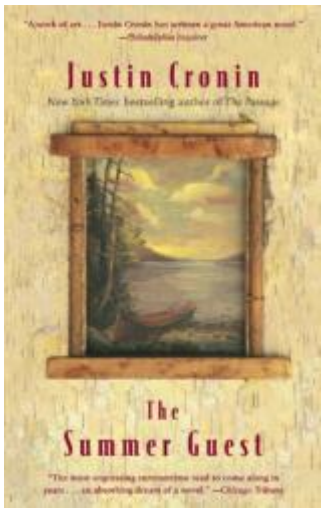
The Summer Guest

by Justin Cronin



About the Book

What if Anton Chekhov, undisputed master of the short story, actually wrote a novel --- and the manuscript still existed? This tantalizing possibility drives THE SUMMER GUEST a spellbinding narrative that draws together, across two centuries, the lives of three women through the discovery of a diary.

During the long, hot summer of 1888, an extraordinary friendship blossoms between Anton Chekhov and Zinaida Lintvaryova, a young doctor. Recently blinded by illness, Zinaida has retreated to her family's estate in the lush countryside of Eastern Ukraine, where she is keeping a diary to record her memories of her earlier life. But when the Chekhov family arrives to spend the summer at a *dacha* on the estate, and she meets the middle son Anton Pavlovich, her quiet existence is transformed by the connection they share. What begins as a journal kept simply to pass the time becomes an intimate, introspective narrative of Zinaida's singular relationship with this doctor and writer of growing fame.

More than a century later, in 2014, the unexpected discovery of this diary represents Katya Kendall's last chance to save her struggling London publishing house. Zinaida's description of a gifted young man still coming to terms with his talent offers profound insight into a literary legend, but it also raises a tantalizing question: Did Chekhov, known only as a short story writer and playwright, write a novel over the course of their friendship that has since disappeared? The answer could change history, and finding it proves an irresistible challenge for Ana Harding, the translator Katya hires. Increasingly drawn into Zinaida and Chekhov's world, Ana is consumed by her desire to find the "lost" book. As she delves deeper into the moving account of two lives changed by a meeting on a warm May night, she discovers that the manuscript is not the only mystery contained within the diary's pages.

Inspired by the real friendship between Chekhov and the Lintvaryov family, landowners in the Ukraine, THE SUMMER GUEST is a masterful and utterly compelling literary novel that breathes life into a vanished world, while exploring the transformative power of art and the complexity of love and friendship.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the fishing camp as a character in itself --- a character that provides both comfort and treachery to its visitors. Does the camp evolve throughout the novel? What makes it so meaningful to so many?

2. The milestones of life propel the novel's storyline. In what way do such turning points --- marriage, mortality --- unfold for the primary characters? What wisdom does one generation pass on to the next in **The Summer Guest**

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3. What is the effect of the novel's prologue? What were your first impressions of Joe as he experienced homecoming after World War II, and how do these images carry you through the rest of the novel? Is the camp a refuge from the mainstream world, of a stark reflection of it?

4. In many ways, Harry and Joe lived parallel lives as widowers, parents, and eventually as men too physically frail to care for themselves. Compare and contrast their attitudes toward life. Did their lives intersect through fate alone?

5. How do the novel's contemporary scenes compare with those from previous generations? Do Jordan and Kate have a simpler life than Joe and Amy had?

6. What locales are monuments to your own past? Describe some of the places that have special significance to you, and what it's like to return to them.

7. Which storytelling point of view was most effective for you in **The Summer Guest**? Did gender lines affect the novel's various voices? Are all the characters telling essentially the same story?

8. In what ways does war form a thread throughout the novel? What are your recollections or perceptions of the Vietnam conflict, and how might you have responded to the draft if Joe Junior had been your son? What does the absence of the draft mean to Jordan's generation?

9. Several of the novel's characters teeter on the boundaries between life and death. What seems to keep some of the characters tethered to life, while others cannot endure it? What is significant about the novel's closing images of Bill and Joe, in light of their previous experience as survivors?

10. Discuss Joe Junior's journey into Manhattan, a scene that occurs early on. Does he feel fulfilled at that point in his life? Would you have been able to sell such a legacy to Harry?

11. The lawyers on retreat appear to clash with their surroundings, uncomfortable with the natural world and inept at navigating its dangers. Do they in any way reflect the darker side of Joe's home life? Or is his life a utopia?

12. Who are the novel's most honorable characters? Where is the most genuine love found in **The Summer Guest**?

13. What gifts does Harry give to Jordan? What intangible gifts does Harry give to Hal?

14. What motivates Lucy to return to her old haunt and become "Alice" again at the end of the novel? What did that chapter in her young life mean to her, and what must it have been like for her to revisit it (this time in the role of daughter, under May's wing)?

15. Are any of the novel's primary characters spared from the pain of tragedy and loss? What coping strategies do they use?

16. The novel ends with a glimpse of the future as Kate gives birth to a daughter. What do you predict the child will discover about love and life? How do the characters pay tribute to their parents?

17. Justin Cronin's previous book, **Mary and O'Neil**, also addresses the issues of coming of age, parenthood, and making peace with illness. In what ways do these concepts play out differently in **The Summer Guest**?

Author Bio

Justin Cronin is the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE PASSAGE, MARY AND O'NEIL (which won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Stephen Crane Prize) and THE SUMMER GUEST. Other honors for his writing include a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Whiting Writer’s Award. He lives with his family in Houston, Texas.

Critical Praise

"Justin Cronin succeeds, touchingly and tenderly, in portraying life itself as a triumph of hope over experience."--- *The Boston Globe*"The bedrock realities of family and place remain constant in spite of the vicissitudes of emotions and events, and the voices of these Mainers have a lovely calm that evokes the timeless summer place. ... the novel's recognition of human frailty and nobility rings true, as does its faithful

recreation of a place outside the storms of history."--- *Publishers Weekly*"Luminous."--- *Booklist*

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