

**READING GROUP GUIDE**  
for  
***THE GOOD DOCTOR GUILLOTIN***  
By Marc Estrin

**FROM THE AUTHOR**

Dear Reading Group,

Why guillotines? Why the French Revolution? How come this one time, I didn't write a funny book?

I often choose subject matter based on my ignorance -- which remains vast, and grows each day the older I get. For *Insect Dreams*, I jumped into the details of American history 1920 -1945 because my father was a teacher of American history, and five decades later I knew too little about it -- a few names, but no connections, no dynamics. I thought I'd learn something and make my dead father happy.

One huge area of ignorance for me was the French Revolution. Robespierre, Danton, Marat/Sade -- something like that. Again, few details, but a sense that much of that eighteenth century conflict is being reflected in our own. Years ago, I had bought Simon Schama's history, *Citizens*. Why? Because I am attracted to fat books. Great reason, huh? But for too long, it had been on my "guilt" pile -- books I should be reading but haven't made time to. The combination of these two factors was pushing towards a dive into 1789.

The catalytic event was a report from my editor, Fred Ramey, that his son had called him up in tears after reading the Sacco-Vanzetti chapter in *Insect Dreams*, my dream-meditation on that electrocution and on capital punishment in general. I realized how profound was our human reaction to the coolly planned murder of a citizen by the state, how many themes, often denied, but deep and broad, the issue evoked.

Back in 2006, before I began *The Good Doctor Guillotin*, the Bush Justice Department had been successful into forcing a death penalty trial into Vermont -- which has no death penalty. It was hard to believe, but a Vermont jury sentenced a young killer to death, when no such penalty had been handed out in fifty years. (You can read an essay of mine, "Both Victim and Executioner" about the trial and sentencing here [here](#) in the Occasionalia section of my [website](#).).

I immediately joined a new organization, Vermonters Against the Death Penalty, took part in their many events, and tried unsuccessfully to gather and publish a collection of writing about the trial. So I decided to use that impetus for my next novel, hoping that that work would get its readers thinking more deeply about the death penalty and its consequences.

Personally, the whole thing gives me the shivers. Politically, it touches many of the deepest

concerns I have about the social conditions of humanity. Philosophically, I don't see how one can support killing to demonstrate that killing is wrong.

I would hope that any group discussing this book would not see it as simply a historical novel set in the eighteenth century, but would look at the dynamics and thinking I have traced out, the different personalities playing their parts, understand the post-story consequences (the Terror), and think about how all these apply to our country's current behavior, changing day by day, execution by execution, about an issue which reflects America's larger behavior in the world.

### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

*The Good Doctor Guillotin* follows five characters to a common destination—the scaffold at the first guillotining of the French Revolution:

- Dr. Guillotin, of course, a physician and member of the National Assembly, involved in many important events, including the Tennis Court Oath.
- Nicolas Pelletier, the first victim—or "patient," as they were sometimes called, since the new beheading machine was seen as a humanitarian medical intervention in the state's technique of dealing death.
- Father Pierre, the curé who accompanies Pelletier in his last days, a man torn between his religious commitment and an equally strong commitment to the poor and their revolution.
- Sanson, the famous executioner of Paris who, 9 months later would execute the king and retire from remorse.
- Tobias Schmidt, builder of the new machine, a German piano maker working in Paris, a freethinker predicting the Terror that will follow, but allowing himself to initiate it. The revolution, after all, had reduced the sale of pianos.

Various other interesting figures briefly appear: Damiens, Mozart, Mesmer, Louis XVI, the Marquis de Sade, Marat, Robespierre, Demoulins among them. The eighteenth century narrative is divided into several sections, each introduced by an essay in the author's voice, the first on five-ness and Pentagons; a second on hope and Utopia; a third on revolutionary violence; and a fourth on capital punishment.

This is no "historical novel." It is, rather, a fictive meditation on a contemporary conundrum using an eighteenth century drum.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Marc Estrin is a writer, cellist, and activist living in Burlington, Vermont. He is the author of seven novels, *The Annotated Nose*, *Insect Dreams: The Half Life of Gregor Samsa*, *The Education of Arnold Hitler*, *Golem Song*, *The Lamentations of Julius Marantz*, *Skulk*, and most recently *The Good Doctor Guillotin*.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Who of the five characters in this novel most captured your sympathy? Does your answer surprise you?
2. How does this novel change your understanding of history? Does it change your views on current

events?

3. How does this novel change, or not change, your views on the death penalty?

4. Do you consider novels about political issues to be effective tools for generating discussion in the larger cultural world today? Why or why not? If not, what do you think has changed in American society? In the past, what novels have changed the cultural landscape and how? Discuss.

5. Discuss the structure of the novel.

6. The introduction/invention of the guillotin changed the course of history in, some would argue, a very detrimental way. What other "inventions," could it be argued, have changed the course of history in a potentially negative way? One example might be the genetic engineering of fruit and vegetables.

7. What role does music play in this novel?

### **SUGGESTED READING**

#### Books

Sister Helen Prejean, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* by  
Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*

#### Movies

*Dead Man Walking*

#### Books in the book

Arasse, Daniel, *The Guillotine and the Terror*

Arendt, Hannah, *On Violence*

Ariès, Phillipe, *The Hour of our Death*

Becker, Earnest, *Escape from Evil*

Billington, James, *Fire in the Minds of Men*

Bloch, Ernst, *The Principle of Hope*

Brockliss, Laurence and Jones, Collin, *The Medical World of Early Modern France*

Buchner, Georg, *Woyzeck*

Buranelli, Vincent, *The Wizard from Vienna: Franz Anton Mesmer*

Burton, Anthony, *Revolutionary Violence*

Camus, Albert, *The Rebel*

Camus, Albert, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*

Canetti, Elias, *Crowds and Power*

Cantor, Jay, *The Space Between: Literature and Politics*

Carlyle, Thomas, *The French Revolution*

Conner, Clifford D., *Jean Paul Marat : Scientist and Revolutionary*

Darnton, Robert, *The Great Cat Massacre*

Daumal, René, *A Night of Serious Drinking*

Farge, Arlette, *Fragile Lives*

France, Anatole *Les Dieux one Soif*

Garrioch, David, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*

Hildesheimer, Wolfgang, *Mozart*

Hsia, R. Po-Chia, *Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial*  
Hufton, Olwen H., *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France, 1750-1789*  
Hugo, Victor, *Les Misérables*  
Hugo, Victor, *Ninty Three*  
Hugo, Victor, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*  
Hugo, Victor, *The Last Days of a Condemned Man*  
Janssens, Jacques, *Camille Desmoulins, le premier républicain de France*  
Jones, Peter, ed., *The French Revolution in Social and Political Perspective*  
Kafker, Frank, and Laux, James, eds. *The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations*  
Lever, Maurice, *Sade, a Biography*  
Levy, Barbara, *Legacy of Death: The Remarkable Saga of the Sanson Family, Who Served as Executioners of France for Seven Generations.*  
Linguet, Simon Nicholas Henri, *Memoires of the Bastille*  
Luttrell, Barbara, *Mirabeau*  
MacNulty, W. Kirk, *Freemasonry : Symbols, Secrets, Significance*  
Nabokov, Vladimir, *Invitation to a Beheading*  
Reynolds, Beatrice Kay, ed., *Spokesmen of the French Revolution*  
Rudé, George, ed., *Robiespierre*  
Sade, Marquis de, *Drame Complète*  
Sade, Marquis de, *Letters from Prison*  
Sarat, Austin, *When the State Kills*  
Schama, Simon, *Citizens*  
Scurr, Ruth, *Fatal Purity: Robiespierre and the French Revolution*  
Solomon, Maynard, *Mozart: A Life*  
Soubiran, André, *Ce Bon Docteur Guillotin, et sa Simple Méchanique*  
Spender, Stephen, *The Year of the Young Rebels*  
Thompson, J.M., *The French Revolution*