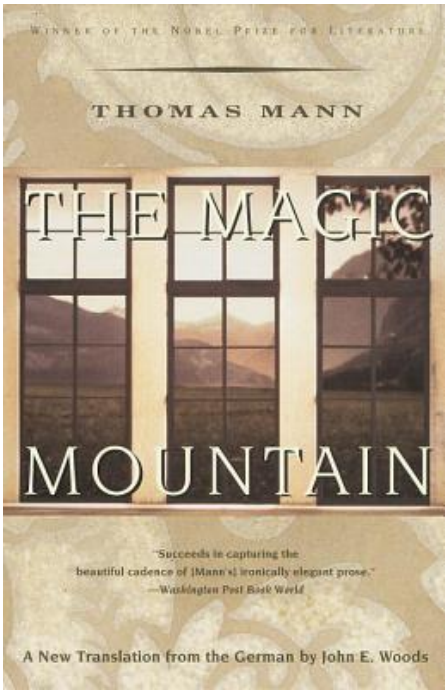

The Magic Mountain

Thomas Mann , John E. Woods (Translator)

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In this dizzyingly rich novel of ideas, Mann uses a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, a community devoted exclusively to sickness, as a microcosm for Europe, which in the years before 1914 was already exhibiting the first symptoms of its own terminal irrationality. The Magic Mountain is a monumental work of erudition and irony, sexual tension and intellectual ferment, a book that pulses with life in the midst of death.

The Magic Mountain Details

Date	:	Published 1996 by Vintage (first published 1924)
ISBN	:	9780679772873
Author	:	Thomas Mann , John E. Woods (Translator)
Format	:	Paperback 706 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Classics, European Literature, German Literature, Literature, Novels, Philosophy

From Reader Review The Magic Mountain for online ebook

Samadrita says

Imagine being stuck in a place where all sense of time is lost in the web of inactivity, a place which enables people to lead a life devoid of any greater purpose and only focused on recuperation from a queer illness, a place almost hermetically sealed and self-controlled, successfully keeping the repercussions of wars and diplomatic feuds between nations at bay. Imagine being rid of all your earthly woes of finding means of survival and all the elements that stand as pillars supporting the normative structure of life during a sojourn in a special, secluded place. Imagine a miniature diorama of a society thriving on its own, divorced from society at large.
If you haven't been successful in imagining a real life scenario fitting aforementioned descriptions, do not despair. You can always discover this specially constructed safe haven in a certain fictional sanatorium in the Swiss Alps where our protagonist Hans Castorp languishes for seven whole years.

The experience of reading this book is akin to a painstaking hike up a dangerously steep slope. (Excuse the overused analogy but it happens to be quite apt)
There are long dry stretches requiring ritualistic finding of one footing after the next, ensuring that as a reader you do not slip and tumble headfirst into the gaping chasm of incomprehension. And then there are the moments of perfect clarity when snippets of Mann's wisdom filter in like errant rays of sunshine through the drear of many tedious descriptions of long walks and repetitive conversations, making the long and difficult climb seem worth it all of a sudden.

> *"But he who knows the body, who knows life, also knows death. Except that's not the whole thing - but merely a beginning, pedagogically speaking. You have to hold it up to the other half, to its opposite. Because our interest in death and illness is nothing but a way of expressing an interest in life..."*

The summit of this "magic mountain" becomes the location of a metaphorical watch tower from where the spectacle of our collective civilizational march is viewed, dissected and analyzed with precision. The quirky patients inhabiting the sanatorium become mere proxies for some nations or disparate points of view, their inter-relationships often symbolic of some deeper ideological conflict woven intricately into the fabric of existence.
But despite the sheer brilliance of this premise, there's something off about this book. Something that prevented me from according that final star.
Even if this remains a lengthy and eruditely presented discussion on Europe's inner contradictions, its juxtaposition of progress in all spheres of life and violence brewing under the veneer of that sanctimonious progress, as a work of literature it is somehow imperfect and rough around the edges. Since I was often tempted to believe it would have worked better as a nonfictional philosophical discourse. It's sort of like what my eloquent friend Dolors says - *'The book lacks a soul.'* How succinctly put. (Read her well-argued review here)

The characters are employed as mere mouthpieces, never resembling well-drawn sketches of actual people with their own stories. The situations and backdrops are mere contrivances specifically begotten to tout ideas on life and death. It's as if the whole narrative is an elaborate ruse developed to convey Mann's thoughts on the state of Europe prior to the First World War. During my moments of exasperation with the book I was able to recall a few of Nabokov's thoughts in his article on *Lolita*-

> *"...All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age*

> *until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann."*

Clearly a jibe at TMM if I have ever seen one.
Not that I agree with Nabokov's opinion on TMM being topical trash but it surely gives rise to the suspicion that if you strip the book of all its allegorical significance, almost nothing substantial remains. And with the turn of the last page, it leaves the reader with a sense of indescribable dissatisfaction about having just finished a journey neither very rewarding nor enjoyable.

Maybe a re-read some time years later on in life will restore the elusive star. Maybe it will not.

Originally posted on:- 31st October, 2013

Geoff says

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“The Hamlet of Europe now looks upon millions of ghosts” Paul Valery wrote. Elsinore is everywhere. “The time is out of joint” spoke Hamlet. And he gazed at laughing skulls and procrastinated and made colloquies with ghosts within the walls his cliffside castle. Hans Castorp also waits, lingers, decides not to decide, dallies with whether it is better to be or not to be, listens to his attendant spirits, weighs skulls in the palm of his hand while time pulses around him on great heights. But *The Magic Mountain* isn’t only *Hamlet*, it is also Bottom’s dream across a long midsummer night, and the enchantment of somnambulistic illusions. It is a winter’s tale, too. 1,001 Alpen Nächte. And Wagner’s Ring Cycle, which might flow out in waves on this purified mountain air from a coffin-shaped black cabinet with an inset gramophone, over which our hero holds his head in his hands for nights on end. And the record spins, and the needle traces its eternal groove as the opera unfolds to its *finis*- Time’s straight line is elastic at all points and so folds into a circle on which the needle hums as it reads its grainy text and moves toward its center, only to be lifted and turned, reset by some unseen hand or shade of hand- and so the cycle, the opera, the aria, the story resumes its inward path on waves of sorrowful music. Does the needle know, as it moves along its course, where it might be, temporally, narratively, in our opera? Or does it lose itself by being bound within and not outside of this this strange method of capturing and reading Time? Yet we measure this boundless sea of Time as if each wave was not retreating from us and coming at us simultaneously, and so was not ungraspable- by the shore of Time sand is collected and placed into a glass funnel, it is pulled down through the hourglass by gravity and in the bottom bell of the hourglass a mountain slowly takes shape.

But “the time is out of joint”, and we might find that as we come to feel ever more confident in our watches and hourglasses, the bell tower in the center of town and the winding face at the train station, to our astonishment we may look up one evening into the dome of sky and see both the sun and moon sharing our heaven, a dual claim on our sensibilities, the sky both studded with stars and washed with daylight’s pallid glow. Fantastical things occur to people when the time is out of joint. And those living within the flux and flex of timeless time also become fantastic, phantasmal. Illness takes hold. Great stupor and great petulance infect our population at these heights. For we’ve climbed above the world to look down into that bottom bell of the hourglass, where the sands of time are forming this mountain in miniature, this sickly dreaming, encapsulated world which grows and grows as time accumulates, grows and grows until it covers all of Elsinore, all of Europe, all the world. As if Time were a lung in a chest opened for us to watch, on an x-ray machine perhaps, as it expands and contracts- we are aware that each expansion and contraction is a kind of counting down for the biological organism- but for the breather, what good would counting breaths do, but become another way of ticking out individuated moments moving us closer to the final great cataclysm? And
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for our Hans Castorp, our cipher for the haunted and harried epoch through which he chose to dwell outside of time - do we blame him for so long posing the question of “to be or not to be?” - when the terrible answer to that question was inexorably approaching, like an avenging angel, all the time anyway?

An infinite book, this “time novel”. It could be nothing else, if it were to be a time novel.

Edward says

To read *The Magic Mountain* is to be wholly immersed in Hans Castorp’s little world, to really take part as Hans and his companions grapple with mankind’s dichotomies: life vs death, action vs intellect, reason vs emotion, naturalism vs mysticism, East vs West, god vs man, and, perhaps above all, love, that singular epitomic contradiction, that wonderful celebration of life, that raison d'être, which capriciously wields the power both to exult and to desolate.

The book’s characters - the wild and charismatic Pieter Peeperkorn, the erudite Herr Settembrini and Naphta (who engage in holy battle for the protagonist’s soul), the enchanting Clavdia, the dutiful Joachim, even the purportedly unremarkable and malleable Hans Castorp himself – all these characters are revealed to be at once genuine and intimately personable yet also representative of external unseen forces that move through the world. Such connections are there for the reader to discover throughout the novel, which deals not only in dichotomies, but in ambiguities (such fertile ground for contemplation).

But what makes *The Magic Mountain* a pleasure to read is the extraordinary sensitivity to the human condition that is evident throughout. Mann portrays the relationships between the characters in sublime detail, filled with subtle emotional interplay (of uncertainty, desire and conflict), which characterize the complex and segregated internal nature of real human relationships; an insight that is rarely conveyed so well in literature.

The Magic Mountain is long and challenging, but depth of the writing and the consistent beauty of the prose are such that it was rarely boring. There's so much here that I feel it's impossible to absorb entirely in a single reading. This is surely one of those “desert island books” that demand to be read again – a novel that never entirely resolves itself, but reveals more with each reading.

Kalliope says

THE POLKA MACABRE of the SEVEN STEPS

It is dusk, and we are on a slim boat, similar to a black gondola and approach an isolated island. As I can make out better the shapes, I realize I have seen this before. The image in front of my eyes is like a black and white version of **Arnold Bocklin**’s painting and now I am transported to his **Isle of the Dead**. There is deep silence. I can only hear the very faint stirring of the water as the boat slides over it. Well no, there is also a faint melody which becomes clearer as we approach the shore. I now recognize **Sergei Rachmaninov**’s symphonic poem that grew directly out of the painting, with its *Dies Irae*. This poem is also in black and

white in spite of all its harmonic colours.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKeTd...

As we arrive in the island, we see amongst the dark thin and tall trees a palace made out of ice. The air is chilly, not cold, not freezing, just crisp and sharp.

We enter this palace of iced crystal and there is a salon, a dancing salon and around it there are seven adjacent chambers or alcoves and there are hammocks and we see several figures lying down, horizontally. They are the “horizontals”, the blessed in their stability. Although we are moving in space, there is something flat, like a fresco in a medieval church or maybe this flattened perspective is my illusion.

We join the horizontals and lie down on the hammocks and wrap ourselves with white blankets and the spectacle begins.

The Polka of the Seven Steps.

The Polka begins and fourteen of those figures in the hammocks get up and form seven couples and get ready for their dance. The horizontals have become dancers and the spectacle at last begins.

First advance the **Winter & Summer**. They set the tempo. Now it is Summer, now it is Winter, and round again. This couple does the rounds so well and draws you in their swirling so absolutely that time passes without breaks and from its cyclicality there seems to be no escape. As they dance we see the sun streaming in with white light and it is warm, but when it touches the dark it freezes. It is magic Snow and it has revelatory powers.

Second in this diversion, step in **Highland & Lowland**. Highland is less haughty and more humble and its vision has an advantageous viewpoint. It sees that existence is enchanted. In comparison, Lowland seems perfect, the desired state. But when it gets closer we see that it is formed out of the common and the petty. In its prejudices it just assumes too much.

In clashing clothing the **Western-Northern & the Eastern-Southern** come now to the fore. Austerity in the garments and the frosty detachment of Western are apparent in the well measured steps, but the exotic frills and extravagance of the bright Eastern delights and allures everyone, especially its dancing companion. They perform the most frivolous steps. It is difficult to tell who follows whom and who sets the pace.

And now it is the turn of the **Unhealthy & Healthy**. The Unhealthy is denied activity and barely moves, but it is openly apparent that it lives the music more profoundly. It dances with its soul. It has clearly been blessed, anointed with TB, which confers additional sagacity. The Healthy seems flippant, and just watching it move around from my hammock makes me giddy. There is a disturbing senselessness about it.

Soon the next couple seems make their way and stand in front of us. **Radicalism** has pulled **Humanism** in. The latter dances elegantly, not missing one step and is dressed in light and harmonious tones. It also takes in stride the thrusts of Radicalism, who is dressed in dark shakes. There is a great deal of push and pull in this dance, but Humanism remains unperturbed.

Suddenly a great deal more light comes in and the next couple are announced: **Apollo & Dionysus**. With the

light a magnificent figure takes center stage. He comes out alone, but is soon followed by his scruffy partner, Dyonisus, who in a most disorderly fashion trots in. If Apollo is impeccable Dyonisus is gaudy. In this movement of the polka Apollo's steps are clear and straight, and we look in amazement how undisturbed they are by Dyonisus' delirious swings.

The light dims suddenly as we reach the seventh and last dance and **Eros & Thanatos** make a dramatic entrance. They hold each other very tightly and intensely, as if their dancing were their salvation. Life as a temporary passage. Their steps are the most intricate and we see how their legs seem to slide out of their bodies and intertwine themselves into a new unity. But this is no polka, it is a tango. The erotic dance that could make you die.

The dancing music finishes and the first bars of *Götterdämmerung* are heard. In still circumspection we prepare to leave this island, a mountain emerging magically from its surrounding waters.

And as I try to remember whether I have seen these dancers before, I wonder if, after Thomas Mann's invitation, we now understand life and its purpose somewhat better, and if we have realized the overwhelming power of art and its dangers….

Dolors says

Impressions on my first reading of "The Magic Mountain" in 2009. Before GR

I finished this over-long book and I can only say I am not prepared to read it again, even if Thomas Mann himself asked me in person.
A complex book, philosophy, history and politics all mixed up with symbolism and irony. The author plays with the perception of time and the reader loses touch with reality. A swayed main character, too much of vain discourse and little sense.
I won't deny the singularity of the work, but I can't say I enjoyed it. My mind must be too plain to follow this kind of argument, I'll leave it for others to enjoy, I'll turn to something quite different.

Impressions on my second reading in 2013. After GR

In spite of my headstrong resolution, when GR crossed my path, I forgot all about my self-made promises and decided to embark on a second literary journey with this novel participating in the Thomas Mann Group Reading. I have tried to write a more detailed account of my thoughts on this second reading.

Reading *"The Magic Mountain"* for a second time has proved to be a ponderous challenge to me. The same Thomas Mann recommends to read his novel not once but twice in his afterword, comparing the experience of a second reading with the necessity of knowing a piece of music to fully appreciate each note, which will lead to a thorough enjoyment of the apparently separate movements that compose a symphony.
Thomas Mann considered music as the quintessential art. It's no coincidence therefore that his most brilliant writing style appears in glorious if brief moments where the triumph of music gets its peak of expression in equaling the narration to a melodious symphony. The chapters *"Snow"* and *"Fullness of Harmony"* are clear examples of Mann's genius in shrouding the human spirit with the beauty of art.

Apart from paying tribute to art as a form of the purest embodiment of the complexities of humankind, *"The Magic Mountain"* arises as a powerful metaphor that serves Mann to draw a masterful portrait of the archetypes of the bourgeois class and the aristocracy of the nineteenth century, of their ideals, morals and values that will commingle with the social and political tensions that would eventually make of the

forthcoming century a devastating and turbulent episode in the world history.
The reader is painfully slowly introduced to these higher reflections through the portrayal of the life in a tuberculosis sanatorium placed at the top of a mountain in Davos where the young engineer Hans Castorp, model of the refined and educated man of the nineteenth century, visits his cousin Joachim Ziemssen for seven days. Being helplessly drawn to the eerie allurement of this otherworldly and timeless spot, Hans ends up staying seven years instead. That Hans spends precisely that amount of time in this Alpine haven isn't fortuitous either, seven being known to be the number of creation, representing the vivid but controversial relationship between the human and the Divine, between the delicate line that separates life from death.

My main misgiving with this undeniable literary masterpiece falls upon the false impression of the story being an outstanding work of magical realism that can be drawn from its first chapters only to witness the thick veil of artifice irremediably drawn creating a blurred atmosphere almost theatrical.
Mann's protagonists end up being the result of an archetypical characterization, becoming mere puppets strongly caricaturized in wooden scenario and cardboard mountains. Each puppet dresses in bright and vivid color according to their attitude towards existence, philosophy, politics or art, giving voice to Mann's own controversial ideas:

Hans Castorp: Or *life's delicate child*. Main character whose main feature is his hunger for knowledge. Hans' personality is very impressionable especially due to his bourgeois heritage and practical occupation as an engineer which makes of him a pristine character in existential and philosophical matters.
Joachim Ziemssen: Hans' cousin and his inseparable companion. Ziemssen embodies the military values, especially the sense of duty as opposed to Castrop's approach as a civil who doesn't feel the call of honor and collective responsibility.
The Italian Settembrini: My most favorite and complex character, full of inner contradictions and existential wonder. Settembrini could be defined as Castorp's fatherly mentor who defends the humanistic tradition, the values of democracy and of the Enlightenment with particular emphasis on tolerance and human rights, reaffirming in productive work, creative activity and active life as the main sources for the progress of mankind.
Leo Naphta: Settembrini's antagonist and rival to capture young Hans' attention. Naptha is the fastidious voice in the story, a nostalgic of medieval order, defender of radical extremes, from totalitarian systems to anarchism or communism. He possesses great skill in dialectic and rhetoric as any consummated sophist.
Russian Mme.Chauchat: Hans' platonic love and symbol of sensual desire. Her Asiatic features and slanted eyes remind Hans of Pribislav Hippe, a schoolmate to whom he felt strongly attracted as a child. The question of homosexuality or even bisexuality is most evident in the way Hans links these two characters as well as in the silent and hostile rivalry between Settembrini and Mme.Chauchat.
Mynheer Peeperkorn: Mme.Chauchat's lover. He represents the ability to feel and enjoy life intensely, conversely to the intellectualism of Naphta and Settembrini. Hans' develops an intense friendship with the old man, bringing the subject of homosexuality to attention once again.

In the end, each one of the characters, no matter the ideas they represent, have to face the mystery of time, life and death. Beauty is of little consequence.
Time is the undisclosed but ever present character of the narrative.
Time, an element of music, measuring its form and structure giving rhythm and pace and climax to the written score.
Time inextricably linked to life, like bodies in space, moving relentlessly towards an unavoidable destiny, highlighting the insignificance of humankind.
Time as an abstract concept which can't be measured in seven weeks, seven years or in a second on a battlefield amidst chaos, muddy blood and breaking voices that sing Schubert's *"Der Lindenbaum"* as a mourning hymn in the view of death.

"We should not care to set high stake on thy life by the time it ends."

Says Thomas Mann in his afterword. Indeed.
But there’s an echo nagging at the back of my consciousness that repeats “where is the joy of life if we don’t”?

This is a timeless classic, maybe one of the most influential pieces of written art in the twentieth century, finely formed, filled with myriad reflections of the highest order, irony and satire but, even with overflowing written musicality, the novel has failed for a second time to strike the right chord in the symphony which is eternally played in my plain but complex soul.

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Note: May I draw your attention to my GR talented friend Samadrita’s outstanding review, which reflects what I haven’t been able to put into words in my own attempt at writing one.

Lee says

In 1997, in Jamaica Plain, Boston, ~4 am, mid-June, after a college friend's band that was blowing up at the time played the Middle East and everyone afterwards came back to our place, I remember a coolish girl on our porch saying to me something like "Oh, you like to read? I bet you like boring shit like *The Magic Mountain*." I don't remember my response but since then whenever I've thought of this book I've flashed to that scene and her assumption that only pretentious little fuckers read books like this. Now, if I time-traveled back to Boston that night (the sun was just barely up, actually -- early summer dawn comes around 4 am) I'd change her mind about me and *The Magic Mountain* with enthusiastic description of how the book was boring at times, sure, totally intentionally boring at times, I'd say, but *shit* it's most certainly *not*. Sure, it's so slow at first it seems like a chore, but I think in fact it's also a mountainous testament to the importance of writerly/readerly patience, more than it's a "magical" read. It didn't get going for me until 330 freaking pages in (706 total). Turns out Mann ain't Musil* -- he's more like a superintellectual Stendhal or, at his best, matches the vivid prose and encompassing scope of Tolstoy. Formally steady pre-modernist approach: no real structural or extended language-y experimentation (other than a 17-page essay on the connection between cellular structure and galaxies). Content-wise, every page seems infused with intellectual talk -- it's explicitly hyper-thematic, a novel of ideas in which the major conflicts are theoretical, a novel that climaxes with a confounding blizzard of argument between opposing intellectuals ("Operationes Spirtuales," p 432-460) followed by a sublime chapter ("Snow," p 460-489) in which the main dude Hans sets out for some solo skiing and gets lost in an actual blizzard of wind-driven snow that gives way to abstractions and hallucinations, like how conflicting theories about Progress or Spirit or the necessity of terror or humaneness are manifested in reality -- first, escalating into real physical conflict between the two intellectual adversaries (the humanist Settembrini and the protofascist Naphta) and then later on real physical conflict among nations driven to war by ideas: "What? Ideas, simply because they were rigorous, led inexorably to bestial deeds, to a settlement by physical struggle?" Overall, I'd award three stars for maybe 600 total pages of this and *nine stars* for another scattered 106 pages, mostly during three parts: 1) the Mardi Gras bit ("Danse Macabre") in which italicized English indicates French is spoken, 2) the aforementioned chapter called "Snow" and much of the chapter before it that introduces Naphta's horrific backstory (note: freaking Naphta doesn't appear until *page 367* -- try getting away with that these days, writer friends -- also, reviews on here mentioning a certain Herr Naphta helped me make it through the first 300+ pages since it was clear that a major character was yet to appear), and 3) the riveting final 20 pages or so (really gets going on page 686 - won't give things away). All in all, things seem intentionally shaped like an arduous ascent in itself. It's a novel that knows it's arduous, trying to induce irregular, elastic experiences of time in readers similiar to those of the characters (time is one of the novel's major themes; its elaboration/presentation here kicks the crap outta -- ahem, ahem

-- recent pulitizer winners** also concerned with time). It's a novel that tries to induce a confounded sense in readers, too, erring on the side of a sort of highly managed confusion intermixed with occasional passages of extreme clarity (eg, at one point there's a description of moments when the sides of mountains all around can be seen through temporary openings in the clouds). It's structured like an upwardly undulating slope that ends sort of in open air. The language is always accessible but it's rarely propelled by a narrative engine running on high-viscosity plot. For the most part, the plot involves questions like: Will Hans get sick? Will Hans stay long? Will Hans get the girl he likes? Will Settembrini or Naptha win the struggle for Hans' burgeoning intellectual soul? Will Hans get sicker and die and or freakin' leave this jawn, healthy or not? It's sort of like *Paradise Lost*, where their sickness (moist spots) and their actual/theoretical removal from the flatlands is their innocence, and Hans over the course of his time on the mountain must awake from his stuporous dream-life where he plays king while expertly wrapped in blankets and waxes about the stars and weighs various philosophies including one involving the supremacy of emotions over the intellect (imagined Pepperkorn in the film played by none other than Don Quixote). Thought about handing out four stars (ye olde 4.5 rounded down) but that seemed more about my restlessness not always dealing with the novel's requirements of audacious readerly patience, not to mention its somewhat underdrawn minor characters, the semi-hokey thing about Hans's unrequited love for a semi-Asiatic pretty boy in grade school he revisits with an alluring lady with similarly slanty eyes and pale skin. Not really a book with many favorable female characters other than one sort of protoliberated object of Hans' lust known for slamming doors. In general, felt like a month-long vacation somewhere I often wanted to leave that nevertheless offered dramatic experiences and vistas and insight. Now I'm glad to be home -- I really look forward to reading a few quicker, easier, shorter books in a row -- but also I feel like the effort was totally rewarded, especially in the last twenty pages. I'd recommend the *experience* of this book to anyone with ample patience or, better yet, anyone interested in trying to slowly but surely overcome their readerly ADD; everyone else, make sure to read the chapter called "Snow," just under thirty of the finest/most vivid pages I can remember reading in my life here in the flatlands, pages I'm sure to read many more times. Anyway, a major mess-with-me-not weapon to wield against those who argue against the presence of ideas in fiction. Highly recommended to pretentious little fuckers everywhere, of any age over 30 (if younger, I'd wait to read it).

(A note on names -- Naptha's name seems to relate to naphtha: "Naphtha normally refers to a number of flammable liquid mixtures of hydrocarbons . . . It is a broad term covering among the lightest and most volatile fractions of the liquid hydrocarbons in petroleum. Naphtha is a colorless to reddish-brown volatile aromatic liquid, very similar to gasoline." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naphtha)

* The Man Without Qualities Vol. 1: A Sort of Introduction and Pseudo Reality Prevails by Robert Musil is different in tone, particularly, and for me was more enjoyable/superior throughout, more open and humorous, and somehow also seemed much less dense.

** Recent Pulitzer winners concerned with "time": A Visit from the Goon Squad; Tinkers

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Megha says

Imagine hiking up a steep mountain. You are not quite winning the game of hide & seek with the Sun and it has got its fiery eyes firmly on you. Your legs are chewing your ears off with incessant grumbling. With each step you take, a wish to flop down right there grows stronger. One of these steps carries you to a spot where a spectacular vista suddenly opens up before you. For the briefest moment, the scene in front of you consumes not only your vision, but your consciousness. It is only in the next moment that it registers that the arduous climb is over and you know it was a worthwhile endeavor.

The Magic Mountain is one such hike. No other book has made such heavy demands on my patience (not even Tommy Ruggles' *Gravity's Rainbow*, I think). *The Magic Mountain* is incredibly dense and often slow going. But then there are places where the narrative sprouts wings and soars. Not to say that I didn't like the other bits of the book, but it was these few outstanding chapters that confirmed that effort vs. reward dynamic was in my favor.
It is certainly not a book with a high degree of obfuscation. Mann doesn't make it any more difficult than it needs to be. He narrates and explains everything with a lot of patience and wisdom.

The book description refers to *The Magic Mountain* as *a dizzingly rich novel of ideas* and that's exactly what it is. It is a highly erudite read all the way through comprising of many a intellectual discussions and debates. One of the frequently occurring themes in the book is the philosophy of time. The subjective nature of time is explicated in great detail. In fact, the book itself has an onomatopoeic quality, in that the narrative seems to move slow when time is not passing swiftly for Hans Castorp, and its picks up the pace when Hans feels that time is flying by.

Some of the other themes include life, death, illness, love, humanism, progress, modernism, irrationality of society, effect of war and then some. Did I say it was dense? Many of the characters are representational of one idea or another. The character of the protagonist, however, goes through a wonderful growth during the course of the novel. His character development, both spiritually and intellectually, is certainly one of the highlights. It may look like this book has a very serious disposition, but really there is plenty of humor and irony in the way Mann writes.

You may have seen some other reviewers mentioning the transcendent chapter *Snow*. I can't go without mentioning it as well. It is by far the best thing about the book. A beautiful, sublime piece of writing. Hans Castorp comes out transformed by the experience, and so does the reader. While other reviewers don't mention it, *Danse Macabre* was fascinating as well. For people living in a sanatorium, death takes on a very urgent position. *Danse Macabre*, literally meaning *Dance of Death*, looks into that very abyss.

Thomas Mann said that *The Magic Mountain* should be read twice. I have read through once, but I can't say I have twirled all the ideas around on my fingers and looked at them from all the sides. I do want to re-read it some day. For my next dose of ideas, I will perhaps be knocking at Musil's door.

Nikos Tsentemeidis says

Μ?λις τελε?ωσα ενθουσιασμ?νος την αν?γνωση αυτο? του αριστουργ?ματος. Δε θα πω ?τι πρ?κειται για ?να απ? τα σημαντικ?τερα μυθιστορ?ματα, αυτ? θα το κρ?νει ο καθ?νας. Δεν ε?ναι αυτ?, στο οπο?ο επιζητ?ς την πλοκ?, αλλ? αν?κει στην κατηγορ?α των φιλοσοφικ?ν, δηλαδ? την αγαπημ?νη μου.

Στο τ?λος του πρ?του τ?μου, αναρωτ?θηκα αν μου αρ?σει ? ?χι. Η αλ?θεια ε?ναι πως βι?στηκα στην αν?γνωσ? του και αυτ? το διαπ?στωσα μ?λις στις πρ?τες σελ?δες του δε?τερου, γι’ αυτ? επ?στρεψα διαβ?ζοντας ξαν? ορισμ?να αποσπ?σματα. Το ενδιαφ?ρον του Μαγικο? Βουνο? αυξ?νεται με αριθμητικ? πρ?οδο. Ε?ναι συνυφασμ?νο με τις αλλαγ?ς που συντελο?νται στην ζω? του κεντρικο? ?ρωα Χανς Κ?στορπ. Μια επ?σκεψη τρι?ν εβδομ?δων σε ?να σανατ?ριο στις ?λπεις, καταλ?γει σε επτ?χρονη διαμον?. ?λη η ουσ?α του βιβλ?ου ε?ναι η μεταβολ? του ανθρ?πινου χαρακτ?ρα σε συν?ρτηση με το χρ?νο και σε ?να εντελ?ς διαφορετικ? περιβ?λλον.

Η ιδιομορφ?α του ν?ου περιβ?λλοντος, αποτελε? ?ναν παρ?γοντα αποξ?νωσης και ανεξαρτησ?ας, ειδικ? για την εποχ? που γρ?φτηκε το ?ργο (1912-1924). Η προσαρμογ? σε ?να τ?τοιο περιβ?λλον προ?ποθ?τει ?να δυνατ? χαρακτ?ρα, ?χοντας ως αποτ?λεσμα κ?τι πολ? διαφορετικ?, καθ?ς τ?ποτα δε θυμ?ζει «τα πεδιν?», πρ?κειται για μια αρχ? εκ του μηδεν?ς. Στη διαμ?ρφωση του «ν?ου» χαρακτ?ρα θα επηρε?σουν οι καθημεριν?ς φιλοσοφικ?ς συζητ?σεις με ?λλους δ?ο ασθενε?ς. Εκε? αρχ?ζει το ωρα?ο. Οι δι?λογοι αποτελο?ν τα κορυφα?α σημε?α του ?ργου και αφορο?ν ανταλλαγ? απ?ψεων, π?νω σε θ?ματα ?πως η πολιτικ?, η θρησκε?α, ο θ?νατος, η μουσικ? κτλ. ?να πολυδι?στατο μυθιστ?ρημα, ?ψογα τεχνικ?ς στημ?νο.

Η μετ?φραση ?χει σε κ?ποια σημε?α μικρ? προβλ?ματα, σε καμ?α ?μως περ?πτωση δεν δυσχερα?νει την αν?γνωση. Επ’ ευκαιρ?ας ?σως της εξ?ντλησης του βιβλ?ου απ? τον Εξ?ντα, θα ?ταν η κατ?λληλη στιγμ? για μια ν?α μεταφραστικ? προσπ?θεια.

Δε θα μπορο?σα να συμφων?σω περισσ?τερο με τον σχολιασμ? του ?διου του συγγραφ?α: «Τι μπορ? να σας πω για το βιβλ?ο και για το π?ς μπορε? καλ?τερα να το διαβ?σει κανε?ς; Θα αρχ?σω με την αλαζονικ? απα?τηση να μην το διαβ?σετε μ?α φορ?, αλλ? δ?ο. Μια απα?τηση που δεν χρει?ζεται β?βαια να ικανοποιηθε?, αν κ?ποιος ?χει ?δη βαρεθε? με την πρ?τη αν?γνωση. ?να ?ργο τ?χνης δεν πρ?πει να αποτελε? καθ?κον, ο?τε προσπ?θεια, δεν πρ?πει να το αναλαμβ?νει κανε?ς παρ? τη θ?λησ? του. Ο στ?χος του ε?ναι να παρ?χει ευχαρ?στηση, να ψυχαγωγε? και να αναζωογονε?.»

Aubrey says

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a contestant for the spot of my absolute favorite novel. The judgment is only being withheld due to the fact that I currently don't have a review for Of Human Bondage, so no accurate comparison can be made as of yet. However. It must be said that if the previous book gave me hope for the human condition, this one explosively revitalized my admiration for the human ideal.

Few people write like this nowadays. Most don't appreciate their world and its myriad ideas and opinions, the sheer amount of conflicting diatribes created by the force of the human brain. If they do, rarely do they make the effort to take on this overwhelming amount of information and distill it down into a message for the future. There's no snapshot of the world at hand that is absolutely gorgeous in what it conveys to the reader, both in quantity and in quality. In light of that, I now have an answer for the which-book-would-you-take-on-a-deserted-island question, as I know for a fact that I could reread this book every day till the day I die, and I'd never not find something new to contemplate and stand in awe of.

This is the well-to-do of Europe before the Great War, living off of old money in a state of pure contentment that, were it not for sheer boredom, would accomplish next to nothing. It is this boredom, this monster titled 'Stupor' referenced in the pages, that forces our man Hans Castorp to distract himself in shifting fashions that model the ever changing obsessions of the continent, from science to political discourse to religious rantings to mystical meanderings. The institution goes through throes of obsession that closely model the 'flatland' from which its denizens came; so too does the violent undercurrent that begins to overwhelm Europe resemble the ever increasing ferocity between those who were formerly combatants solely in the intellectual realm.

The question must be posed: would Hans have ever returned to the world outside of institutional walls, had the War never occurred? Boredom may be a tiresome thing, but would it have been enough to convince him to leave the nest, where time is compartmentalized, stretched, and finally completely ignored into oblivion? Or would he have hung around till his own death, when his excuse for staying finally takes his life, and he is removed from reality in as quiet and unobtrusive a fashion as his ill comrades had been before him? Now, take that question, and apply it to Europe as a whole. What do you see? There's a question for the ages, if ever there was one.

And to tie in to the other wonderful side to the coin: of course the book can't detail absolutely everything worth passing down, but it offers much food for thought, thereby giving the tools required to take on the questions it leaves open-ended in its wake. (view spoiler)I could go on. But I will save space for further re-readings, when the fervor is once again fresh and I have more immediate recollection under my belt to spout out. One last thing: books like these are why I read as much as I do. You find a gem like this, and you can't go back.

Warwick says

You’re faced with a daunting task when you try to talk about *The Magic Mountain* – there are so many threads that to pull on one seems unfair to the others. For some it’s a meditation on time, for others it’s the foundational ‘sick-lit’ masterpiece; it’s an allegory of pre-First World War Europe, say one group of supporters; not at all, argue others, it’s a parody of the Bildungsroman tradition.

And yet despite the profusion of themes and ideas, this is a supremely *contained* book. ‘Insular’ you might almost say, were the etymology not so inappropriate; perhaps ‘hermetically sealed’ is better (and indeed that becomes an important phrase in the text). The world of this novel is a closed one, or so at least it appears – sealed off from reality, with its own rules, its own time, its own space. The extent to which the characters here can interact with the ‘real’ world is something they have to discover themselves through the book’s seven-hundred-plus pages.

The plot can be disposed of in a single statement: that a young engineer called Hans Castorp takes a three-week visit to see his cousin in a Swiss sanatorium and ends up staying for seven years. This is not a novel of events, but a novel of ideas. (The main idea was apparently, *I wonder if I can write seven hundred pages where literally nothing happens?*)

At first the set-up seems to anticipate the whole imprisoned-in-a-medical-facility trope that has subsequently become familiar – as Hans gets sucked into the routine, and gradually diagnosed with problems of his own that prevent his leaving, I was picking up on a vague *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* vibe, and I also found myself thinking of the Alpine clinic scenes from *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* or even the Timothy Cavendish bits of *Cloud Atlas*.

But the danger here is more subtle. The staff are friendly and accommodating (despite a sense that ‘above and behind [the Director] stood invisible forces’); you can leave for a trip into town, or even discharge yourself, whenever you wish. To paraphrase The Eagles, you can check out anytime you like, but you can never discount the possibility of a tubercular relapse forcing you to return with a collapsed lung. The patients claim they want to get out, but their attitude, in reality, is much more ambiguous. There’s a brilliant moment where Hans rails against the surroundings a little too much, and the director of the sanatorium calls his bluff with a quick examination:

> When he was done, he said, ‘You may leave.’
>
> Hans Castorp stammered, ‘You mean…but how can that be? Am I cured?’
>
> ‘Yes, you’re cured […]. As far as I’m concerned, you may leave.’
>
> ‘But, Director Behrens. You’re not really serious, are you?’

And suddenly we realise that Hans does not want to leave at all. He doesn’t want to go back to the responsibilities and expectations of his engineering job; here, in the sanatorium, he has freedom – freedom, and also a certain license in behaviour granted to the sick.

This is what lies behind the book’s treatment of time, and why the narrator can refer to the story as a *Zeitroman*, a ‘time-novel’. The inhabitants are in some sense degraded by being there, but they also cherish their privileged status, exempt from the world’s calendar. One character speaks of the sanatorium as an ‘isle of Circe’; it is a ‘life without time’, where the ‘true tense of all existence is the “inelastic present”’ (*ausdehnungslose Gegenwart*). In such an environment, there is a tendency for ideas, ideologies, dogma, to clash together unmediated – and also, conversely, for petty jealousies, flirtations and sexual desires to be unnaturally heightened.

Indeed this must be one of the most sexual novels ever written to involve so little actual sex. Everything is sublimated into various social conventions, so that Hans’s quasi-relationship with his mysterious fellow patient Clavdia Chauchat is initiated when he asks to borrow a pencil, and a climactic instance of sexual union is described, adorably, as a moment when ‘the use of informal pronouns achieved its full meaning’.

Psychoanalytic critics have had a field-day with the pencil-lending, not least because it reminds Hans of his homoerotic feelings for a childhood friend. But what makes the book truly Freudian in a less trivial sense is its close examination of the links between sex and death, *eros* and *thanatos*. One of my favourite chapters is the section called ‘Research’, where Hans stays up all night reading books about anatomy and biochemistry and feeling intimations of mortality mixed with a vague horniness. Life is imagined as ‘a secret, sensate stirring in the chaste chill of space’ – ‘matter blushing in reflex’ – while evolution is ‘the quintessence of sensuality and desire’, stirred into action ‘by reeking flesh’. Gazing out over the nighttime Alpine landscape, Hans sees only a cosmic, naked (female) human body:

> The night of its pubic region built a mystic triangle with the steaming pungent darkness of the armpits, just as the red epithelial mouth did with the eyes, or the red buds of the breast with the vertically elongated navel.

(This whole virtuoso section reminded me of university, spending all night poring over textbooks while trying to manage teenage hormones.)

So much for the metaphysical games, the grand narrative theories. I’d expected something of the sort just from the novel’s reputation. What I had not expected – and it came as a very pleasant surprise – was to find that *The Magic Mountain* is a comic novel. In fact the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that it’s this tone that lifts it, for me, into the first rank. Apart from anything else, it’s so important for the reader that they have some counterpoint to the grandiose theories so many of the characters want to expound upon, and Mann provides exactly that through the endearing character of Hans himself, our ‘thoroughly unpretentious’,

‘unheroic hero’. High-minded comments – and there are many – are rarely allowed to stand without an invitation for us to smile at them:

> ‘Did you know that the great Plotinus is recorded to have said that he was ashamed to have a body?’ Settembrini asked, and with such earnest expectation of an answer that Hans Castorp found himself forced to admit that this was the first he had heard of it.

Later, after a similarly earnest apophthegm from another character, we are allowed to eavesdrop on Hans's thought process: ‘Well, there’s a Delphic remark for you,’ he says to himself. ‘And if you purse your lips tight after delivering it, that will certainly intimidate everyone for a bit.’ In fact even when Hans is the one delivering the sententiousness, he can’t take himself very seriously:

> ‘There are so many different kinds of stupidity, and cleverness is one of the worst. Hello! Why, I think I’ve just coined a phrase, a *bon mot*. How do you like it?’

(‘Very much,’ comes the deadpan reply. ‘I cannot wait for your first collection of aphorisms.’) Without these ironic shifts in register, the book would still be fascinating but it would be monotone: with them, the effect is almost orchestral.

Such things are brought out especially well by John E Woods in his 1996 translation, an improvement on the old 1927 Lowe-Porter version in every way. Lowe-Porter, it has been said, succeeded in translating the novel into German, and having tried the first few pages of her translation I admit I found it almost unreadable. I had to order the Woods from the US, but it was worth it, despite the godawful cover and font design used by Vintage, and passing over also the Americanisms scattered through the text (*catercorner* being perhaps the most jarring; Woods also silently amends the patients’ temperatures from Celsius to Fahrenheit!).

Towards the end of the book, we finally suspect that Mann is pushing us beyond the ‘hyperarticulate’ arguments and towards real-world applications of these theories – to ‘leave logomachy behind’, as the narrator says at one point. The final couple of pages of this book move for the first time beyond Davos, to show us the Western Front – and we realise with a terrific jolt that it is 1914 and time has not stopped moving after all. Suddenly we appreciate the full importance of the novel’s investigation into how love and life can be made to emerge from death.

But now I am in danger of just rephrasing the book’s final lines in less felicitous language. Suffice to say that the whole mountainous project comes together in the climax, and it all ends, characteristically, in a question mark. Readers today may be better-placed than they wish to supply the answers.

Matt says

If you give this book a chance, and some long quiet hours with your full attention, you will be in the midst of incredible richness.

Wise, erudite, deeply engaged but titanically remote, grand, magisterial, ironic, cosmopolitan, comic in a sly gently mocking way.

They don't write 'em like this anymore. the title is onomatpoeic. The book itself is mountainous....some of the deepest philosophical prophecy on what the 20th Century was, and would become. The characters are allegorical, true, but the character sketches are limned with living detail which suggests more than just "smart guy= intellect" and "rowdy guy= passion" or whatever.

I hated this when I foolishly tried to dip into it as a sophmore in high school. You really gotta be a bit older, wiser, more patient and more ironically inquiring to get the full effect here.

This is one for the ages. Drink it slow and you're bound to find some of the more delcious textures this side of the big hoary giants which everyone already (supposedly) already knows by heart....

Lance Greenfield says

At the risk of being labelled a Philistine, I declare that this book is one of the most insufferably boring tomes that has ever made it onto my bedside table. I admit that I only struggled my way through the first 170 pages, but that was enough to convince me that I should not waste any more minutes of my precious life wading through any more of this drivel.

I know, I have also been chastised for criticising modern art in the same way. Tracey Emin's "Unmade Bed" and Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain" will just have to live in the pile of junk that I fail to understand.

I realise that I am in the minority, as most reviewers and professors of literature believe this to be a masterpiece, and probably the best book to come out of Germany in the twentieth century. Then again, Hans Christian Anderson's boy who recognised the nakedness of his Emperor as those around him admired the splendour and wonderful colours of their leader's new clothes, was also in the minority.

Perhaps, then, I shouldn't feel too bad about my opinion of this amazing piece of creative writing. It may also explain why English literature was the only `O' Level that I failed, despite having been a prolific reader all of my life. It just happened that the books that were chosen for my studies for those exams also bored me to tears.

Following some comments on this review, I have added these notes (27/9/09).

I have always been a prolific reader, sometimes having up to five books on the go simultaneously. I read most novels at the rate of 80-100 pages per day. With The Magic Mountain, I found that I had been reading a few pages at a time for well over a month, and had only waded through 170. There is so much description attached to the narrative that all that had happened by this stage was that the main character had arrived at the sanatorium, met his old friend and most of the patients. It had also come to light that he really wasn't there for his own medical benefit. He isn't really ill. Rather that he was there for a bit of a rest, and escape from the drudge of life in Hamburg with his guardian, and to be with his best mate. If the descriptions were interesting, and succeeded in conjuring up a wonderful picture in my mind, I wouldn't feel quite so bad about it.

Encouraged by some of the other reviews, I revisited the book, and read the passage describing Hans's adventure in the snow, as that was said to be the best part of the book. I remained unimpressed.

Perhaps I would have enjoyed this book more if my German language were up to the standard required to read the original, but I doubt it. I am not alone in my disillusionment. Several of my friends and family, some of them professors and schoolteachers, share my views, and I have yet to meet anyone who has survived to

reach the end. It is obvious that there are many who have read, re-read, and thoroughly enjoyed The Magic Mountain. I am happy for them and I rejoice that the world is full of variety, particularly of taste. Wouldn't life be dull without that?!

Michael Finocchiaro says

Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain: "An ordinary young man was on his way from his hometown Hamburg to Davos-Platz in the canton of Graubünden. It was the height of summer, and he planned to stay for three weeks."

Here we are introduced to Hans Castorp (one of my all-time favorite bumbling protagonists) with a load of telling adjectives. Mann insists that he is a young man (although he will act like an old man in many ways) and ordinary (and we will see that this was probably a fatal flaw in being too ordinary). I intentionally left the second phrase about the fact that it was summer time and yet he was heading to a place (Davos) that folks usually frequent in the wintertime. This adds a bit of mystery which is cleared up in the following chapter. The detail that Davoid was in a particular canton is typical of Mann's style of including sometimes useless details just to ensure that the photo he is painting is as realistic as possible. This book in general is one of the funniest that I have ever read (with Natsume Soseki's I am a Cat (???????)) and, if you haven't had the pleasure yet, you will not regret either. I need to reread this!

Luís C. says

Reading The Magic Mountain is learning to die. Those who live are dying a little, and on this mountain one lives very slowly. It tells the story of Hans Castorp, a young man without many qualities, who the author just does not want to call mediocre. He was a little exhausted by the end of his engineering course. Before assuming a high position in the firm of relatives, he goes to a sanitarium on the mountain to rest for fifteen days, under the pretext of visiting the tubercular cousin. Doctors have discovered that it has the disease in it, and it stays internal as well.
Then a transformation takes place in him, gradually, as he goes to live in this place where it seems that time does not exist. In the brief retrospection of his previous life, it is interesting to note the parallel between his biography and that of Thomas Mann, who was also fatherless (distant in Brazil) and, although his mother, indifferent to his relatives. Speaking in the biographical parallel, we will already notice the incredible chapter on the beach walk - this in the mountain, in a place that was covered with snow, even in the summer - as if the mother of the author, brazilian, of Paraty, left in that atavistic feeling of the sea.
Get to know the guests of the clinic, which seems to have nothing extraordinary. They are in fact ordinary people who have taken on an incurable disease at the time, and live with it in the best possible way. The better this coexistence, the more normal they seem, the more they gain psychological depth, the more we know how much ordinary human people carry within themselves.
How could it not be, there is religious discussion - in the person of two of the most interesting, most complex characters, a writer and a Jesuit, two revelers at first, who grow and dominate the scene. It is the city of God and the city of men in struggle, both charged with errors, trying to justify and impose themselves. The outcome of this dispute will be the climax of the novel. No winners, but with loss and disappointment. However, life goes on.
Hans Castorp knows or thinks about knowing love. He does not realize that those who live in their conditions have no right to love. As if to say that those who live in the conditions in which we all live life have no right to love. It is on the eve of World War I, when the world will change. Hans Castorp suddenly matures - that is, we say that time did not exist there, but it is so slowly that the transformations happen in people who,

when they see, are already others. As if it were all of a sudden.
Nothing could be suddenly in an 800-page book. Nothing could be more surprising in a book of so many pages, in which nothing happens, and that leaves us trapped in that world full of humanity, bleeding unnoticed, dying - and gazes with death - while we go making us richer inwardly. It is not just Hans Castorp that grows throughout the novel. It's not just the characters - not greatness like us - that grow throughout the novel. US too.

Jason says

I am in a good mood today!

Which should be readily apparent, because if I were not, this book would probably have received only two stars from me—not as a reflection of its literary quality per se, but rather as a reflection of my own reaction to it.

Here is what happened yesterday: I finished this book and tossed it forcefully onto the coffee table next to me in what may be seen as a transparent attempt to attract attention to myself (which is something I tend to do often) and sure enough someone picked it up, read its title, and asked me what it was about, providing me with a wonderful opportunity to roll my eyes dramatically (another move with which I am somewhat familiar) and ask, “Do you *reallllly* want to know?” I explained that it was about this aimless young gentleman who decides to kill some time before starting a new job by visiting his cousin in a tuberculosis sanatorium high up in the Swiss Alps, but who begins to exhibit symptoms of ill health himself and whose visit becomes lengthened by increasing bouts of time until his initial 3-week stay has been stretched out to a full seven years, and that this book was about his experiences in that sanatorium over the course of those seven years. By this point, my enquirer’s eyes were wide with interest and I was astounded. In explaining the premise of a book that has actually kind of bored me, have I inadvertently extolled its virtues? Is this book perhaps more interesting than I am giving it credit for? The short answer to that is, NO! This exchange with my enquirer has merely revealed what I think is the essence of *The Magic Mountain*—it is a place that appears interesting, a place a reader might wish to visit on account of that appearance, but once there it is a place that traps the reader for seven long years and berates him with its endless philosophical musings and its explorations of moral ideologies, and only upon being finally discharged does the reader discover his eyes are bleeding from all the fork stabbing.

Now I have gone ahead and made it all sound so horrible. The truth is, this book is very well written. It has a lot to say about the cyclical nature of time and humanity’s fruitless attempts to anchor itself against its continuous passing. It speaks of the mysteries of biology and brilliantly relates the starting point of life to an unexplained (and unstoppable) illness. It presents death as merely an extension of life as opposed to its diametric opposite and eerily makes the reader feel comfortable with it. And it exemplifies the importance of spiritual health to providing fulfillment for a life that is by most accounts cursory and meaningless. But at the end of the day, it is a book for the brain, and as much as that may be adequate for some, I need a book with a heart and soul. I need a book with characters I can relate to and empathize with, and unfortunately this book had none of that. So, to the extent that I “enjoyed” my visit to this sanatorium, it is not a place to which I would consider returning any time soon.

Fernando says

Thomas Mann es considerado uno de los más gloriosos escritores alemanes y uno de los mejores a los que

uno puede acercarse en la literatura. Sus obras son ya clásicas y de un prestigio irreprochables. Ha escrito novelas realmente extensas (esta es una de ellas), pero también cuentos y ensayos.
Mi acercamiento a él fue leyendo primero su exquisita nouvelle "La muerte en Venecia" de corte netamente romántico y un cuento maravilloso llamado "Mario y el mago", pero quería realmente descubrir por qué esta novela, "La montaña mágica" ha tenido y sigue teniendo un brillo y una admiración tan apabullante en los lectores de todas las épocas desde su publicación en 1924.
Realmente no me defraudó y reafirmó mi admiración y respeto hacia Mann, ganador del Premio Nobel de Literatura en 1929, ya que yo también sucumbí a sus encantos literarios y a su poderosa narrativa.
Seguramente continuaré con "Doktor Faustus" en breve.
"La montaña mágica" es una obra colosal, descomunal y el ascenso del lector posee el mismo tenor que el de esa montaña enclavada en la localidad de Davos, pero sin tornarse difícil o pesado, más allá de que por momentos la densidad y especialmente la extensión de los capítulos generan que el éste necesite tomarse todo el tiempo posible para recorrer sus páginas.
Es una de las novelas más largas que he leído. Consta de 1.050 páginas y tiene muchísima tela para cortar a partir de lo vasto de los temas tratados en ella. Es como un gran compendio de artes, humanidades, filosofía e historia por nombrar algunas temáticas pero se centra en dos cuestiones fundamentales: la enfermedad y la muerte.
En torno a estas dos cuestiones se desarrolla en su totalidad el argumento de la novela, porque tienen una implicancia directa en Hans Castorp, su protagonista y de todos los que comparten sus vidas en el famoso sanatorio de Berghof. Todos van allí a curarse de sus afecciones que redundan usualmente en problemas respiratorios, de tuberculosis, de pulmones a punto de estallar y otras enfermedades similares. La majestuosa montaña donde está enclavado propio sanatorio Berghof, con su clima y si entorno le aportan las condiciones a la salud de los pacientes: *"Aquel aire era capaz de curar todas la enfermedades latentes en el cuerpo del hombre, aunque comenzaba por hacerlas brotar, provocaba una especia de revolución orgánica que desemboca en una eufórica explosión de la enfermedad, por así decirlo."*
De alguna manera, el ambiente que los cobija para recuperarlos, les aporta complicaciones que logran hacer que el paciente tenga que quedarse allí por meses.
La acción transcurre desde 1907 hasta 1914. Increíblemente, Hans Castorp, que llega a ese sanatorio construido a casi dos mil metros de altitud para visitar a su primo Joachim Ziemssen para pasar tres agradables semanas, terminará viviendo siete años ya como un paciente más.
Junto con Joachim conoceremos a los más variados personajes, todos ellos extremadamente particulares y queribles. Rápidamente el lector se encariñará con algunos, como el inefable humanista italiano Lodovico Settembrini, que tendrá una preponderante influencia en Hans, a punto tal que se transformará en un padre para él. Con una apasionada defensa de los valores, el humanismo, la tolerancia y la democracia será un guía y un referente en Hans Castorp.
También irán apareciendo otros no menos interesantes como la risueña señorita Herminie Kleefeld, madame Karoline Stöhr con su "ignorancia intelectual" a cuestas, el ruso Antón Karlovich Ferge, la señorita Engelhart, el señor jocoso señor Albin, la enfermera en jefe Adriática von Mylendonk, el trastornado Ferdinand Wehsal y la institutriz Robinson también. En fin, la lista de personajes es tan larga como la novela.
Existen tres personajes más que también son clave en todo este asunto. En primer lugar, Clavdia Chauchat quien poco a poco irá transformándose en el objetivo amoroso de Hans que en un principio es platónico hasta que se vuelve real y tangible. Junto con Clavdia nos encontraremos con otro personaje fundamental llamado Mynheer Peeperkorn y quien Mann le concede tres capítulos completos, dado que de un modo distinto a Settembrini logrará hacer efecto en Hans Castorp porque además, quedan incluidos en un triángulo amoroso más que complejo.
Otro de ellos es Leo Naptha, un intelectual judío, que procede de una orden jesuita, especializado en la Edad Media que será la antítesis del señor Settembrini. Entre estos dos se generará una pugna eterna, que incluye larguísimas discusiones y entreveros de alto vuelo intelectual y filosófico que desnudan sus posiciones completamente antagónicas hasta estallar de la peor forma al final de la novela.
Todas estas batallas intelectuales demostrarán el poderío filosófico de Thomas Mann. Maneja ambos planteamientos de ideales con una precisión y una brillantez impecable, porque logra penetrar en la psiquis

de cada personaje y los controla por completo, tal vez no al nivel de un Dostoievski, pero sí con un aplomo incuestionable. Son muchos los temas que este autor plantea en el libro y en todos ellos lo hace sin fisuras. Realmente destacable.
Volviendo a la cuestión de la enfermedad y la muerte, el cual es harto desarrollado en el libro, creo que para que ellos tengan efecto fue necesario incluir algo que tal vez algunos lectores pasa por alto: leyendo las distintas situaciones noto que la gran mayoría de los enfermos del sanatorio son presa de una hipocondría galopante y lo que es peor, eso es sustentado y alimentado por los mismos doctores, Behrens que es el médico principal y su ayudante, el doctor Krokovski. Entre los dos, de alguna manera se dan maña para mantener a los pacientes por más tiempo del que tienen estipulado.
Tal vez yo veo algo que otros no, pero me ha dado una fuerte impresión esto de cómo manejan la enfermedad de sus pacientes, así también como el tratamiento del asunto de la muerte y cómo afrontarla. He tomado nota de muchas frases y reflexiones acerca de la muerte y a muchos lo incluí en los avances de lectura, dado que Mann aborda a la muerte desde todos los puntos de vista posibles.
En un determinado punto llegamos a algunos factores que los pacientes que se autodenominan "Los de arriba" sostienen contra el mundo de "los que viven abajo". En primer lugar el tratamiento que se le da al tiempo. Mann se toma gran parte de un capítulo para explicar con qué diferencia transcurre el tiempo en el sanatorio en contraposición con el tiempo supuestamente "normal" de los habitantes Davos, incluso afirmando que todo sucede de una manera distinta. A punto tal que uno lo termina creyendo.
En segundo lugar la cuestión de la enfermedad. Se llega a un momento en que ninguno de los pacientes puede afirmar que se podrá ir del sanatorio, puesto que su enfermedad es tomada como un modo de vida. El mundo "de abajo" goza de buena salud pero ellos, nunca la podrán recobrar.
A todo esto se suma la influencia de los doctores Behrens y Krokovski a quienes Settembrini apoda como Minos y Radamante, que son los jueces de los muertos en el Reino de las Sombras. Simbolismos como estos aparecerán continuamente en distintos capítulos de la novela.
Una novela tan extensa da posibilidades a incluir todo tipo de situaciones completamente disímiles y esta no es la excepción. Desde la carnavalización bajtiniana que nos regala en una auténtica fiesta de disfraces que se realiza en el salón principal del sanatorio hasta el capítulo denominado "Noche de Walpurgis", al mejor estilo del Fausto de Goethe en donde Hans será llevado a conocer el costado más excéntrico de sus compañeros del sanatorio.
Por otro lado y como comentara previamente, el alto vuelo poético de Settembrini es algo que engalana y enriquece a la historia. Es un placer leer algunas de las cosas que dice porque nos hace pensar, reflexionar y soñar. Algo parecido sucede con Mynheer Peeperkorn, aunque su sabiduría posee otros componentes distintos a los de Settembrini y aún así terminan haciendo tremenda mella en Hans, hasta llegar a eclipsar a Settembrini.
Creo que hay varios momentos clave en esta novela. Para mí son la llegada de Hans Castorp al sanatorio, luego el descubrimiento de su enfermedad, sus peripecias con Madame Chauchat, la aparición de Leo Naptha que cambiará la percepción de Hans sobre la vida, la ida de Joachim para cumplir su sueño de enrolarse en el ejército, la introducción de la novela de Mynheer Peeperkorn y el final, que involucra a varios personajes como Joachim, Settembrini, Naptha, Peeperkorn y obviamente, al mismo Hans.
"La montaña mágica" es el fiel retrato de una época casi mágica también: la de principios del siglo XX cuando el mundo, distraído y absorto en sus propios placeres recibiría una feroz bofetada a partir del asesinato del archiduque de Prusia, Franz Ferdinand que desencadenaría la Primera Guerra Mundial.
Ya nada iba a ser lo mismo para Hans y para el mundo. Lo bello, lo mágico, lo fascinante desaparecerá completamente y otra será la realidad de Europa.
Para lograr este efecto final, Mann primeramente nos sumerge en este sanatorio tan particular, poblado de personajes tan maravillosos e inolvidables logrando que el lector escale esta montaña sin dificultad alguna y créanme que no es nada fácil lograr que en una novela tan extensa el interés decaiga.
Solo los grandes maestros como Thomas Mann pueden cumplir estas expectativas de una manera tan excepcional.
Por último, debo reconocer que en cierta forma, me sorprendió gratamente el final dado que corta casi de un plumazo toda una realidad de siete años de forma abrupta para arrojarnos a un ambiente mucho peor y trágico y además, he intentado tratar de recordar si existe otra novela de la manera que termina esta: Mann

termina el párrafo final del libro con una pregunta.
De la misma manera culmino yo mi reseña: ¿tú lector me ayudas a recordar otro libro que haya terminado así?

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Socratic Dialogues

"The Magic Mountain" is a sequel to “Death in Venice”.

Just as Plato’s Socratic Dialogues were the foundation of the novella, they guide the narrative of "TMM", a "Bildungsroman" that is concerned with the education of the protagonist, Hans Castorp, during the seven year period from ages 23 to 30.

Castorp doesn’t so much learn or grow by his physical actions. The character development is intellectual, a development which is equally apparent in both the author and the reader.

Because it's structured as a Socratic Dialogue, there is no guarantee that all readers will take the same message from the novel. Mann presents us with two, if not multiple, pedagogical or metaphysical points of view. While we might be able to infer Mann’s preference, it's not always clear, and it's left to us to draw our own conclusions.

This reinforces the reputation of the novel as one of the great works of literature, not only because its subject matter is the rival ideas upon which civilization is founded, but because it lets us be the judge.

As with Socrates, the goal is to make us think methodically about the issues, rather than to encourage us to approach them with inflexible preconceptions or to depart captive to rigid dogma.

In Which the Hero is Heightened and Enhanced

"TMM" is set in a sanatorium on a Swiss mountain, where patients suffering from tuberculosis go to receive treatment and a cure.

To do so, they must leave the flatlands of Germany and elsewhere and reside "up here" in a rarefied, pure, idealized atmosphere and world. They undergo a "change of air" and learn to breathe afresh.

They are pulled out of day-to-day timetables, responsibilities, cares and conflicts. On the mountain, they can see things for what they really are.

Not that it is all heavenly and harmonious: there is no less rivalry and conflict or, for that matter, gossip up here.

At times the novel betrays an almost comic fantasy tone associated with fables, morality plays (Goethe described his "Faust" as a "very serious jest") and fairy tales (not to mention "The Master and Margarita").

Olympian Rivalries

The title of the novel derives from Nietzsche’s "The Birth of Tragedy":

"Now it is as if the Olympian magic mountain had opened before us and revealed its roots to us. The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians."

For Nietzsche, the Olympian gods helped mankind battle "that overwhelming dismay in the face of the titanic powers of nature."

Because the gods lived the lives of mortals, their example gave the Greeks strength, resolve and moral guidance.

However, unlike Christianity, there were multiple gods, and thus scope for differences of perspective or emphasis, in particular, the difference that most interested Nietzsche, the difference between the Apollonian and the Dionysian (a preoccupation of Mann in both "Death in Venice" and "TMM").

Dialectics, Dialogues and Diabolics

In both Nietzsche and Mann, there is a polarity, a dialectic, a double-sidedness.

The dialectic is ideological. However, Mann presents it to us in the form of a dialogue or duel between two characters. It is personalized, as it is with Dostoyevsky.

While the dialogue is often essayistic in total length, it is not just fodder for a dry "novel of ideas", it is a dramatic embodiment and reflection of a personal and philosophical tension between two vital people. It comes to us in short, sharp, punchy grabs. It’s like going 15 rounds with two intellectually-gifted prize fighters.

If you’re not interested in the rivalry of ideas, this novel might not be for you. If you are, it could be a wonderful reading and thinking experience.

Still, Mann’s refusal to always resolve the tensions between the ideas might not be to your liking.

Some see it as disingenuous, witness this assessment by one of my favourite critics, Alfred Kazin, who once met Mann in Hollywood:

"Mann, the creative peer and contemporary of great experimental novelists like Proust and Joyce, is easier to read but actually harder to grasp through the external conventionality of his form and the heavy load of Germanic philosophic apparatus.

"He is so continuously double-sided, so ‘safe’ in manner and so subversive within, so much the pompous German pedant in his literary manner and in his substance so representative of his aesthetic, nihilist, decadent generation, that it is almost impossible to do justice to the range and elusiveness of his mind.

"Either one makes too much of only one side of him or one imitates his own tiresome Olympian irony, the suavely self-protective use to which he put his doubleness by effectively concealing his real opinions."

Kazin damns Mann with faint praise. In contrast, the Marxist Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs (who unknown to him was the model for the character, Leo Naphta) declared Mann the "last great bourgeois writer", writing:

"Thomas Mann is a realist whose respect, indeed reverence, for reality is of rare distinction."

Whether or not the subversiveness, the elusiveness, the concealment to which Kazin adverts is real, it might have contributed fuel to recent attempts to go beyond Mann's writing and venture into his personal life, in particular for the purposes of reassessing his legacy on the basis of perceived homoeroticism.

This trend is prurient, but in an age of media voyeurism seems to be inevitable. Regrettably, it distracts attention from the writing and the subject matter, which can't be any more fundamental to the concerns of any civilization, and was regarded as sufficiently meritorious to justify the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Taking Stock of Time and Space

Hans Castorp is an inexperienced and inexpert engineer, a simpleton, a naïf, a neophyte.

When he arrives at the Berghof, he takes stock of both time and space. He takes his bearings, he is measured, he measures himself, so that he can determine exactly where he is and what he's about (as he will later use a thermometer to "measure" his temperature and his illness). However, gradually, he loses his sense of time and place, and as if he were on Olympus or in Heaven or Eternity, his experience becomes timeless, almost dreamlike.

Apart from the dialogues, nothing much happens to Castorp. He doesn't cover a lot of space. The narrative doesn't depend on the passage of time, so much as the transmission of ideas. Before we know it, Mann has quietly covered seven years in 700 pages.

In a way, Mann plucks Castorp out of his world, out of his time and makes him listen to pedagogues, perhaps because, like most of us, he is not yet able to think particularly deeply about these issues himself.

Not only is "TMM" a great work of literature, but it is about how a great work of literature works: it takes us on a journey from innocence and ignorance to experience and wisdom. It's we who experience character development. If we are lucky, we can put our lessons into practice in our lives.

Settembrini versus Naphta

The principal dialogues are between Settembrini (an heroic individualist) and Naphta (a divine collectivist).

Settembrini is an eloquent Italian, "a dark man of graceful carriage, with curling black moustaches." He's a humanist, an individualist, a rationalist who upholds the beauty and dignity of man:

"Our Western heritage is reason – reason, analysis, action, progress."

Leo Naphta is small, thin, clean-shaven, ugly, hook-nosed, bespectacled, well-dressed. He is a Jew by birth, but a Jesuit by inclination and training. Paradoxically, he is a collectivist who supports both the Catholic Church and Socialism:

"Like many gifted people of his race, Naphta was both natural aristocrat and natural revolutionary; a socialist, yet possessed by the dream of shining in the proudest, finest, most exclusive and conventional sphere of life.

"[In effect, he had made] a declaration of affection for the Roman Church, as a power at once spiritual and aristocratic (in other words anti-material), at once superior and inimical to worldly things."

Perhaps, what Naphta is seeking spiritually is both Heaven in Eternity and Heaven on Earth. Both require a respect for authority, the authority of God (and the Church) and the authority of the State, whether religious or secular.

Sometimes, to establish and protect the authority of a State, it is necessary to use force. In other words, sometimes, Naphta must advocate Revolution and Terror.

Life and Death

The contrast between the two worldviews is revealed in their perspectives on Death.

Settembrini sees Death as part and parcel of Life, as the flipside of Life. If it is differentiated from Life, it takes on a negative quality:

"Severed from life, it becomes a spectre, a distortion, and worse. For death, as an independent power, is a lustful power, whose vicious attraction is strong indeed; to feel drawn to it, to feel sympathy with it, is without any doubt at all the most ghastly aberration to which the spirit of man is prone."

Naphta sees the nobility of man solely in terms of the Spirit, not the organic or animal aspect of the human. Death and disease are in dialectical opposition to the life of the Spirit, yet they govern and influence Life at the level of the non-spiritual human, the animal, the organism that is capable of disease, of illness, of dissolution, of suffering:

"Disease was very human indeed. For to be man was to be ailing. Man was essentially ailing, his state of unhealthiness was what made him man. There were those who wanted to make him 'healthy,' to make him 'go back to nature,' when, the truth was, he never had been 'natural.'

"All the propaganda carried on to-day by the prophets of nature, the experiments in regeneration, the uncooked food, fresh-air cures, sun-bathing, and so on, the whole Rousseauian paraphernalia, had as its goal nothing but the dehumanization, the animalizing of man.

"They talked of 'humanity,' of nobility — but it was the spirit alone that distinguished man, as a creature largely divorced from nature, largely opposed to her in feeling, from all other forms of organic life.

"In man’s spirit, then, resided his true nobility and his merit—in his state of disease, as it were; in a word, the more ailing he was, by so much was he the more man."

Man is less than Spirit.

Point and Counter-Point

Castorp listens to all this and remarks:

"You say we did not come up here to get wiser, but healthier, and that is true. But all this confusion must be reconciled; and if you don’t think so, why then you are dividing the world up into two hostile camps, which, I may tell you, is a grievous error, most reprehensible."

Just as if he is listening to two Greek gods, he regards the two pedagogues as aristocratic. However, in the chapter entitled "Snow", he sees the light in a dream-like state on an Olympian mountain:

"Man is the lord of counterpositions, they can be only through him, and thus he is more aristocratic than they. More so than death, too aristocratic for death—that is the freedom of his mind. More aristocratic than

life, too aristocratic for life, and that is the piety in his heart.

"There is both rhyme and reason in what I say, I have made a dream poem of humanity. I will cling to it. I will be good. I will let death have no mastery over my thoughts...Death is a great power...Reason stands simple before him, for reason is only virtue, while death is release, immensity, abandon, desire.

"Desire, says my dream. Lust, not love. Death and love—no, I cannot make a poem of them, they don't go together. Love stands opposed to death. It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death.

"Only love, not reason, gives sweet thoughts. And from love and sweetness alone can form come: form and civilization, friendly, enlightened, beautiful human intercourse...For the sake of goodness and love, man shall let death have no sovereignty over his thoughts. - And with this - I awake."

The Awakening of Love

So, after point and counterpoint, after the working of the dialectic, finally we have an awakening of Eros.

"Adventures of the flesh and in the spirit...granted thee to know in the spirit what in the flesh thou scarcely couldst have done. Moments there were...when there came a dream of Love...may it be that Love one day shall mount?"

As in "Death in Venice", Castorp awakens to the light of Desire, Lust and Love. Only, while Aschenbach died in peacetime, Castorp survives in wartime.

Still, in neither case does Mann allow us to witness his protagonist mount his Love. Perhaps, after all, it's legitimate for Kazin and others to wonder why Mann denies his protagonists the fulfilment of Love?

This doesn't necessarily mean that we readers are also denied. We must find and consummate our own Love while we fend off Death.

VERSE:

Homo Humanus

Herr Settembrini,
Homo humanus,
Man of acumen,
Judgement and learning,

Carping pedagogue,
Chronic windbag and
Oppositionist,
Proudly discerning,

Wielding influence
On those gullible,
Confiding, childlike,

Still full of yearning

With his garrulous
Gift of florid gab,
Lively harangue and
Animus burning.

Naphta's Catholic Communism
[After and in the Words of Thomas Mann]

I believe not in original sin,
But in an ideal state
Of man as the child of God,
A paradise without government
And without force,
In which there is neither
Lordship nor service,
Neither law nor penalty,
Nor sin nor relation
After the flesh.
No distinction of classes,
No work, no property.
Nothing but equality,
Brotherhood and
Moral perfectitude.

Clavdia Chauchat, Hot Cat
[After and in the Words of Thomas Mann]

Whenever he thought of
Her, Clavdia Chauchat,
Kirghiz-eyed and tainted,
Grinning like a hot cat,
He was back in his boat,
Fantasising about
A time crepuscular,
The place a Holstein lake,
Scanning with dazzled eyes,
From the glassy daylight
Above the western shore
To the mist and moonbeams
That wrapped eastern heavens
Round likely lovers, in
Tight embrace, hoping for
Desire evermore.

Sleeping between TB Sheets

Once I received
A circular
Warning me that
I'd possibly
Caught some disease
Tubercular.

Mynheer Peeperkorn

Who is this man of Java,
Regal and plutocratic,
Who exclaims in foreign Dutch,
That’s both guttural and thick?

Mynheer Pieter Peeperkorn,
A coffee-king retired,
Larded with money and
Expensively attired.

Indisposed by an aching
Spleen that’s quite inflamed,
He saves a weighty summons for
His small Malayan valet.

His face is sparsely whiskered
And his skull’s white-haired,
Though he is otherwise
Colourless and blurred.

His personality matches
The pallid gaze of eyes,
Each small and pale, beneath
Stern deep-wrinkled brows.

He’s an alcoholic who
Loves to sniff one of those
Fine burgundies with his
Large and fleshy nose,

But better still to sip
The glass in his tight grip
Through his oddly thick
And much distorted lips.

Nevertheless, you know, this
Netherlander from abroad
Is somewhat lean and tall,
His chest robust and broad.

A wealthy business magnate

With a mighty money magnet,
Whose silent push and pull
Towards women gravitates.

Now, it’s Madame Chauchat,
The hero of our tale believes,
With whom the Dutchman’s
Quietly thick as thieves.

For he noticed in dismay
And much perplexity
That their arrival was
Concurrent, if not coincident.

Still, unperturbed, Peeperkorn
Sought a place inside an inn
To take unto himself
A glass of Holland’s gin.

"The Art of Seduction
(For Men and Women Alike)"

Literally translated from the French,
Hopefully preserving its elegance,
"The Art of Seduction", read by a Mensch,
Could teach him a few of the elements
Of sensual passion learned from a wench,
Meant, too, for women of preeminence
Who desire in beaus no arrogance,
Just a man of the world's beneficence,
An aura of debonair resonance
And a suitably furnished residence.

The Egyptian Princess

Only the English guests who chewed
On their cucumber sandwiches
Complained with ascetic attitude
That speaking foreign languages
Was just plebeian and too crude.

Like the extroverted paramour,
Princess of Lesbia and of Egypt,
Who’d exchanged three months’ cure
For a carton of sphinx cigarettes
And a brand new coffee machine.

For she eschewed skirts and blouses
For severely short-cropped hair,

A sack coat and well-pressed trousers,
While her multi-beringed fingers
Were yellow-stained with nicotine.

Except her sickly Moorish eunuch,
She scorned the world of hetero men,
And their rampant egomania,
To pant hot and heavy in the bed of
Frau Landauer, a Jewess from Romania.

Nazi Party Girl
[Apologies to Elvis Costello]

You’re nothing but a nasty party girl
Looking for new party members
That you can check up upon
And add to your collection.

You know the two little Hitlers?
The ones that you’ve been pursuing?
It's said, all's not gold that glitters,
Could fools gold be your undoing?

You think you’re not a guilty party, girl,
But it's obvious your mouth is made up
And some of us know your mind is undone,
The true colours of your flag have unfurled.

You're in a knitting circle, on your
Hobbyhorse, seeking Lebensraum.
If you don’t have the space for us,
Why would we have the time for you?

You’re nothing but a Nazi Party Girl.
You believe you’ve got it made, your pockets
Are full and you’re rolling deep in clover,
But what'll you do when the Party’s over?

Carnaval
[After and in the Words of Thomas Mann]

Out on the streets and
In the market place,
A mighty magic-mad,
Mountain carnival
With harlequins

And columbines,
Shaking rattles
And tin trumpets.
Comic opera and costumes,
Masquerades and bedlam.
Confetti on the ground
And maskers on foot.
Decorated sleighs
And skirmishes.
Champagne and burgundy,
Sweet and spiritous.

The Kiss
[After and in the Words of Thomas Mann]

He beheld the image
Of a life in flower,
Of flesh-borne loveliness,
As she opened her arms,
So unspeakably sweet.
First leaning from above,
She inclined unto him,
Then bent down overhead,
While he became conscious
Of organic fragrance
And the mild pulsation
Of the heart in her blouse.
Something warm and tender
Clasped him around the neck.
Melting with desire,
He sensed her upper arms,
He felt her fine-grained skin,
Heavenly cool to touch.
Then upon his shy lips,
The moist cling of her kiss.

T.D. Whittle says

I am not going to review this book in any serious or analytical way. It's been reviewed by many clever readers already, over several generations and sprawling continents. It hardly needs my support. I am just going to offer my entirely subjective comments about what a great and thoroughly enjoyable read it is.

The plot should be familiar to Western readers by now, as this classic is a century old and much discussed in literary circles. However, in case you missed out, here's the synopsis from Goodreads:

> In this dizzyingly rich novel of ideas, Mann uses a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, a community devoted exclusively to sickness, as a microcosm for Europe, which in the years before 1914 was already exhibiting the first symptoms of its own terminal irrationality. The Magic Mountain is a monumental work of erudition and irony, sexual tension, and intellectual ferment, a book that pulses with life in the midst of death.

It took me ages to finish because I kept setting it aside to think about it and to write on colourful sticky notes, which now make my book twice as thick as it already was. I did not want to rush through my reading, so I allowed *The Magic Mountain* its own space in my life, reading it only when I could give it my full attention for several hours at a stretch, to the exclusion of everything else. In honour of the "cure"and to get a feel for Hans's setting, I often spent this time on our front balcony overlooking our garden and the gentle hills that make up our town. Alas, there were no great snows or high peaks, but it has its own kind of curative peace, nonetheless.

It was necessary for me to stop reading from time to time, in order to ponder important questions, such as whether I am Team Naphta or Team Settembrini. Just kidding! There is only one right choice, of course, and I was always on side with the passionate Humanist, despite his dogmatism and (at times) overbearing manner. While I felt sad for Naphta's final solution, it was rather inevitable, and I have to admit to enormous relief that our fictional Italian ideologue survived the ordeal.

This has to be the best Modern novel I've read. I love that Mann took on the entire Western world and all of our human concerns -- personal, social, existential, political, natural, theological, and artistic -- as the basis for his book. I love that he chose one rather impressionable but not overly impressive young man to be our un-heroic hero. Having said that, I must add that I believe that I thought more highly of Hans than Hans thought of himself, or perhaps than Mann thought of him. I did not find Hans to be such an ordinary young man at all, at least not by today's standards. Perhaps young European men were typically much cleverer and more personally restrained during that era, than our average young man today? I doubt it, though.

It's fair to say that Hans is easily swayed by stronger personalities than his own. Because of this proclivity, he remains vulnerable and vacillating in his own philosophies as one who stands for nothing and so might fall for anything. Hans is not strong enough in himself to withstand peer pressure, even when he is appalled by the undertakings of those peers. Against his own better judgment, he participates in activities that are, by his own account, distasteful and sometimes dangerous and illegal (i.e. a degrading seance and an insane duel).

And yet, I admired his sense of friendship and the way that he reflected on things, trying hard to make right choices. Mann really turns the coming-of-age tale on its head, though, as in the end, one expects Hans to be wiser, stronger, and more decisive in himself. In fact, what happens is that news of the war crashes through the protective walls of the Berghof, awakening Hans from his seven-year "enchantment" and propelling him off to battle, along with thousands of other young men.

That Hans would join the war, whatever his thoughts and feelings on it (which we never know), was inevitable, too. As Settembrini says, explaining the necessity of the duel to Hans, "Whoever is unable to offer his person, his arm, his blood, in service of the ideal, is unworthy of it; however intellectualized, it is the duty of a man to remain a man" (p.700). So, in one of the finest and most subtle ironic twists I've read, ever, Hans's "salvation" from suspended animation at the Berghof comes by way, not of his healing, or his education by learned minds, or his experience in love and death and illness (all of which make up his life-but-not-life existence) but by an external inescapable catastrophe. Once again, Hans does not act upon life but reacts to it. It chooses him, as it chooses all his able-bodied peers. But of course, what we readers suspect is that it is most likely not life, but death which has chosen Hans, which has swept him off his mountain top and into its arms. We never know for sure.

This novel is subtle and yet also straightforward, with a plot that is simple to follow and yet also complex and multi-layered. It's hilarious and serious and sometimes goes on and on about topics that make you question your devotion as a reader (i.e. pages and pages on the history and practice of Freemasonry). I marvel at how any writer could write characters like these, who are each representing a particular worldview and high-flung ideals, and yet who come across as real people rather than allegorical stand-ins for human beings. When we take our leave of each of the august personages who haunt the Berghof, we feel the loss of a relationship that mattered to us. That was my experience, anyway, as I said goodbye to Joachim, to Peeperkorn, to Claudia, and then, finally, to Settembrini and Hans himself.

It's fascinating and a bit sad to realise that many of the big topics the Europeans were grappling with a hundred years ago are still relevant today, and not only the existential ones: most especially, humanism versus radicalism. Clearly, we haven't resolved this yet, and it seems only to be getting worse if we judge by recent events.

I will re-read *The Magic Mountain* because I feel there is much to learn from it and that a second reading is not only desirable but also necessary to even begin to grasp it all. Also, I will no doubt be missing my friends at the Berghof by then.

Fionnuala says

Reviewed in December, 2013

I love when the themes of two books I happen to be reading overlap. And when those themes also reflect aspects of my own life experience, I feel a wonderful convergence, an exchange of awareness at an almost physical level as if the the space between the pages where the authors ideas are laid out and my reading of their pages has become porous and a continual flow happens between all three, an exchange not unlike the one that happens in the deepest tissues of the respiratory system when we breathe in and out.

In perhaps the most obvious parallel between the two books I've been reading and my own life, the hero of The Magic Mountain and the Narrator of Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu, both suffer from respiration related diseases. Proust’s Narrator, an asthmatic like myself, spends portions of his life *à l’horizontale*, wrapped in the tissued softness of a curtained room, lest any noxious air disturb the normal rhythm of his breathing. Quite early in his stay at the Berghof sanitorium, Hans Castorp discovers that he may have a *soft spot* on his lung and this discovery removes him from the normal rhythms of life to live his own horizontal version of ‘lost time’ in the hermetic world of The Magic Mountain.

The exchanges that take place between the two books might also be compared to those produced by the vibrating membrane of the acoustic chamber of a gramophone - since music plays such a big part in both works even as it does in my own life.
Certain pieces of music become significant in both books, and are used by their authors as a kind of recurring theme. Schubert’s *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore*, a song about the symbolic linden tree, emerges as a connector between Hans Castorp’s feelings and ideas, and as a significant object in the working out of his life and fate. Mann also uses other pieces of music as metaphors for his hero’s existence: just as Radomes in the opera Aida sings *Tu - in questa tomba* when Aida comes to him in his underground prison, Castorp is ‘buried’ in the tomb of the Berghof sanatorium, waiting to be joined by his love. But like Don José in Bizet’s Carmen, Castorp’s Russian ‘Carmen’ is drawn away from him towards a more ‘robust’ toreador. However, Castorp, although *ein Sorgenkind des Lebens*, one of life’s problem children, is never at a complete loss and, without any operatic drama, he subtly vanquishes the toreador.

Music is therefore a powerful trigger for change in Castorp's life but, as is the case in Proust, it is only one of a series of cathartic mechanisms: a simple nosebleed propels Castorp back in time to a significant moment in his childhood; the experience of being lost in a snow storm on the mountain awakens new levels of consciousness within him; dreams play a role too, as do images, in particular the x-ray image of his own body which provides a eureka moment in terms of his self discovery, his 'Bildung'.

Hans follows many avenues of study in his quest to understand himself, one of them being the lectures given every week in the sanatorium by Dr Krokowski on the subject of love as a force conducive to illness. Among the arcane topics covered by the doctor is The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights. This work was a favourite of Proust, and love as a force conducive to illness is itself an underlying theme in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.
Dr Krokowkski also talks about plants in connection with love, in particular the morel mushroom. Proust chooses the name Morel for one of his characters, a character himself associated with the destructive power of love.
The study of plants becomes a preoccupation for Hans in his personal program for self cultivation. He is particularly interested in the family of flowers called ranunculacae, *a compound flower, as I recall, an especially charming plant, bisexual...* This is yet another similarity with Proust's work since the metaphor of bisexual and self-fertilising plants is an important element in the *Recherche*.

There are other parallels too, 'love' meaning 'being loved', references to duels, the personification of death, *death wearing a starched Spanish ruff..whereas life always wore a little, normal, modern collar.*
Proust and Mann place themselves in the text from time to time, acknowledging the reader reading, *At the beginning of May (for May arrived while we were talking about snowdrops) ...*, the 'we' being the author and the reader.
They both have very sharp observational skills as if they had taken a quick snapshot of a glance, a way of sitting or standing, a way of walking, and they can stretch description almost to the point of caricature as in the case of Dr Behrens or Mme Verdurin. The authors also make frequent diversions within their narratives but seem to finish up exactly where they planned in the end, with a discussion of 'Time'.

Thomas Mann has some very interesting things to say about the element of 'time' in narration, the very cornerstone of Proust's work.
Narrative, however, has two kinds of time: first, its own real time, which like musical time defines its movement and presentation; and second, the time of its contents, which has a perspective quality that can vary widely, from a story in which the narrative's imaginary time is almost, or indeed totally coincident with its musical time, to one in which it stretches out over light-years.
He can stretch a moment out of all proportion to real time: *Their eyes met..* Claudia's napkin slips towards the floor - Hans Castorp half rises as if to pick it up it - but she retrieves it, scowls in annoyance at her own silly panic and *turns away with a smile.* That brief incident takes half a page to tell but at other times, Mann can condense years into a single sentence: *There is not that much time left in any case, it's rushing by slapdash as it is, or if that's too noisy a way of putting it, it's whisking past hurry-scurry.*
Because the weather on the Magic Mountain is unpredictible with snow in summer and sunshine in winter, *robbing the year of its seasons*, Hans Castorp marks the passage of time not by calendars or watches but simply by his visits to the barber or the frequency with which he clips his nails - and since death is a major theme, as it is also in Proust, Mann reminds the reader more than once that, *In the end it is only the physical that remains, the nails and the hair.*
Hans Castorp lives outside of time while on the Magic Mountain just as Proust's Narrator moves outside of time, *en dehors du temps* in his search for *le Temps Perdu*.

Carmo says

“Adeus, Hans Castorp, filho ingénuo e traquinas da vida! A tua história chegou ao fim.”

Vou guardar **Hans Castorp** na minha memória literária com muito carinho. Vou guardá-lo ao lado de outras personagens marcantes que me são tão caras como velhos amigos de carne e osso.

Apesar do tamanho pouco prático, andei com este tijolo atrás por todo o lado (sim, olharam-me de lado com ar incrédulo!), e num livro que fala sobre o Tempo; o Tempo que se dilui, o Tempo que passa por nós sem darmos por ele, o Tempo que nos leva inevitavelmente ao Fim e à Morte, engoli oitocentas páginas que parecem não ter história. É a rotina milimetricamente planeada, a vida num Tempo sem relógios, em contraponto com o mundo da planície onde a vida decorre impaciente.
Ali em cima, naquele sanatório onde se reúne a elite internacional e estão presentes todas as contradições Europeias, **Castorp** desfruta uma liberdade mágica e primordial, uma elevação espiritual que o afasta cada vez mais da realidade. Poucos são os que ainda se interessam pelo evoluir do mundo.
E é nesse Tempo suspenso, nessa vida estática, que também eu acabei enredada numa leitura que fruiu sem pressa e sem expectativas. Ler, pelo simples prazer de apreciar uma obra que nos envolve.

Muito se discute neste livro; filosofia, politica, religião, um caleidoscópio de referências que farão as delicias de qualquer intelectual. Deixo essa parte para quem o faça melhor do que eu. Aborreci-me e bocejei de tédio com algumas das discussões e encantei-me com outras. Se as primeiras não foram suficientes para minorar a obra, as segundas foram decisivas para que **A Montanha Mágica** vá ficar na memória como a obra prodigiosa que é.