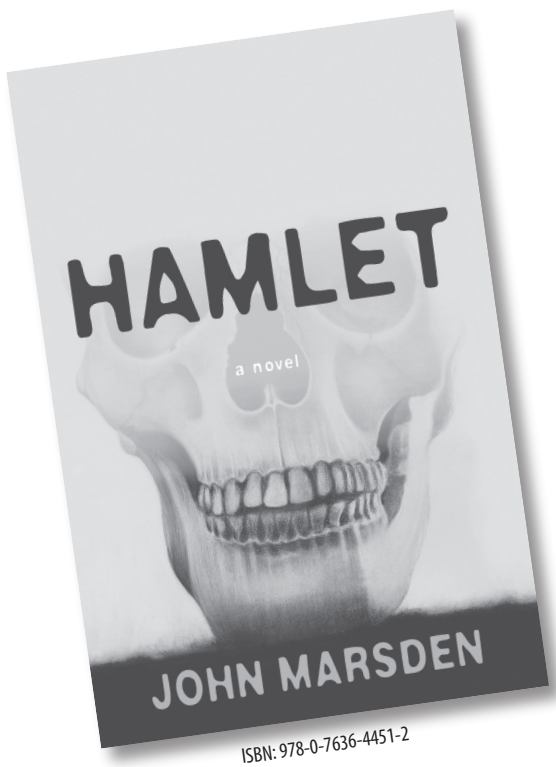


HAMLET

a novel

BY JOHN MARSDEN



Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, but Hamlet can't be sure what's causing the stench. It emanates from the royal palace, and his family seems to be the problem, not the solution.

Horatio thinks his friend is acting strange, but then Hamlet's uncle has become his stepfather. And the prince's rage at his mother's infidelities, together with his greed for the beautiful Ophelia and the call of his dead father to avenge a "murder most foul," have his mind in chaos. Hamlet wants to be the size of a king, man enough for anything, but can he believe his own eyes? Was it really his father's ghost that night on the castle ramparts—or a hell-fiend sent to trick him?

In this dark, sensual, and beautifully crafted novel, John Marsden brings one of Shakespeare's most famous and intriguing characters to full-blooded life in a narrative of intense psychological complexity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe Hamlet after reading the first two chapters of the novel? Would you want to be his friend or not? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think Hamlet is justified in feeling angry and humiliated at his mother's quick remarriage to his uncle Claudius? Would he be as disturbed if she had waited a more seemly amount of time, or would he be as upset regardless? How would you feel if you were in his shoes?
3. A spirit claiming to be his father visits Hamlet. Would you believe the message of this spirit or doubt it? Why? Do you believe in ghosts? What does Hamlet believe in?
4. Horatio is upset that Hamlet does not confide in him what the spirit revealed. Should best friends always reveal everything to each other? Why or why not? Do you consider Horatio to be a loyal confidant?
5. Queen Gertrude and King Claudius urge Hamlet to move past his grief. Despite their obvious intentions to silence Hamlet, does their advice have any merit? How do people move on with their lives when they have suffered a great loss? Why are some people better able to pick up the pieces of their lives and go on while others seem to suffer greatly?



-
6. Describe Ophelia. What are her desires? How are they thwarted? Do you think Hamlet should act on his impulses and engage in a romance with her, or might it cloud his thinking further? Could a romance with Ophelia distract Hamlet from his grief and his mission? Do you think Hamlet and Ophelia are a good match? If you were his friend, what advice would you give him?
 7. How would you rate Polonius and Laertes as a father and brother, respectively? What qualities make a good father? A good sibling? Are Polonius and Laertes protecting Ophelia from herself? What might happen were they not there to monitor, advise, and control her? It has been said that “protection is the oldest form of sexism.” Do you agree? How might this statement relate to Ophelia’s situation?
 8. Do you think Hamlet would be considered mentally ill by today’s standards? How does the author, John Marsden, reveal Hamlet’s fragile state? Despite slips from reality, Hamlet often reveals himself to be a deep and philosophical thinker. Can you find statements that are more thoughtful and provocative than the other players in the scene realize? Discuss which of these statements are your favorites.
 9. What are the “four lines” from Hamlet’s tower room (pages 57–58)? What do they reveal to us about his character and his state of mind? What would your four lines be?
 10. Do you think Hamlet’s feelings match Ophelia’s, or are they made of different stuff? Does the sensual portrait of Ophelia surprise you?
 11. How does Hamlet test the conscience of the king? On whom does he rely for help with the plan? On whom would you rely for help in such a situation? Do you think guilty people always reveal themselves by their actions? Are you able to tell when someone is being honest with you?
 12. Discuss the events that unfold because of the performance by the visiting players. How do things become even more complicated for Hamlet and his family? Do you think Gertrude is ultimately to blame, or is Claudius the more culpable? When do you become certain of whose treachery caused the events to domino?
 13. Describe what happens to Polonius. Does he contribute to his fate by always playing the role of the fox? How does Ophelia take the news of her father’s death? How does Laertes? Should Hamlet have to face the consequences of his actions, or can he be excused on the grounds of mental illness?
 14. What is the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Is it worth putting up with the treachery and madness of the situation so that they can enjoy the luxury of the royal court? How are their fates also sealed by the family? Do you consider them innocent or guilty?
 15. Why does Hamlet say that worms are democratic (page 148)? Do you think Hamlet is out of his senses when he delivers his tirade about Polonius’s body? Do you think Claudius is a serial killer or just a man for whom morality has been unraveled by greed and a lust for power?
 16. What happens to the fair Ophelia? Ultimately, who, if anyone, is to blame for her fate? Hamlet regrets his loss of control at the grave but feels compelled to outdo Laertes in his demonstration of grief. Why might people feel the need to out-suffer each other? Who do you think ultimately loved her more? Would you consider Ophelia’s life a waste?
 17. What plan do Laertes and King Claudius concoct to rid themselves of their “problem?” Is either of them justified? How can one sin unravel an entire life or even a kingdom?

-
18. Hamlet says to Horatio, “I’m not God. . . . This way I don’t create a new world; I just tweak it a little. As it flows along, I move a rock or take away a dead branch. I’m not in charge of the world. That was a conceit on my part” (page 204). Do you think this is a common conceit in the world of the twenty-first century?
 19. King Claudius is intent on power while Laertes wants revenge. How is their plan foiled? Do they both get what they deserve? Does Hamlet get what he deserves? In the end, who remains innocent? What are we to learn from the tragedy of Hamlet?
 20. Compare the novel to the original Shakespeare play. What do they have in common? How are they different? How is reading a novel a different experience from reading or watching a play? Which do you prefer? Why?
 21. It could be said that Hamlet has three fathers: his birth father, now dead; the ghost of his birth father, who controls him even in death; and his new stepfather. Is it possible to have too many fathers? How many is too many? How well do Hamlet’s fathers control him, and what methods do they use? How effective is Hamlet in dealing with this trio of domineering men?

ABOUT JOHN MARSDEN

John Marsden grew up in Australia and decided at age nine to become an author. But first he became a teacher. An avid reader, he hoped to share his enthusiasm with his teenage students, who seemed generally indifferent toward books. His first young adult novel, *So Much to Tell You*, which he wrote in just three weeks, won many awards and became a bestseller. All the while, John kept teaching, and in 2006 he founded his own school, Candlebark. His subsequent books sold millions of copies both in Australia and around the world. Today John Marsden continues to write and to oversee Candlebark’s development as an inspiring educational environment. Of *Hamlet*, he says, “*Hamlet’s* done a good job of haunting my life. I read the play when I was sixteen, saw a film of it when I was seventeen, and haven’t been able to shake the story since.”

This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a literacy coach in Ohio and an award-winning children’s author.