

Discussion Questions *The Dinner* (Herman Koch)

The Characters

- 1) As the story progressed and you learned about Paul's dark side, how did your opinion of him change? To what extent did you identify with him at the beginning or end of the book?
- 2) What is your opinion of Paul and Serge at the beginning of the book? Does your opinion change over the course of the book? If so, why does it change?
- 3) How do you think the author intended for the reader to feel about the characters?
- 4) The author says half of readers react with disgust to Paul's character and half react by saying, "Finally, a character who does what we are all thinking!" Which one are you?
- 5) Who is the biggest "villain" in this book?
- 6) Which parents would you rather have – Babette and Serge (Rick's parents) or Claire and Paul (Michel's parents)? Why? What do you think it would be like to have a prominent politician for a father?

More about Paul

- 7) In chapter 3, Paul describes his son: "I looked at him; I looked into the clear eyes beneath the black cap, the honest eyes that, I'd always told myself, formed a not-insignificant part of our happiness." Can the Lohman family ever be happy again?
- 8) In Chapter 24, Paul mentions that he believes that the incident will eventually blow over. The public and the police will become occupied with other events, and after six months to a year go by that they will "be able to go on living as happy family". Do you think this is really possible?
- 9) In chapter 30, we see the details of Paul's approach to history and humanity. As you watched him lose his teaching job, did you perceive him as someone who is ill or simply selfish?
- 10) 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 and broke a window with a soccer ball. How did this incident influence Paul's reaction now?
- 11) Did Paul's violent incidents really happen? If so, why does it appear there were no repercussions? To what extent does this relate to why he thinks his son should not experience repercussions for what he has done?

The Writing

- 12) How do you think the story would have unfolded had Claire, Michel's mother, been the narrator? What if Serge had been the narrator?
- 13) What does the choice of an unreliable narrator (Paul) contribute to the story?
- 14) The author says that a book is already finished when he comes up with the first two sentences. He believes these two sentences carry the book's DNA, and "As long as every

sentence that comes afterward contains that same DNA, everything is fine.” What do the first two sentences say about the “DNA” of this book, or the narrator, Paul? “We were going out to dinner. I won’t say which restaurant, because next time it might be full of people who’ve come to see whether we’re there.”

- 15) Why doesn’t Paul share many of the details about places or people’s names? What do we learn about Paul from this habit?
- 16) What do you think the author’s point was in having the parents’ meeting take place in such a fancy restaurant? How did this setting add to the story?

The Technology

- 17) How important is the right to privacy matter when someone else’s rights have been violated? If you found out a crime was committed by violating someone’s privacy and snooping through his/her phone, SHOULD you report it? Why or why not?
- 18) What are the norms in your social group about posting videos on YouTube or other social media websites? What are the limits about when it’s not OK to post a video?
- 19) Paul discovered that Rick and Michel had recorded a couple of other incidents and kept the videos. What is the purpose of them doing that? Why would they keep videos that would get them in trouble if other people found them?

Ethics and Values

- 20) How important is trust in the story? Paul tries at one point to convince Michel that he hasn’t been going through his texts and voicemails. Does Michel deserve to be trusted, knowing what we know? Does Paul deserve to be trusted?
- 21) Ultimately, who was responsible for the homeless woman’s death? What does this book suggest about the responsibilities of society in general? Of the upper class in general? Of what people like Michel and Rick should have done in this situation?
- 22) Under what circumstances (if any) is not reporting someone’s involvement in a murder (or other serious crime) ok?
- 23) At one point Paul suggests that nobody in Holland should be living on the streets. Is he suggesting that the homeless woman bears some fault in this incident? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
- 24) What does the book have to say about the value we place on human life and whose life is more important? Does the book suggest that we have some kind of ranking system? Do you agree with that? Why or why not?
- 25) If you were ever in trouble like Rick and Michel, how would you want your parents to act? What do you think your parents would do?
- 26) Did any of you talk to your parents about this book? If so, what were their reactions?