mountains of Portugal* "part quest, part ghost story, part contemporary fable" offers a haunting exploration of great love and great loss. Filled with tenderness, humor, and endless surprise, it takes the reader on a road trip through Portugal in the last century "and through the human soul. Praise for *The High Mountains of Portugal* • Just as ambitious, just as clever, just as existential and spiritual [as *Life of Pi*] . . . a book that rewards your attention . . . an excellent book club choice. • San Francisco Chronicle • There's no denying the simple pleasures to be had in *The High Mountains of Portugal*. • Chicago Tribune • Charming . . . Most Martellian is the boundless capacity for parable. . . . Martel knows his strengths: passages about the chimpanzee and his owner brim irresistibly with affection and attentiveness. • The New Yorker • A rich and rewarding experience . . . [Martel] spins his magic thread of hope and despair, comedy and pathos. • USA Today • I took away indelible images from *High Mountains*, enchanting and disturbing at the same time. . . . As whimsical as Martel's magic realism can be, grief informs every step of the book's three journeys. In the course of the novel we burrow ever further into the heart of an ape, pure and threatening at once, our precursor, ourselves. • NPR • Refreshing, surprising and filled with sparkling moments of humor and insight. • The Dallas Morning News • We're fortunate to have brilliant writers using their fiction to meditate on a paradox we need urgently to consider "the unbridgeable gap and the unbreakable bond between human and animal, our impossible self-alienation from our world. . . . [Martel's] semi-surreal, semi-absurdist mode is well suited to exploring the paradox. The moral and spiritual implications of his tale have, in the end, a quality of haunting tenderness. • Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Guardian* • [Martel packs] his inventive

novel with beguiling ideas. What connects an inept curator to a haunted pathologist to a smitten politician across more than seventy-five years is the author's ability to conjure up something uncanny at the end. "The Boston Globe" a fine home, and story, in which to find oneself. "Minneapolis Star Tribune

## Book Information

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: Spiegel & Grau; First Edition edition (February 2, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812997174

ISBN-13: 978-0812997170

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1.1 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars See all reviews (155 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #55,528 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #137 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Metaphysical & Visionary #211 in Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Fantasy > Magical Realism #535 in Books > Literature & Fiction > British & Irish > Historical

## Customer Reviews

Let me stipulate that in *The High Mountains of Portugal*, Yann Martel may well have written a great novel; it's just not the kind of book I enjoy. I do not need my fiction to be driven by the classic conflicts we learned about back in junior high—"man vs. man (to use the old-fashioned language of my seventh grade teacher), man vs. nature, man vs. himself. But I do need it to be driven by something other than man vs. antique automobile. I loved *Life of Pi* and am quick to concede that Mr. Martel is a gifted craftsman in the art of narrative. Tomas's quest to find a lost antique crucifix and his eccentric insistence on walking through life backward were compelling conceits that quickly captured my initial interest. And for a time, the beauty of Martel's prose was enough to sustain my interest in the story even when Tomas's quest got bogged down, for example, in detailed accounts of the gear his uncle had packed for him, and the moment of Tomas's quest slowed to a crawl. But after miles of driving along with Tomas in his uncle's vintage car and not getting anywhere in particular, my mind began to drift. I first found myself skipping paragraphs, and then entire pages. And in each case it felt like I landed right back in the place I had left behind, like picking up the needle on an old vinyl LP somewhere toward the beginning and placing it back down toward the middle only to find you're still listening to

the chorus of "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida." I read mainly for pleasure, though I am always glad to encounter books that expand my understanding of the human experience or that enrich or alter the way I see the world. I suspect that's what Martel was going for in *The High Mountains of Portugal*: giving us a modern fable that sheds new light on a dark corner of life. Unfortunately he lost me along the way.

The high mountains of Portugal are not mountains at all, but huge boulders on a mythic plateau, where men come in search of meaning. The book is not a novel in the usual sense but a collection of colorful stories linked by this search for meaning. A priest in colonial times who tries to minister to African men bound for slavery. A young man driving an automobile across Portugal when motor fuel was purchased in drugstores. He is searching for a rare crucifix made by this priest long ago. A pathologist pondering the meaning of life and death. A man at loose ends until he becomes best friends with a chimpanzee. That's all I can tell you of the plot. Author Yann Martel writes beautiful, lyric prose. Although written in plain, lucid English it somehow gives the sense of being a translation--such is the otherworldly nature of the storytelling. It draws the reader in like the retelling of a dream. It doesn't matter if the story doesn't completely make sense. Neither, all too often, does life. Do the travelers in these unreal landscapes find what they're looking for? You'll have to decide for yourself. This is the third Martel book I've read and to my mind it's the best. If you like magic realism, if you enjoy surrealistic journeys, you will absolutely love *The High Mountains of Portugal*. I recommend it highly! Reviewed by Louis N. Gruber.

*The High Mountains of Portugal* is the latest novel by Yann Martel. The writing is beautiful and lyrical, but for me the novel just never seemed to come together into a coherent whole. The book will likely appeal to Martel's core audience and, clearly, the author has written an highly creative novel that cuts deeper and is more literary than most. I really wanted to like this book. Sadly, as alluring as Martel's writing might be, the novel never quite got off the ground for me and I found it to be a long and difficult read. The book is really a triptych of three separate stories. We are introduced to a museum archivist on a quest to find a lost relic, a pathologist who ends up doing a most unusual autopsy, and a Canadian politician who gives up his all too conventional life. These stories are loosely connected by a number of tropes including the titular high mountains of Portugal, true love lost, mourners who have a penchant for walking backwards, and chimpanzees. There are also threads of an overarching story that weave their way through the novel and an element of whimsical unreality that percolates throughout the book. Although I have not read *Life of Pi*, it is clear to me

why Yann Martel won the Man Booker Prize. Martel's writing is lyrical, nearly poetic, and quite beautiful. The recurring themes allow for a rich variety of interpretation. The overall mood and way the book comes together will probably be seen as masterful by the literati. But for me the book was just too slow. Martel spends a great deal of his lyrical, poetic, and beautiful prose to describe the many insignificant events of life. The book is mired down by detailed descriptions of the dull, mechanical things we do every day like waking up, walking, eating lunch, finding a place to sleep. The elevation of the humdrum may be yet another of Martel's recurring themes--another element of innovation that might be considered groundbreaking by some--but in practice it slowed the novel down to a crawl and made the book a very slow and difficult read. It's hard to fault a serious novelist for leaving a story behind when the reader really wants more, but I felt a bit cheated as the surprising conclusions to each of the three sections were neither all that surprising nor satisfying. Each section develops too slowly and ends too abruptly. I do see what he was trying to achieve, but lethargic build ups that end in a less than satisfying punchline smack more of a shaggy dog story than creative story telling. I felt much the same way about the recurring themes. The best literary devices sneak up on you and you realize in retrospect what the author was trying to do. However, when a book starts out with a man who lost his true love and now can only walk backwards to move forwards--wink, wink, nudge, nudge--you know something is up. The smack-me-in-the-head-with-the-literary-device approach may work for others but it was over the top for me. I absolutely appreciate the author's writing style. He has a unique voice and a truly remarkable way of turning a phrase. I also appreciate the effort that it takes to write a novel that is original, strives for more than just a plot-driven story, and has layers of meaning that demand to be uncovered. Sadly, this one just did not hit the spot for me. It may well be that this novel will more than stand the test of time. I have visions of one of my future relatives getting a chuckle as they come across this review... it's long after I'm gone, and they are trucking piles of my old junk to the dumpster. Martel has won the Nobel Prize, this book has just replaced *The Great Gatsby* in the high school curriculum, and great-great grandpa just got it plain wrong. But try as I might, it took too much effort and too many short readings to get from cover to cover. Like Martel's mourners, my progress was so slow, almost retrogress. I felt like I was moving backwards as time kept ticking into the future. There is, no doubt, a lot of substance here, but it took all too much work for me to get through it. This one is worth a look see in your local library, but only die hard Martel fans will want to buy it.

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