

A Kiss from Maddalena

by Christopher Castellani

Algonquin Books (a division of Workman Publishing)

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Massachusetts
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SUMMARY:

A Kiss from Maddalena is the story of a wartime relationship between two young lovers, Maddalena Piccinelli and Vito Leone, set in a remote mountain village in Italy during the waning years of World War II. The war plays a crucial role in separating the pair, whose relationship is further tested by Maddalena's parents' staunch disapproval of Vito as a worthy suitor. As German tanks begin to invade and devastate the village of Santa Cecilia, most of its inhabitants, including Maddalena's family, flee to safer environs while Vito remains behind to care for his invalid mother. Two years pass, as the war grinds to a close, before the Piccinellis can finally return home. Upon arrival, a stunning surprise awaits them: their war-ravaged house has been miraculously restored by Vita in a last attempt to win their daughter's hand. But before a joyous, long-awaited denouement can occur, Vita and Maddalena's fragile relationship must overcome one final, seemingly insurmountable, obstacle . . .

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. We are introduced to Vito's hand-built bike at the very beginning of the story. What do you think the bike symbolizes within the larger context of the novel?
2. The book is divided into distinct segments entitled: The Bike, The Tank, The Carriage, The Procession, The Car, and The Boat. What is their significance vis-à-vis the plot?
3. Conflict is a major element in this novel, taking on a life of its own. Characters struggle with internal conflicts, while Italy is bound up in a confusing and conflicting war. Are the skirmishes among characters a microcosm of the larger war conflict? How do characters resolve their own conflicts? How well do the characters understand Italy's role in the war?
4. Do you think Maddalena, the book's female protagonist, is a fully realized and believable character? Is hers a universal voice that transcends time and place – or is she a product of her times?

5. The church and religion permeate the everyday lives of these characters, while religious images pepper the narrative. For example: “he slid on the floor and kneeled before their luggage” (p. 320); or “we believe in the old expression: never go so far from home that you can’t hear the church bell ringing” (p. 179); or “She’d hear his heart beat deep within and make a hollow sound, like the drop of a church kneeler.” (p. 76). Was the villagers’ religious faith crucial to their survival, or by contrast, did it exert a stranglehold on their existence?
6. The book’s portrayal of war in Italy in the 1940’s is vivid. Based on your own knowledge of this era in history, do you believe it is realistically portrayed? Does the novel effectively capture the political climate of the times?
7. Compare this novel with other romantic novels you have read which are set during a war. What are their similarities and differences? Do they represent differing points of view?
8. At times the book exudes a fable-like, almost storybook quality. “...Farmers and shepherds walked alongside the carriages, their faces caked with dirt. ‘Welcome home,’ they said, and shrugged” (p. 220) or “...the toothless farmers now formed a circle and kicked their legs in a victory dance...” (p.84). What effect does this use of language have on the reader? Are these simply stylistic devices to cushion the impact of the horrors of war? Describe how language is used to soften war’s deafening tone?
9. Consider this excerpt about Maddalena: “...she had the power to control none of it. Someone else would decide how this would end, just as someone else had decided the war and her chances with Vito and every detail of her marriage. That she played such a small part in her own life did not enrage her. Not now. Not yet” (p. 314). Discuss fate versus empowerment. Think about the role of this omniscient narrator. Is his intimacy with the character’s mind/heart reminiscent of the narrative voice in a Jane Austen novel?
10. If you were to write a different ending to the novel, describe what you imagine this to look like. Were you satisfied with the way the book drew to a close? What might you change?
11. The Piccinellis have an unexpected response to the end of the war from their safe haven at Zia Zabrina’s farm. “The Piccinellis celebrated...though secretly they resented how little the war had touched them. No bombs had dropped here. No one but soldiers had been forced to leave their homes. Not one of them had seen his neighbor pulled from a pile of rubble (p. 209).” Why do they react in this surprising way? Do you understand their response?

12. Vito is a character who possesses qualities of goodness and integrity, but at the same time, he is flawed. Does his character grow and evolve? What are his motivations? Do you find yourself rooting for him?
13. Guglierma Lunga, the village *strega*, is a colorful character who lives and breathes superstition. What role does superstition and/or “curses” play in the lives of the villagers? In the lives of people today?
14. Whose point of view do you think this story represents? A character’s? The author’s?
15. Envision a sequel to this novel. Describe what you see.

ACTIVITIES:

1. Research the politics and history of Italy during World War II.
2. Research the architecture and layout of mountain villages in Italy during the 1940’s.
3. Create an oral history about someone you know who survived a war.
4. Collect sheet music of Italian songs that date from WWII and perform in a group.
5. Paint a picture or construct a diorama depicting a scene in the novel.
6. Write a play based on the novel to be performed locally.
7. After a discussion of *A Kiss from Maddalena*, have your book group prepare and serve a meal of Italian peasant food.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from <http://www.christophercastellani.com>

Christopher Castellani was born and raised in Wilmington, Delaware. His parents immigrated to the United States from a small village in Italy in the years following World War II, and their experiences as adolescents in Italy have been a significant inspiration ... Chris was educated at Swarthmore College, received his Masters in English Literature from Tufts University and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Boston University. He is currently at work on his second novel—a follow-up to *A Kiss From Maddalena* – slated for publication by Algonquin. Castellani lives in Arlington, Massachusetts, where he is head instructor at grub street (www.grubstreet.org), a non-profit creative writing center.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Christopher Castellani's website, filled with interesting background about the novel and the author: <http://www.christophercastellani.com>

Reading Group Guide (an additional Guide located on Christopher's website):
http://www.christophercastellani.com/content/Reading_Group_Guide.pdf

H-Italy, a member of H-Net Humanities & Social Sciences OnLine. This site offers scholars a central source for information in the field of Italian history.
<http://www.h-net.org/~italy/index.html>

The Dante Alighieri Society of Massachusetts, a non profit organization dedicated to promoting and fostering Italian language and culture. <http://www.dantealighieri.net/cambridge>

OTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

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Review of *A Kiss from Maddalena*, *Publishers Weekly*, 10 February 2003: 160.

Verdone, Jules. *Novelist produces a memorable first 'Kiss.'* Review of *A Kiss from Maddalena*, by Christopher Castellani. *Boston Globe* 16 July 2003: D8.



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