

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: A Short History of Richard Kline

AUTHOR: Amanda Lohrey

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SUBJECT: Fiction

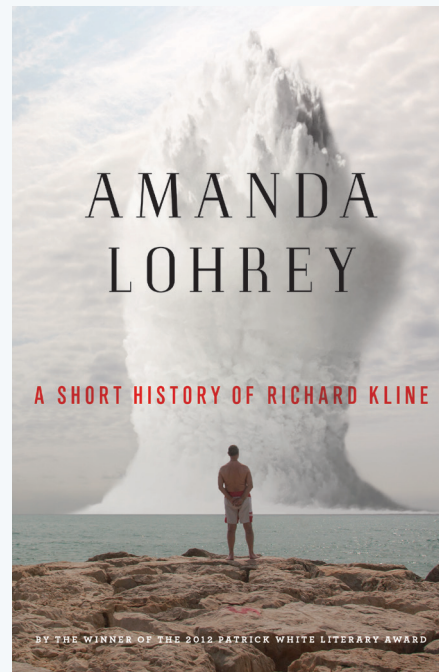
About the Book

This fictional ‘history’ is of a life in two parts. For his childhood and much of his adulthood, Richard Kline is discontent. He feels a lack, even if he can’t articulate exactly what it is that he lacks. He suffers ennui, a sense of futility, and later anger. He yearns for more, but doesn’t know what he is yearning for. He makes various attempts to find fulfilment and meaning, whether through work or therapy, sex or family. But it is only when he encounters the Indian guru Sri Mati, when he is forty-two, that he achieves any sort of understanding or contentment.

This first encounter with Sri Mata is almost literally at the centre of the novel; it is the pivotal moment in his life. Rick is so moved by the sight of her that he cries for the first time in his memory. On his second encounter with her, he feels he has come home. His sense of connection with her is immediate and profound, but he is uncertain of what to do with this connection. He can glimpse the possibility of fulfilment, but he cannot always retain his equanimity on his path to that fulfilment.

Lohrey has created a character who is intellectual, cynical and sceptical. Rick questions what is happening to him and despises the trappings of Eastern mysticism. But he comes to accept that his experience cannot be intellectualised, that he must surrender to it.

Alternating as if between memoir and biography, this novel recounts the external events of Rick’s life, but the



emphasis is always on his inner thoughts and feelings, and on the spiritual and the philosophical. As we are privy to the change in Rick’s understanding of the world and his experience of it, so too are we privy to seeing his identity change. A starting point for your discussion perhaps – Who is Richard Kline?

About the Author

Amanda Lohrey is the author of the acclaimed novels *Camille’s Bread*, *Vertigo* and *The Morality of Gentlemen*, as well as the award-winning short-story collection *Reading Madame Bovary*. She has also written two Quarterly Essays: *Groundswell* and *Voting for Jesus*. In 2012 she was awarded the Patrick White Literary Award.

Praise for *A Short History of Richard Kline*

‘This is at once a quiet, searching novel, and yet bold and daring. [Lohrey] takes us sensitively and tenderly through Richard’s searching and yearning for authenticity and meaning. Such a focused, deep and searching examination of the inner life is not an easy subject for a novel, but I found it fascinating.’—

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‘Lohrey handles [her] material with masterly control, taking the reader on a contemporary pilgrimage full of insight ... It is an enlightening experience.’—**Caroline Baum**

Questions for discussion

1. Is Richard Kline an everyman? Or does he represent a certain type of person? Are we to understand that his experience is emblematic of something universal in our age, or is this the story of one man’s journey and not emblematic at all?
2. Do we all, as Martin suggests, suffer a ‘divine discontent’ (p208)? If so, is it because we are ‘attuned to an unconscious knowledge of something else, something larger than ourselves’ (p208)?
3. Is the novel an argument for Rick’s meditation practice and discovery of Eastern mysticism? Is meditation the ‘cure’ for our ills? Are ‘silence and surrender’ and ‘faith’ the ‘essence’ of this cure (p128)?
4. Rick sees himself as different from others. For example, he asks himself ‘Was it like this for other people’ (p29) and later wonders ‘why it was that I was always the first to spot the worm in the apple. Was I more perceptive than other people?’ (p58). Is he more perceptive? Is he different more generally? Or do we all feel ourselves to be special? Is this perception of himself something he needs to surrender?
5. Rick searches for meaning and fulfilment in several ways before he finds Sri Mata. Why don’t any of them provide him with what he is seeking in a sustained way? Are they innately flawed, or are they just wrong for Rick? Do you think your answer might be different from what the novel is suggesting?
6. Pondering the ‘burden of personality’, Rick thinks ‘Maybe this was a male thing. Did women feel it?’ (p219). If he is an everyman (see Question 1), is he also

an everyperson? Or is Richard’s experience essentially masculine?

7. On the novel’s opening page, Rick as narrator tells us that ‘the animating spirit of the event had been with me from the very beginning ... It was as if I were an arrow shot out at birth toward a distant target that I could not see, but that I was destined, at the moment of impact, to strike with the full force of my being’ (p1). Does Rick have control over the direction of his life?
8. As an adolescent, Rick is struck by the preciousness and futility of life, and asks himself questions – ‘why was I born? Why did humans have such powerful minds? Why did I have a mind if it could not save me?’ (p7) and later ‘why did people suffer’ (p9). Does he find answers to these questions, or does he have different questions by the end of the novel, or does he cease to question life entirely?
9. Zoe and Luke exist tangentially to Richard’s story. Do you have a sense of them? Does their marginal place in the story imply that Richard’s quest is a selfish one, as Zoe seems to feel? Or does Zoe’s final meeting with Richard suggest that she has come to understand Richard’s perspective as she should have?
10. As a child, there is a disconnect between what Rick experiences intellectually and emotionally (p3). Does this disconnect continue as Rick becomes an adult, or does he become more attuned to his emotions at the expense of his intellect?
11. Do you agree with Martin’s distinction between faith and belief (p210)?
12. Discuss the use of symbols in the novel. For example, cliffs, precipices, edges and brinks, or arrows. Or, talk about what Leni’s villa represents. What about Leni herself? Is she a character or a symbol?

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13. How do Rick's dreams give you insight into his character and the themes of the novel?

14. Why do you think Lohrey alternates between first-person and third-person narration? How did the shift affect your reading, or your perception of Rick as a character?

15. What does the novel suggest about identity? How changeable is it? If Rick was destined to meet Sri Mata, was the 'version' of Richard Kline he had 'constructed' 'beside the point' (p203). Or was it a necessary stage? What is the 'new skin' he is developing (p203)? Does identity reflect a person's exterior and surfaces, or does it reflect something essential in them?

16. In the course of the novel, Rick suffers a number of minor physical injuries and worries about his physical health. After a scare about his heart ('the miraculous pump' p103), Rick experiences a flood of gratitude and vows not to 'take this heart for granted' (p103). What significance do body organs and the physical body carry in the text, and how does this relate to the spiritual journey Rick embarks on?