

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF BROOKLYN

# COLM TÓIBÍN

'Stunning'  
ANNA  
FUNDER

# THE

'Remarkable'  
JOHN  
BANVILLE

# MAGICIAN

READING NOTES



## BLURB

When the Great War breaks out in 1914 Thomas Mann, like so many of his fellow countrymen, is fired up with patriotism. He imagines the Germany of great literature and music, which had drawn him away from the stifling, conservative town of his childhood, might be a source of pride once again. But his flawed vision will form the beginning of a dark and complex relationship with his homeland, and see the start of great conflict within his own brilliant and troubled family.

Colm Tóibín's epic novel is the story of a man of intense contradictions. Although Thomas Mann becomes famous and admired, his inner life is hesitant, fearful and secretive. His blindness to impending disaster in the Great War will force him to rethink his relationship with Germany as Hitler comes to power. He has six children with his clever and fascinating wife, Katia, while his own secret desires appear threaded through his writing. He and Katia deal with exile bravely, doing everything possible to keep the family safe, yet they also suffer the terrible ravages of suicide among Thomas's siblings, and their own children.

In *The Magician*, Colm Tóibín captures the profound personal conflict of a very public life, and through this life creates an intimate portrait of the twentieth century.

'This graceful novel is a moving and intimate portrait by one master of another . . . It is a stunning tribute to the great man, and a vital story for now.' — Anna Funder

'*The Magician* is a remarkable achievement. Mann himself, one feels certain, would approve.' — John Banville

'As with everything Colm Tóibín sets his masterful hand to, *The Magician* is a great imaginative achievement – immensely readable, erudite, worldly and knowing, and fully realized.' — Richard Ford

'No living novelist dramatizes artistic creation as profoundly, as luminously, as Colm Tóibín, or conveys so well the entanglement of imagination and desire.' — Garth Greenwell

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colm Tóibín was born in Ireland in 1955. He is the author of ten novels including *The Master*, *Brooklyn*, *The Testament of Mary* and *Nora Webster*. His work has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times, has won the Costa Novel Award and the International Dublin Literary Award. He has also published two collections of stories and many works of non-fiction. He lives in Dublin.



## INTRODUCTION

It's the turn of the twentieth century in Lübeck, a small city in Germany, and young Thomas Mann grows up with a conservative German father and a Brazilian mother who challenges the propriety of the people around her. In this deeply researched and spectacularly imagined novel, Tóibín sets the scene for the life of the novelist Thomas Mann, as he marries a young woman from one of the richest, most cultured Jewish families in Munich and fathers six children. Mann struggles with his sexuality, becomes a prolific novelist and then is immersed in the complex and devastating politics of the two world wars.

He is the most successful novelist of his time, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, a public man whose private life remains secret. In 1933, he flees Germany for Switzerland, France and, ultimately, America, while his brother and several of his children are leaders of the anti-Nazi movement. *The Magician* is an intimate portrait of Mann, his magnificent wife, Katia, and the times in which they lived — the First World War, the rise of Hitler, World War II, the Cold War and exile. This is a man and a family fiercely engaged by the world, profoundly flawed and unforgettable.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From an early age, Thomas is very much in the public eye of Lübeck. How do you think this affects his emotional development?
2. On page 20, Thomas reflects *'No matter where he went, he would never be important again.'* What do you make of that amount of self-awareness from one so young?
3. On page 62, Thomas meets Klaus and Katia for the first time. How is their relationship as siblings different from the relationships that Thomas has with his? And what draws him to them?
4. Almost immediately after his sudden intimacy with Herr Huhnemann (page 65), Thomas decides to propose to Katia. Why do you think he made this decision?
5. On page 92, Mann reflects that he *'realized that after his sister's death he had busied himself with writing. Sometimes he even managed to believe that her suicide had not even happened.'* What do you make of this detachment from grieving? How is it similar to (or different from) the way Thomas handled the death of his father?
6. On page 151, Katharina Schweighardt, the landlady who cares for Julia Mann, says, *"No one who has been used to money can live with that. That is how the world is."* How do you see this reflected in other members of the Mann family?



7. Tóibín describes a profound union between Katia and Thomas. They have an unspoken agreement about his sexuality and how it plays out in their marriage. Why do you think Katia accepts this arrangement? How do you read her wants and desires as a character?
8. On page 180, Thomas reflects that *'His two eldest children, he understood, could not be damaged as he could be. Their standing in the world depended on their open dismissal of easy sexual categories. Any effort to undermine their reputation would be banished by their own careless laughter and that of their friends. But no one would be amused if sections of his diary were to be published.'* Discuss why Thomas is afraid. What do you make of Thomas's sexualisation of younger boys (including his own son)?
9. Throughout the beginning of Hitler's rise to power, Thomas struggles with his place in the public eye. What are his reasons for not immediately denouncing Hitler, and do you think they are selfish? Misguided? Why or why not?
10. On page 240, Thomas says in reference to his writing, *"I can make no sense of the present. It is all confusion. I know nothing about the future."* How do you think this applies to his approach to life in general, and specifically to his writing up to this point in the novel?
11. The chapter on page 387 opens with the statement: *'The war was over; Thomas had not experienced it. He did not know what its aftermath meant.'* As Thomas experiences Germany after the war, how does this play out?
12. After Thomas refuses to attend Klaus's funeral, he receives a letter from Michael (page 394), which admonishes him for not being more present to his own children, while always seeking his success as a writer first. What impact do you think this letter has on Thomas?
13. At the end of *The Magician*, reflect on what you think Thomas's main motivations in life are. Could he have been successful in pursuing these without women like Katia and Erika?
14. Once you've finished *The Magician*, do some group research on the historical Thomas Mann. What aspects of the novel seem to be direct corollaries to his life, and which things may be of the author's imagination?



## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

### Supplemental reading:

*The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann

*Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family* by Thomas Mann (Tóibín recommends the translations by John E. Woods or John Edwards.)

*Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature* by Anthony Heilbut

*Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann

### Supplemental viewing:

*Jojo Rabbit*, 2019, directed by Taika Waititi

*Katja Mann: A Life with Thomas Mann*, 1969, directed by Michael Blackwood (via Amazon)

*Death in Venice*, 1971, directed by Luchino Visconti

For a full list of additional resources, please visit [colmtoibin.com](http://colmtoibin.com).