



Reading Guide

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) In some ways Hurtubise represents the reader. What does he make of Louis Bapaume after sifting through the bits of evidence left behind?
- 2) Do you feel you need to reread the book to understand it? How does this affect your experience as a reader?
- 3) The epigraph to the story reads, “But if memory shows us the past, how does it show us that it is the past?” (Ludwig Wittgenstein). How do we know what, if anything, is “true” about this story?
- 4) What are gallettes (p. 46), créton (p. 34), bilboquet (p. 16), and soutane (p. 60)? Why would the translator leave these words in the original French?
- 5) How does Bapaume understand girls and women?
- 6) Who does the teddy bear belong to? How does it connect the characters?
- 7) How does the deformed dog, Coq-l’Oeil, function in the plot?
- 8) How do the backdrop events of World War II and the Holocaust colour the story?
- 9) “The fundamental disaster that fashions the reality of the world is the inevitable death of those we love. And anyone who claims to believe in the unreality of things need only be reminded of the reality of mourning.” In your own experience of grief, have you found the world to be unreal, surreal, or ultra-real? How do you relate to the message on the prism at the end of the book: “No disaster can touch me because nothing is real”?
- 10) When Bapaume rediscovers his composition that Maurice is studying, he does not remember it as his own. Upon rediscovering an old creation — photo, writing, music, artwork, handwork, et cetera — have you ever felt that it was created by someone else? Why do you think this happens?

- 11) Bapaume does not find himself in an environment where he believes creativity is inclined to flourish. How does the image of a “coffin of oblivion” relate to his problems with creation? What factors are necessary for creativity to flourish?
- 12) Bapaume hears one of his compositions being played in the church and says, “It’s from the period — from the blessed time — when I composed without thinking, the way a beaver builds dams with no idea of the harm it could cause.” Does creation spring from within the artist (tapping into his or her own well of creativity) or from elsewhere (tapping into a collective source of creativity)? How do you account for the fact that Gaétan Soucy wrote *Atonement* in just ninety-nine days?
- 13) How do you relate to the ending of Part 2 (“The Beauty Spot”): “Nothing takes up more space in a church than a doll’s coffin, white as the vast snow.” Why might the author use his own family name for that of the family with the new baby?
- 14) “You know, Monsieur Bapaume, I’m a conscientious craftsman. I can tell a piece of wood I’ll use to make a piece of furniture from one that will end up in the fire. It’s the same with forgetfulness. What I mean is . . . it knows what it’s doing when it throws something into the fire.” Does forgetfulness make the world a better place?
- 15) How would you account for the change in Bapaume’s outlook and manner upon his return to the station?