

READERS' GUIDE

The World of After by Stephen Henighan

INTRODUCING *The World of After*

In a graduate student residence at Oxford University in the early 1990s, Kevin, an Irish Montrealer, meets Leon, a London Jew from a Communist family, and Alex, a Soviet defector's son brought up in Toronto. When Alex begins to tutor a charming yet troubled upper-class English undergraduate, the dynamics in their conflicted three-way friendship culminate in Kevin and Leon playing a prank on Alex. The act's disastrous outcome binds the three young men together emotionally even as it dispatches them on separate courses through the 1990s.

Ranging from a precisely and ironically evoked Oxford, which parodies that of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, to post-Referendum Montreal, war-ravaged former Yugoslavia, London, Moscow, Poland, and Berlin, *The World of After* depicts the 1990s as an interlude of freedom and confused but enriching self-discovery between the rigidity of the Cold War and the stark divisions of the post-September 11, 2001 world. Kevin struggles to find love, recover a friendship he has betrayed, and chart a world he no longer understands as Leon dodges his past and Alex descends into a criminal culture that leads to a confrontation with his own values.

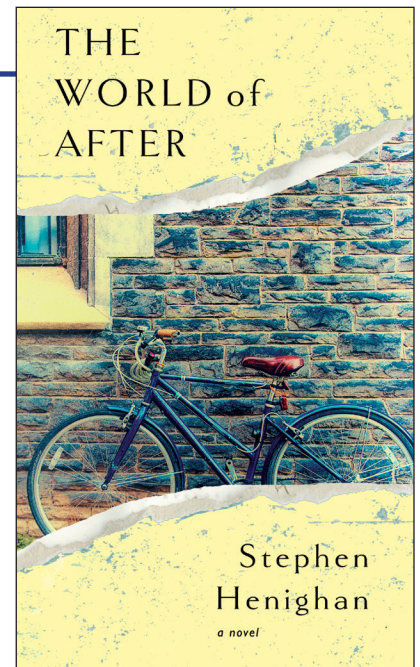
IMPORTANT THEMES

Friendship – Having moved abroad totally alone, Kevin yearns to meet male friends and once he does, he tries hard to avoid being left out. *The World of After* is a study in the complex nature of male friendship and the jealousies it can evoke.

Identity & Self-discovery – “I filled in the visa application form: Country of Birth, Country of Nationality, Ethnic Nationality. I hesitated at the last question. . . . I was too mongrelized to have anything so uncompromising as an ethnicity. In Montreal, I had been an Anglais, pigeonholed by my mother tongue; in England, I was a Yank, condemned by the Brits' tin ear for foreign accents. I reasserted the primacy of the nation-state by writing: Canadian.” (p 352) Kevin asserts throughout the novel that he is Canadian, but when he meets fellow Canadians doesn't seem to have anything in common with them. Kevin navigates what exactly being “Canadian” means to him.

Guilt – Kevin's guilt over Colin's death and Leon's rejection of Kevin's guilt create a rift between the trio of friends, putting them on very different trajectories than what initially brought them to Oxford.

East and West – Having grown up during the Cold War, Kevin has an idea of “the West” and “the East” as opposites. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, these ideas start to break down, yet they still exert an appeal. Kevin is drawn to his new friends partly because of their access to “the East,” which lay behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War: Leon is of Lithuanian Jewish background and Alex was born and partly raised in Moscow. Later Kevin falls in love with Catherine, an American “Westerner” who grew up in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and has adopted an “Eastern” outlook even as the old idea of “the East” is crumbling.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider the opening line of the book: "Compatriots from different cities, when they meet overseas, are obliged to share a nationality." Have you had that experience when meeting fellow citizens abroad?
2. Is there an event in your lifetime that splits your memories into a before and an after?
3. What makes Kevin tell Alex that he slept with Pia too? (p 46)
4. Why does Kevin feel the need to correct people that assume he's American?
5. Tina compares Kevin to Charles Ryder, "the innocent hanger-on, the passive foil," in *Brideshead Revisited* in regards to his relationship with Alex and Leon. Is this an accurate comparison?
6. Are Kevin and Leon jealous of Alex's friendships with Jerzy and Colin?
7. Compare the Quebec Referendum to the breakup of Yugoslavia. Is the wish to separate cultures in both places what fascinates Kevin about Yugoslavia and the East?
8. Alex says, "If Stalin had written great poetry, I'd read it even though it was by Stalin." (p 98) What would Alex think of cancel culture today? Would you read Stalin's poetry if it was great?
9. Discuss the class differences between Alex, Kevin, and Leon and how it plays out in their relationships with one another.
10. Should Kevin feel guilty over what happened to Colin?
11. On p 224, Kevin and Leon argue about whether or not to tell Alex about their role in Colin's death. Who do you agree with and why?
12. After Kevin tells Camille he misses her, he thinks to himself, "French revealed feelings to which my English-speaking self lacked access." (p 241) Kevin thinks a similar thing about Alex and speaking Russian. Can there be two versions of ourselves that come out depending on the language or culture we're inhabiting?
13. What leads to Kevin's breakdown at Dean Bessborough's party?
14. Kevin blames Alex for his rustication on p 311. Is this justified?
15. What was the author's purpose in using varying means of communication? E.g. letters, email, phone calls.
16. Discuss Kevin's girlfriends and their relationship to his character development.
17. Why does Kevin help Alex at the DHL warehouse in Amsterdam? (p 419)
18. If Kevin had gone to Germany earlier in his research, would he have experienced its history the same way?
19. After obsessing for so long about being honest with Alex, when Kevin finally is, he decides not to tell Leon that he told Alex the truth. Why?
20. "The world of immutable facts and firm belief through which I had moved in the years after the end of the Cold War was eroding; we had entered a time in which any truth could become indistinguishable from a lie." (p 448) Discuss in relation to current society and fake news. What do you think led to this realization from Kevin?
21. Do ideas of "West" and "East" remain significant in today's Europe? What would be some examples?

ABOUT STEPHEN

Stephen Henighan is the author of six novels, four collections of short stories, and six books of essays, criticism or reportage. His work has been published in *Ploughshares*, *The Malahat Review*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Geist* magazine, and *The Walrus*, among others. He has translated novels into English from Portuguese, Spanish, and Romanian and is General Editor, Biblioasis International Translation Series. He is currently a professor of Spanish and Hispanic Studies at the University of Guelph.

