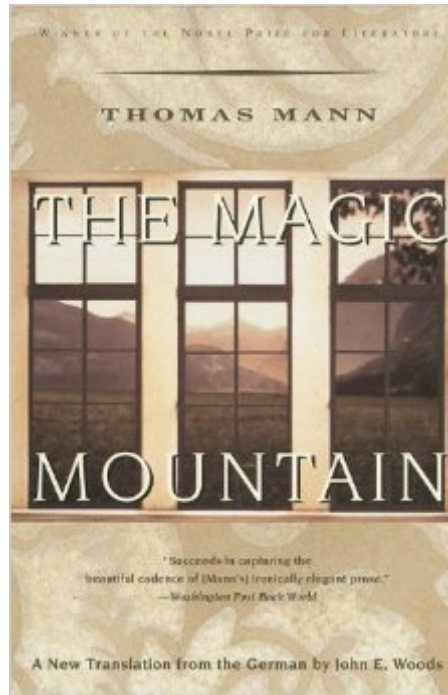


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The Magic Mountain



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this absolute masterwork, Mann tells us the story and the education -intellectual, emotional and spiritual- of young Hans Castorp. Recently graduated from his engineering studies at the university, and just about to begin working for a shipyard, Castorp travels to the Swiss Alps at Davos. He is supposed to spend there three weeks visiting his cousin Joachim Ziemssen, who is receiving treatment against tuberculosis in a high-mountain hospital. After the three original weeks, Castorp discovers he is "sick", and so he stays there seven years, the span of this magnificent "bildungsroman" or novel of apprenticeship and inner growth. It is never really clear if Castorp does get sick or if he gets trapped by the magical place. Anyway, the isolated hospital is the perfect place for Mann to create this microcosmos of Europe and of life, a few years before that world came crumbling down forever in the suicidal WWI. In the Berghoff hospital, Castorp meets several people which will be, either through affinity or antagonism, his mentors. But first we have to mention the beautiful Russian Clawdia Chauchat, the one with the "steppenwolf-like eyes", a little older than Castorp, and with whom he falls in love -from a distance. Castorp will only have one chance of

passionate love with her, before she temporarily leaves the hospital. The rest of their love will be only Platonic. But Castorp meets other interesting and influential people. The most important one is Settembrini, an extremely sympathetic and attractive character. He is an Italian rationalist and liberal, who talks about progress, democracy, freedom, and the bright future of humankind, once it is set free from oppression and superstition.

Nominally, the Magic Mountain is the story of Hans Castorp, a young German man who has just finished school and is about to start on a career in shipbuilding. First, he goes for three weeks to a Swiss sanatorium to visit his cousin, partly for a vacation before he starts his job and partly to convince his cousin, a soldier, that he should rejoin the real world rather than stay in the sanatorium. Castorp gets a check-up from the doctor, learns that he is ill and remains for seven years. Mann originally started this book as a novella parody of sanatoriums and medicine in the early 20th Century, when doctors were first saying that disease was created by organisms and were enamored with the power of the newly discovered x-rays. However, Mann stopped the novella at the beginning of World War I, and came back to it after the war, realizing that he had a lot to say and that this story might be a good vehicle through which to say it. After all, the sanatorium's clientele were the new rich and the old upper class of all the different countries of Europe who began the war. The doctors acted both as the leaders who led them through the insanity and the scientists who made the mechanized, horrible war possible. And Hans Castorp was the age of the soldiers, following the leaders, the aristocracy, the scientists and the intellectuals into battle. You can read all this into the book, if you wish. The doctors are firm in their belief that they are helping their patients, but are not above shenanigans like "proving" with little evidence that patients should stay year-round, rather than leave for the summer in order to line their wallets. Herr Settembrini and later Herr Nafta are the intellectuals filling Castorp with ideas that seem sometimes benign and sometimes diabolical.

To a great many Europeans, World War I must have seemed like Armageddon, a cataclysmic event that would completely and irrevocably transform the continent. Covering the time leading up to the war, "The Magic Mountain" personifies this transformation in its main character, a young man named Hans Castorp, whose life becomes immeasurably enriched after he abandons the ease and complacency of his childhood and opens his mind to new vistas of knowledge. It is not just the coming-of-age novel of a man, but of the world. Hans is a moderately intelligent engineering student from Hamburg who grew up in an environment of comfort and leisure with not many thoughts about anything other than what concerns him directly. One summer, he goes to the Swiss Alps for three

weeks to visit his cousin Joachim Ziemssen, who is convalescing at a sanatorium called Berghof for people with respiratory ailments. While there, Hans takes ill as well and is forced to stay longer to recuperate, a stay which stretches itself out to seven years. At the Berghof, Hans makes the acquaintance of several other patients of various intellectual and social levels. Most prominent is an Italian named Settembrini, a freelance writer, cynic, and progressivist who dreams of a world republic and believes literature is the ultimate unification of politics and humanism. His current work in focus is the contribution of a literature section to an encyclopedia on human suffering, the intent of which is to catalog all its causes and try to eliminate them. Settembrini has a nemesis in another off-site patient named Leo Naphta, a Jew-turned-Jesuit who advocates a sort of Christian communism, using St. Augustine's City of God as a model.

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