

The Dinner

ROZ BELLAMY

Over an uncomfortable meal in an expensive restaurant, two couples must discuss their teenager sons' shocking actions.



Author Herman Koch.

Raising a child involves many responsibilities and sacrifices, both physical and emotional. *The Dinner* reminds us that as well as providing love and support, many parents would do simply anything for their children. Dutch author Herman Koch explores just how far a parent might be willing to go to protect their children, and how their ethics and values can be compromised or radically overturned when their children need help.

Originally published in Holland in 2009, Koch's deeply satirical novel is about to be released in English for the first time. The cynical narration of protagonist Paul Lohman is a delight, and makes what is essentially one long scene – all action is centred around a single restaurant meal – a captivating read. We are treated to Paul's elaborate descriptions of people and the food itself. He cringes at the pretentious waiters who push wine consumption so they can sell more bottles and one who points his finger too close to the food. We are not spared any details, from the portion sizes, with sparse

plates dotted with a few salad leaves, to the waiters' excessive information on each free-range or home-grown ingredient. Koch skilfully satirizes the wealthy upper class throughout the novel, especially once we meet Paul's brother, Serge, a popular politician, and observe the way that strangers idolise him.

Readers learn early on that Paul and Serge's children have done something terrible but have a long wait ahead to find out the details. It is not until the second half of the novel that we are told about all the events that have taken place and begin to understand where Paul and Serge, and their wives Claire and Babette, each stand on what has happened. At this stage, the wonderful dry humour that is so prominent in the first half of the book begins to fade and is replaced by a much more sinister tone.

Koch's non-linear story telling is very effective; at times, it is only when you are presented with new information that you realise that parts of the story were missing. The novel builds suspense and intensity as it delves further back in time, and therefore doesn't require as much action in the present. I found that the best part of reading *The Dinner* was in knowing that more clues and pieces of the past were coming but still finding myself surprised and having to re-evaluate the characters each time new material was presented.

At no stage does Koch force a moral or lesson onto the reader. The individual characters' contexts, motivations and decisions are left for the reader to evaluate – it is up to us who we choose to judge.

Rating: 4 stars out of 5

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By Herman Koch

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Roz Bellamy is a Melbourne-based writer, reviewer and editor, with a passion for the arts and travel.