



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

This is a true story ... A young man heads off on a journey to find out if magic still exists in the world, to know its wonder, and to see if it might save him when his own life is unexpectedly at stake.

In the Caribbean, he meets a Rastafarian Don Juan who teaches him about the 'natural mystic'. Fate propels his travels through the Americas and Europe to locate the source of this knowledge in Mother Africa, where his own emerging mastery of mysticism is tested by the Sahara desert. He is imprisoned in Nigeria, and tortured, and then sold as a slave.

Magic is an incredible journey, both physical and spiritual, that reverberates with the uniqueness of lived adventure and of a passionate heart and vision. Upon closing the last page of this book, we ache for the innocence to lose our way and travel deeper, to rediscover the savage but delicious nature of the miraculous in our own lives.

About the author

Jan Golembiewski grew up in suburban Canberra and in the jungles of Papua New Guinea.

He has a PhD in psychological aspects of architecture, and he runs his own architectural practice specialising in psychological aspects of design.

Jan lives in Sydney with his wife, the novelist Bem Le Hunte and their children [Taliesin, Rishi and Kashi] and a revolving collection of friends.

Reviews

'They try and say glory to God in the highest. I say it's about glory to God in the lowest. If you can't find God in the lowest, you're wasting your time – and that's where our protagonist finds his Magic – in prison cells, and as a slave in forgotten parts of Africa, in slums of New Orleans, and mosquito-ridden coastlines in the Caribbean. This is an engrossing tale of a year down the path less travelled. Warm, funny and intensely human, Magic is an inspiring, deeply-felt and painfully honest coming-of age adventure. It's a story of a perilous spiritual search that transcends religion, and an authentic adventure. An impressive debut.'

Father Bob Maguire, AM, RDF

'I couldn't put it down.'

Sofie Laguna, author of *The Eye of the Sheep* and *The Choke*

For discussion

- What are the overriding themes of *Magic*?
- Discuss the significance of the title *Magic*. Did your interpretation of the title change after reading the book? In what ways and why?
- Landscape and buildings have an actual, as well as a symbolic role in the unfolding of this memoir. Discuss their importance. How do they affect Jan's, and his companions', moods and behaviours?
- What are your thoughts on 'tourism' versus 'travel'? Is there a difference?
- Discuss the difference between terms 'religion', 'spirituality', and 'mysticism'.
- Jan was 18 years old at the beginning of his journey [p65] and 20 when he returns to Australia [p310]. He began the book when 21, working on it until now. Does this information change your reading of the book, or does it not make a difference? Why/why not?
- How important do you think it is for young people to take a gap year to travel and experience the world?
- Jan often uses nature to describe feeling or ideas – eg: '*a gurgling creek of unsorted and misplaced ideas*' [p11], '*the lava of this new reality*' [p243]. What effect does this have, and more importantly, what allusion is the narrator making?
- How are the tarot cards used throughout this memoir? Is there a magical element to them? Discuss.
- *Magic* is set in the late 1980s [Jan mentions 'students protesting against the Reagan Administration's role in derailing the Nicaraguan peace negotiations' [p20], and before social media [first social media began 1997]. When Jan meets Tony's family in Hawaii and his vegetarianism comes up, he realises '*It struck me then that we're only the same people tomorrow as we were yesterday because of two things: the habitual choices we make about what we think and do, and the memories that others hold us to. So I played along, wearing my new past like a new body.*' [p17]. Compare and contrast our everyday body to the 'new body' we show when travelling, and to that shown on social media – are they different? How so, and why? Discuss.
- When visiting the church at the heart of San Andrés Itzapa, Jan states '*Somehow this church embraced a Catholicism that had been so diluted by Indian paganism that it had lost touch with Christianity altogether.*' [p75]. Compare it to other Christian places where people still go, hoping for healing miracles [eg: the Lourdes grotto in France, or El Santuario de Chimayo (church) in New Mexico]. Is it any different? Discuss.
- How important are Ras Focus' teachings in influencing Jan's journey and his discovery of himself?

For discussion [continued]

- Focus and Jan call the West 'Babylon'. Why is this? What are they alluding to?
- Ganja – or cannabis – is considered 'the holly herb' by Rastafarians, and is used in a number of ways including the ritual of 'grounding'. But does ganja cause the magic to happen? What about the Wizard's LSD in New Orleans? Neither Focus nor the Wizard acknowledge these drugs as the source of their power. Discuss.
- Jan writes: *'When a person comes across magic for the first time, they have a choice. They can do as I did in Belize: embrace it with radical trust, knowing that it's good. Or else they try to control the situation by rationalising it away as madness.'* [p171] Is he correct? Do we still believe in magic? Do we rationalise it? And if so, why? And what about hallucinations and delusions – are these genuine experiences? Could our concepts of mental illness be wrong?
- When reading Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* [p230], Jan learns that when cosmic consciousness is achieved, *'one can do no wrong, effortlessly guided by the soul's bidding'*. Later, he states *'consciousness forges fiction so it can know itself, and perhaps even be duped by it, to fall in love with its own creation.'* [p244]. Do you agree with either of these ideas? Why/why not?
- Compare and contrast the different types of magic described in the book [Wizard's, Ras Focus', finding the squats in London and Paris, seeing the planets with the naked eye, the infinite reservoir of change when shopping in New Orleans, finding a manger in Germany, and surviving the desert and the sandstorm]. Which, in your opinion, were real magic? Which came closest to your understanding of magic? Why?
- Jan writes: *'I ached to experience real Africa'* [p149]. How real do you think his impression of Africa is, before going there? What influenced it? Discuss.
- Consider the basis of each belief/religion Jan encountered through his travels. How different or similar are they to each other and to Christian beliefs? Why do you think that is?
- When the girls try to plan for the trip through Africa, Jan states *'the only way to prepare for the unknown was through an internal, spiritual journey of discovery, not by calculating litres and kilometres.'* [pp 193-194]. How much truth is there in this statement? Are such preparations *'an unnecessary affectation.'* [p197]?
- When thinking about the message Ruth brought back from the Canadian High Commissioner, *'about a man who set off into the desert and all that was ever found were his bleached bones, his stretched dry skin and his Bible.'* [p277] Jan questions the strength of the man's belief. He states: *'I think he either turned back as Lot's wife did, or his passion for God's message was hot air and egotism rather than substance. How can such a gruesome ending come to one who walks with God? It doesn't seem right, it doesn't seem possible.'* Is this a reflection of Jan's faith, or is there an element of egotism on Jan's part?

For discussion [continued]

- Consider Jan's thoughts on symbols [p242]. Do symbols have deeper meanings? Is there anything in your life you considered symbolic? Discuss
- Before setting off on his own across the desert, Jan gets rid of all his possessions [p271]. How important are our possessions in defining who we are?
- Discuss Jan's belief that borders are fluid, that he does not need a passport to travel, and his behaviour at the Niger/Nigerian border, when he tells the border guards '*... perhaps you'll refuse me the papers to travel on Allah's earth because you claim it as your own?*' [p301]. Did you see this as naivety, arrogance, or wisdom? Do you believe borders should be fluid, and that one should be able to travel without passports? Why/why not?
- When Jan says '*I'm a Muslim, and a Christian. A Jew and a Hindu, and a Buddhist also. I don't wish to veil the light of God in the politics of mankind*' [p331] what is he really saying?
- Is Jan correct in saying that it is politics that prevents us from knowing God? Discuss.
- Consider Jan's behaviour in small cell at the Kamba border – is he having a spiritual experience or losing his mind? [pp322-323]
- How – if at all – has Jan changed during his travels? Do you think in the end he really wanted to go back to Australia?
- What does this memoir tell you about the relationships between the 'haves' and 'have nots'? Think in terms of money, belongings, power, class etc.

Suggested reading

The Alchemist – Paulo Coelho, Alan R. Clarke [Translator] Özdemir İnce [Translator]
[HarperCollins, 1993(1988)]

Chasing El Dorado: A South American Adventure – Aaron Smith [Transit Lounge, 2014]

Shantaram – Gregory David Roberts [Pan Macmillan Australia, 2011(2003)]

A Long Way from No Go – Tjanara Goreng Goreng, as told to Julie Szego [Wild Dingo Press, 2018]

Autobiography of a Yogi – Paramahansa Yogananda [Self-Realization Fellowship, U.S., 2004(1946)]

The Teachings of Don Juan – Carlos Castaneda [Washington Square Press, 1998(1968)]

The Poisonwood Bible – Barbara Kingsolver [Farber, 2013(1998)]

Some of the Dharma – Jack Kerouac [Viking, 1997]

The Journey Home: Autobiography of an American Swami – Radhanath Swami [Simon & Schuster: Mandala Publishing, 2010]

The Way of the Shaman – Michael Harner [HarperCollins Publishers, 1997(1980)]

Bad Buddhist: Speed Bumps and Detours on the Path to Enlightenment – Meshel Laurie [Black Inc., 2018]

The Seduction of Silence – Bem Le Hunte [Flamingo: Harper Collins, 2001]

Magic

Jan Golembiewski

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95 Stephen St

Yarraville

Victoria 3013

Australia

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