



The dinner

By Herman Koch

First published in 2009

Genre & subject

Suspense fiction

Synopsis

An internationally bestselling phenomenon: the darkly suspenseful, highly controversial tale of two families struggling to make the hardest decision of their lives - all over the course of one meal.

It's a summer's evening in Amsterdam, and two couples meet at a fashionable restaurant for dinner. Between mouthfuls of food and over the polite scrapings of cutlery, the conversation remains a gentle hum of polite discourse - the banality of work, the triviality of the holidays. But behind the empty words, terrible things need to be said, and with every forced smile and every new course, the knives are being sharpened.

Each couple has a fifteen-year-old son. The two boys are united by their accountability for a single horrific act; an act that has triggered a police investigation and shattered the comfortable, insulated worlds of their families. As the dinner reaches its culinary climax, the conversation finally touches on their children. As civility and friendship disintegrate, each couple show just how far they are prepared to go to protect those they love.

Tautly written, incredibly gripping, and told by an unforgettable narrator, *The Dinner* promises to be the topic of countless dinner party debates. Skewering everything from parenting values to pretentious menus to political convictions, this novel reveals the dark side of genteel society and asks what each of us would do in the face of unimaginable tragedy.

Author biography

Herman Koch is a Dutch writer and actor.

Herman Koch was born on 5 September 1953 in Arnhem, Netherlands. His family moved to Amsterdam when he was two years old. He went to the Montessori Lyceum Amsterdam from which he was expelled.

Koch is the author of short stories, novels, and columns. His debut was *De voorbijganger* (1985; English: *The Passerby*) with short stories. His first novel was *Red ons, Maria Montanelli* (1989; English: *Save Us, Maria Montanelli*). His sixth novel was *Het diner* (2009; English: *The Dinner*), which was translated into 21 languages including English, had sold over one million copies throughout Europe, and won the 2009 NS Audience Award (Dutch: *NS Publieksprijs*).

Koch is a comedy actor. He contributed to the comedy shows *Borát* (1984–1989) for radio and *Jiskefet* (1990–2005) for television.

Discussion starters

- In the beginning of the novel we meet Paul and his wife Claire as they walk to the restaurant. Paul talks about his idea of happiness and quotes from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. What do you think he means when he says that 'unhappiness can't stand silence'?
- We learn that Serge and Babette adopted a child, Beau, from Burkina Faso. What do you think the underlying motivation was?
- Paul's violent inclinations start to appear when he describes the holiday with his brother in France, where he imagines killing the Dutch people, mentioning violent American films such as *Deliverance* and *Straw Dogs*. Why do you think Paul feels this way?
- When Paul finds out about what his son has done and confronts him in his bedroom, he remembers a scene when Michel was eight years old. How did this incident influence Paul's reaction now?
- How and to what extent do you think Michel is influenced by his father's rage?
- Serge Lohman is willing to sacrifice his entire political career in light of the crime that his son has committed. What do you think his real motive is? Why does his wife so vehemently oppose his decision?
- The author has set the novel over a meal in a classy restaurant. What do you think he is trying to illustrate by this choice?
- The novel reveals moral ambiguities regarding the nature of evil, loyalty, love and honesty. What shapes these ambiguities?
- Do you think people can be born with a propensity for violence and evil, or are they more likely to be shaped by early life, family and circumstances?
- If you were in Paul and Claire's position, what would you do?

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