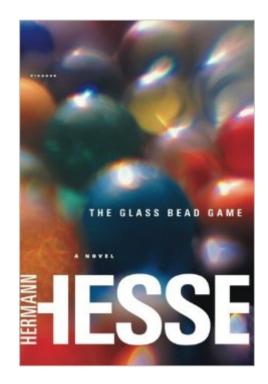# The Glass Bead Game: (Magister Ludi) A Novel

Synopsis

The final novel of Hermann Hesse, for which he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946, The Glass Bead Game is a fascinating tale of the complexity of modern life as well as a classic of modern literatureSet in the 23rd century, The Glass Bead Game is the story of Joseph Knecht, who has been raised in Castalia, the remote place his society has provided for the intellectual elite to grow and flourish. Since childhood, Knecht has been consumed with mastering the Glass Bead Game, which requires a synthesis of aesthetics and scientific arts, such as mathematics, music, logic, and philosophy, which he achieves in adulthood, becoming a Magister Ludi (Master of the Game).

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First: From a prose point of view, I found the first 50 to 100 pages of this translation to be very difficult going. More astute readers would probably pick up on the subtle humor (Ziolkowski mentions it in his introduction) but I found it dry and tough going. I mention this because I've run into a number of people who say, "I really wanted to like it, but I couldn't even make it past the first 50 pages!" If you find this to be the case, just grin and bear it: Know that after the first 100 pages the book picks up considerably in pace.I won't comment on the book's philosophical corollaries or references, since others better versed in such things have already done so, better than I could.Rather, one of the aspects of the book that I found particularly compelling is the Game itself and the ideas behind it.The Glass Bead Game, as Hesse describes it, is a meditation, seemingly both competitive and collaborative, on different fields of knowledge, where the point is to take

concepts from otherwise disparate disciplines and associate them in creative, profound ways -- finding a pattern shared rhythmically by a piece of Baroque music and spatially by ancient Chinese architecture, say.An observation I've made over time is that of all the people I know, those that I would say are possessed by genius all share a common trait, the ability, to use the cliche, to "Think Outside the Box." To realize new, previously unseen associations between things is a quality of a great mind, and here Hesse acknowledges the value of this talent, elevating it even to an artform (though I suppose the Castalian players in the novel would firmly call it "post-art".

When in my 30s, after having read several of Hesse's novels, I attempted to read The Glass Bead Game. I couldn't get past the first 50 pages. I was unprepared to accept Hesse as a humourist and satirist. Now, approaching 60 and having learned not to take life or Hesse so seriously, I thoroughly enjoyed the book and consider it Hesse's greatest. A mature Hesse, who understood life's ironies, wrote The Glass Bead Game for a mature audience, who could laugh at life's ambiguities.The Glass Bead Game is comprised of a novel, 13 poems, and 3 short stories. I think the reader would enjoy the novel more by reading the book in reverse order, starting with the three short stories: The Rainmaker, The Father Confessor, and The Indian Life. The underlying theme of the stories is that the forfeiture of self, or self-interest, leads to redemption or an awakening.The poems superbly unite the novel's cultural, spiritual, and mental perspectives. Hesse's best known poem "Stages" is included. Here's a four line excerpt:"If we accept a home of our making,Familiar habit makes for indolence.We must prepare for parting and leave-takingOr else remain the slaves of permanence."The novel is set in the future and located in the sequestered province of Castalia. This is a world of academia that consists of theory, analysis, interpretation, and debate - all elements of "the game". Absent from Castalia are action, creativity, originality, and experiment.The protaganist, Joesph Knecht is raised in this culture. He also lived at a couple of subcultures outside Castalia. At Bamboo Grove, under Elder Brother's tutelage he learned to meditate, play I-Ching, read Chuang Tzu, and learn Chinese studies.

This book is to Hesse as "The Brothers Karamazov" is to Dostoevsky. Throughout it are the same ideas that have been put forth in earlier works, often with similar characters, but with a fuller and more articulate expression than before. Like Dostoevsky, he finally figured out how to say *everything* he had to say in one volume. So it comes as no surprise that those only concerned with certain aspects (particularly the more spiritual ones) of Hesse's writing would find it disjointed and tedious. If you want to read more of Hesse's stories about tormented and/or confused souls looking

for meaning in the world, this isn't your book - go reread Damien and Steppenwolf. This book has that esoteric search, but its main character, Joseph Knecht, pursues this search as a curiousity and not out of some desperate need. I'm sure that's why several people seem to find him lacking compared to other Hesse protagonists - they're expecting a conflict in him that isn't there.As I read these other reviews I find it fascinating that everyone seems to come away from the book with such different things that they were struck with. In my case, this was the socio-political commentary. Through this book, Hesse comments on our own time and on a fictional opposite to it, thoroughly exposing the flaws in both. I remember most distinctly Knecht's letter of resignation from Magister Ludi, where he tells his colleagues that although they understand the importance of their society's existence, they made the fatal mistake of not educating the people who support them. That they cannot take the existence of what they have for granted, for the day would eventually come when all they built would be dismantled.

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