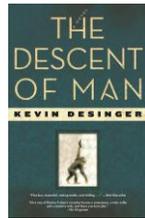




Reading Guide for
THE DESCENT OF MAN
by Kevin Desinger



"Give one of Harlen Coben's everyday heroes a conscience, a wine cellar and a sensitive wife, and there you have Jim."—*The Oregonian*

"Enticing and unpredictable."—*Blogcritics*

"This ingeniously plotted first novel holds many surprises, not least of which is Jim's ability to dial back his civilized persona, revealing the feral creature who emerges when his family is threatened...terrific."—*Booklist*

"As compelling as a whodunit mystery...but the real heart of the book lies in the backstory about Jim and his wife and the trials they go through to answer the question: what is enough for a marriage? Only when their quiet existence is threatened do they each realize their value to each other."—*ForeWord Magazine*

FROM THE AUTHOR:

"The Cut Bank"

One morning I was standing at the edge of a river, fishing for steelhead, when I heard a high-pitched cry. It sounded like a hawk or eagle, but when I scanned the sky I saw nothing but the low gray clouds of early spring. As I looked back to the river, a movement on the far bank caught my attention. The river is fifty yards wide here, maybe six feet deep where I was casting, then shallower from the middle toward the far bank, where it deepens again. A female deer was leaning over the cut bank—a four-foot drop—and a fawn was struggling in the sluicing water. I believe the cry I had heard was from the fawn when it fell in. Panicking now, it scrambled against the sheer gravelly slope, slid back into the river, then scrambled again.

I looked around to see if there was any way I could cross, but it would have been a hard swim in cold, fast water to the middle, a slog across the shallower center water, then another swim. People drown in this same river every summer because of the temperature of the water. Even if I were to survive the crossing, I had no chance of making it in time to save the fawn. There is an awful helplessness in being unable to do anything but watch as a tragedy unfolds.

The fawn repeatedly and frantically tore at the cut bank, each time sliding back beneath the surface of the river. The mother was standing at the edge of the bank, looking straight down. She paced a little but quickly returned to stand above her still scrambling and failing fawn. Then, with her head extended as far downward as she could reach, the mother laid down with her belly in the grass at the edge of the bank, hooves just curling over the edge, and she brought her nose within twenty inches of her fawn's nose. The fawn quit struggling, just paused, halfway out of the river, breathing hard. They looked at each other. The mother stayed there for maybe ten seconds, then stood again and stepped back. The fawn held still for a short while longer, then leapt at the bank, caught footing, leapt again and made it to the top. They stood together for a few seconds, then disappeared into the forest.

It would take someone watching me to say how long I remained looking across the river at the cut bank. Eventually I glanced around and saw that I was alone. Out of habit, I checked my lure and resumed casting, but my heart was no longer in it. I hadn't come to the river that morning to fish for steelhead after all, and what I had come for had ended. When I understood this—that my life had just been changed in a very small yet permanent way—I took my rod apart and headed back up the trail to my car.

—Kevin Desinger

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Did this novel make you want to learn more about wine?
2. Do you think what happens to Jim—his melt down—is rare or perhaps more common than we think?
3. How is marriage portrayed in this novel?
4. How has the loss of a child changed Jim?
5. How do you think Jim and Marla will be in the future? Do you think their marriage will survive?
6. This book makes one contemplate laws and rules. What laws and rules does Jim live by, in the end?
7. Do you think Police Sergeant Rainey is trying to help Jim stay safely within the bounds of the law, or bait him?
8. What do you think you would have done in the same situation?
9. Do you think Jim will now be more prone to violence?
10. If there was one “take away” lesson from this novel, what would you say it is?

11. Is the theme of this book “loss” or “redemption”?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Desinger graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop before moving to Portland where he has written for *Willamette Week*, the *Oregonian* and a number of regional publications. An earlier short story appeared in *The Missouri Review*. This is his first novel.

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