

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

About the book

In the acknowledgments for this book of connected tales, author Moreno Giovannoni thanks the people of San Ginese, 'the real one and the other one' (255). Just as the village depicted in *The Fireflies of Autumn* is both real and invented, so too are the stories both fictional and true.

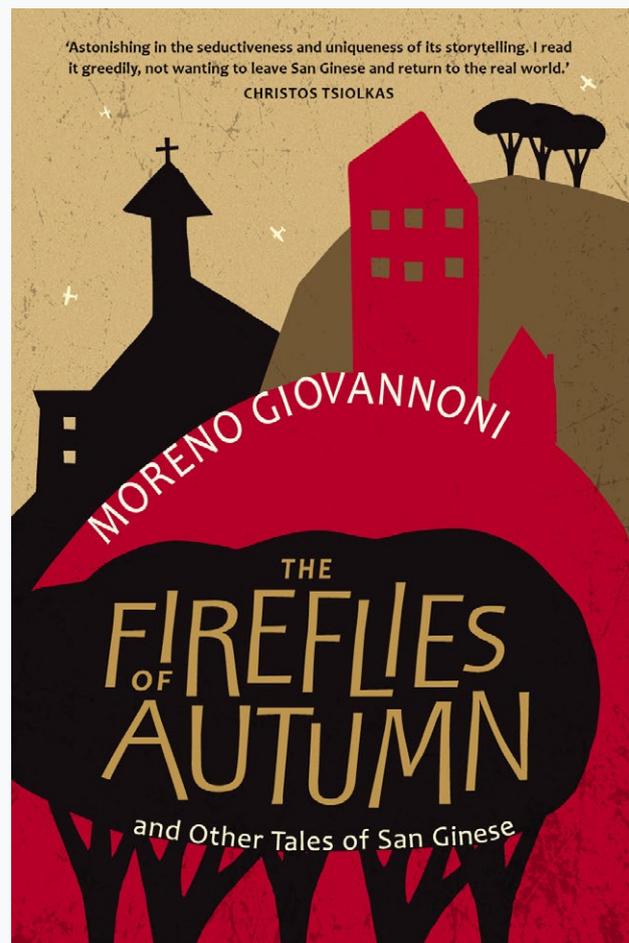
The stories of San Ginese are supposedly told by Ugo, the great-grandson of Genesisius (Ginese), who 'was the first' of his family in San Ginese, a man without ancestors. Ugo tells us that 'all the tales are true, but that they are 'told by many Italian voices' (3–4). He also tells us that he had his words translated by an expert in the writing of immigrants (and we know that Moreno Giovannoni is a translator), but 'entrusted to him a task that went beyond mere translation' (4).

What is this task? Perhaps to say something about the experience of migration, in its many different forms. Migration to different countries, back to the home country, to different places within the same country. A kind of migration to San Ginese by the Germans and English visitors who have their summer homes there. Recent migration to San Ginese by, for example, Albanians and Moroccans. Migration that is permanent and migration that is temporary.

Migration means leaving people, place and memories behind. This book is an act of re-creating people, place and memories and is therefore a direct response to migration. And so these stories tell us about more than migration. Cumulatively, they also tell us about the past and present, about the way that large and small events affect people, about a collective and the individuals within it, and about a culture and society that is at once always changing and continuous.

About the author

Moreno Giovannoni was born in San Ginese but grew up in a house on a hill, on a tobacco farm at Buffalo River in north-east Victoria. He is a freelance translator of long standing. His writing has been published in *Island*, *Southerly* and *The Saturday Age* and his essays 'The Percheron' and 'A Short History of the Italian Language' were included in *The Best Australian Essays* in 2014 and 2017. Moreno was the inaugural winner of the Deborah Cass Prize in 2016. *The Fireflies of Autumn* is his first book.



TITLE: The Fireflies of Autumn

AUTHOR: Moreno Giovannoni

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SUBJECT: Literary Fiction

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Quotes

'*The Fireflies of Autumn* is phenomenal. I was so immersed in this book that I read it greedily, not wanting to leave San Ginese and return to the real world. There is immense beauty in this book, and there is great sadness and there is genuine tenderness. I can't recall when I was last thrilled by a book as I am by this one. Only one adjective will do: this is a great book.' —CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

'I lived in Tuscany fifteen years ago and still hanker for its charms. Reading Giovannoni's delightful book *The Fireflies of Autumn* took me back there in a visceral way. Suddenly I was sitting on a chair in a cobblestone street in a small Tuscan village watching these captivating stories unfold. The writing is exquisite and the characters seemed uncannily familiar. This is the real Tuscany, in all its simple splendour and rawness.'

—EDWINA JOHNSON, Director, Byron Writers Festival

'I have never read a migrant tale so original, so breathtaking in scope, or so magical. I have not since stopped thinking about the characters in San Ginese.' —ALICE PUNG

Discussion points

1. 'Migrants never arrive at their destination,' the epigraph tells us. What destination are they searching for? Why don't they ever arrive?
2. Can migrants ever escape the pull of their home country? What different forms does this pull take?
3. 'When you leave home, your life becomes a misery' (240). Does *The Fireflies of Autumn* support this claim?
4. 'The Moral of a Modest Tour of San Ginese' tells us that none of the original inhabitants of the village are left. With such change, what are people yearning for 'home' actually yearning for?
5. During the war, the entire village apart from one man migrates to a nearby village. Why do the Sanginesini seem to want to stay in Compito? Why don't they stay?
6. 'One more reason to emigrate was to avoid being scolded by your father' (157), the narrator says. Discuss the links between family and migration.
7. Why do some people return home again and some people stay in their new country?
8. Talking about the consequences of the war in 'The Consequences of Frostbite,' the narrator asks 'who is to say why some things happen and some things don't?' (171). Do you think this book suggests that events can be traced to a cause, or does it suggest that events occur more randomly?
9. Women in 'those days ... were prisoners and they were always trying to escape, like birds in a cage' (175). What are women's roles in this book?
10. Why is the fact of a small Moroccan boy riding a bicycle the 'fourth and most significant truth' in 'The Moral of a Modest Tour of San Ginese'? What does your answer suggest about the 'moral' of the book as a whole, or its 'truths'?
11. The story 'A Luciana' suggests a parallel between the 'ancient tradition of human sacrifice to the gods' with youths 'abandoning their home and going in search of new lands' (230). Is this an apt parallel? Why or why not?
12. *The Fireflies of Autumn* is bookended by 'Ugo's Tale' and 'The Translator's Tale'. Who is the narrator of these stories? Does it shift? What does that say about the stories?
13. What does the book's incidental focus on translation tell us about truth-telling?
14. Why do you think Giovannoni has chosen to tell this story through interconnected stories rather than, say a novel? How does this form of writing build up a picture of San Ginese over time? Do you feel you get to know the characters better through this kind of storytelling?
15. Why is 'The Percheron' the first story in the collection after Ugo's introduction?
16. Talk about the role of religion in the Sanginesini's lives. What about superstition and even magic?
17. Is 'loneliness the lot of all human beings' (140)? What else does this book say about the human condition beyond its exploration of migration?
18. What do the 'fireflies of autumn' symbolise?