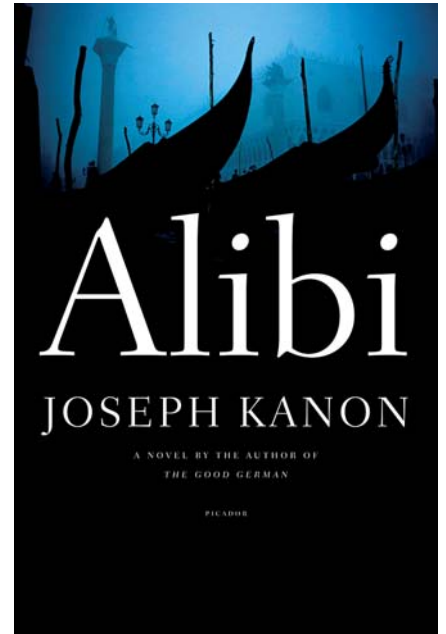


READING GROUP GUIDE

Alibi

A Novel

by Joseph Kanon



ISBN: 0-312-42590-2

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Alibi* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Alibi*.

About the Book

“Somebody I knew in Germany told me it would be interesting to follow one bullet, see where it finally stops. You think it ends in somebody’s body, but really it keeps going, the people he knew, the way it changes things, on and on.”

On and on. These are the words of Joseph Kanon’s complex hero, the American GI Adam Miller, and they aptly describe the ricochet trajectory of Kanon’s *Alibi*. Like a bullet, the plot travels from the Jewish ghetto of Venice during the Nazi occupation, visits the concentration camps, and sweeps through the Italian underground resistance movement, emerging in a decadent villa just after the war has ended.

When Adam completes his active duty as an investigator of war crimes in Germany, he decides to join his mother at her rented home in Venice. There he falls in love with the concentration-camp survivor Claudia Grassini. Meanwhile, Adam’s mother is engaged to marry

the urbane Venetian Dr. Gianni Maglione. But Gianni has a history of complicity with the Nazis, and may have even played a role in Claudia's father's death. To protect his mother and avenge his new love, Adam undertakes his own investigation of Gianni's shadowy past. Even after the doctor is murdered, Adam is compelled to continue his search—he and Claudia must find the perfect alibi, or be charged with Gianni's murder.

Alibi may have all the hallmarks of a classic thriller, but Kanon has in fact crafted a meditation on morality that traces the atrocities of World War II to their unexpected consequences.

“Burrowing deeply into Patricia Highsmith territory, Kanon has crafted an absorbing tale. . . . [Kanon] is frequently compared to the likes of John le Carré and Graham Greene. With *Alibi*, he shows that he's up to the comparison.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Kanon's richest, most full-blooded work to date . . . [He] has mastered the art of the historical thriller.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Disturbing and hypnotically readable, *Alibi* is a mystery, a love story, and a work of philosophy—and a perfect companion for the thriller reader who wants a philosophical challenge, as well as entertainment.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Joseph Kanon is a specialist in superior historical thrillers. . . . Moody, deeply atmospheric, and as labyrinthine as the streets of Venice.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“*Alibi* is a thriller with a slide-rule perfect plot. . . . Wholly engrossing and one of the finest thrillers you will read this year—up there with the classics of the genre.”

—*The Daily Telegraph* (London)

“If you want to explore life, love, death, beauty, and moral confusion—all glimpsed from a gondola, so to speak—you won't do much better than this.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Once again Kanon has written a novel set against the backdrop of World War II that is evocative and sensitive, moody and thought-provoking.”

—*Arizona Daily Star*

About the Author

Joseph Kanon is the author of three previous novels, *The Good German*, *Los Alamos*, and *The Prodigal Spy*. Before becoming a full-time writer, he was a book publishing executive. He lives in New York City.

Discussion Questions

1. *Alibi* offers its characters a series of moral dilemmas that can also be pondered by the reader. Gianni's "choice" is particularly thorny. He may either give up a dying man to the Nazis or turn over a young, active member of the partisan resistance. Although in the end this proves to be a false choice, how would you rationalize such a decision?
2. Venice has served as a backdrop to many novels. Its history of secrecy and wealth, the romance of the masked ball, and the enigmatic canal system make it a potent setting especially for the mystery novel. Why do you think Joseph Kanon has chosen Venice for his novel?
3. How do the gradually changing seasons (from deep winter to spring) color the events in the novel?
4. The financial reversal is one of the most shocking twists in this constantly twisting novel. When Adam realizes that it is his mother, not Gianni, who is the gold-digger, how does it muddy the morality of Adam's actions?
5. Put yourself in Adam's situation. After the murder, would you stay in Venice to continue investigating Gianni's past, or flee with Claudia?
6. What are Adam's motives for investigating Gianni's past—to protect his mother, to avenge Claudia, to avenge his own father? And how do these motives change after the murder? Which of these motives do you think is most valid?
7. Many families have stories about WWII and the Holocaust. Where were yours when these events were unfolding?
8. Have you ever discovered anything surprising about a family member after his or her death?
9. Compare *Alibi* to histories you may have read about this period in Europe. What did this book teach you about WWII and its aftermath, particularly in Italy?
10. Occupied Italy's role in the war raises many moral questions pondered by the characters in this novel. For example, how does a society sort out the criminals from the victims of a foreign occupation? When nearly everyone seems to be complicit in the atrocities in some way, how does a nation begin to forgive itself?
11. In *Alibi*, Venice is a tourists' paradise haunted by a traumatic recent past. Kanon reminds us that even the most picturesque places may have shameful histories. Can you think of other tourist spots with similarly turbulent (and possibly hidden) pasts?
12. Cavallini is determined to protect the honor of the Maglione name. Why do societies protect their established and wealthy families?

13. *Alibi* is not a typical whodunit. Perhaps Bertie expresses this most succinctly when he tells Adam: “It’s the ultimate mystery, isn’t it? People. Not who done it. Who they are.” The search in this novel is for Gianni’s true identity. Adam is not looking for the culprit; he’s looking for the victim. How does that change your expectations of the outcome?
14. *Alibi* is critical of Venice’s secretive society and of the crimes it tried to conceal after the war. Can we apply these same criticisms to our own society?
15. How would the experience of reading this novel be different for a person from Venice?
16. Does the “bullet” stop with the conclusion of the novel? Adam and Claudia have been torn apart, and both must live with the guilt that comes with their perfect alibi. What do you imagine will happen in the twenty years after Kanon’s story ends?

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5629

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: www.picadorusa.com

Picador

What to Read Next[®]