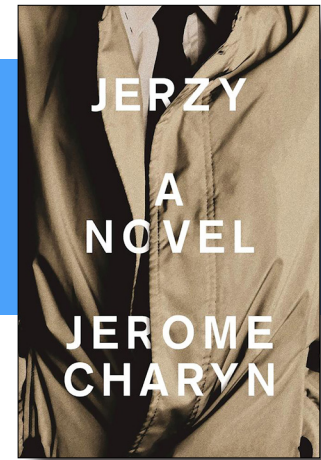




Jerzy

A novel by Jerome Charyn

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“A moving attempt to trace the connections between Kosinski’s wartime struggles and postwar fictions.” —*New Yorker*

“*Jerzy* is a novel with a light touch that’s still capable of lifting heavy subjects. Charyn knows what he wants to do and knows how to do it. His prose has some of the rapid-fire but carefully controlled energy of Thomas Pynchon’s early novella *The Crying of Lot 49*. Part of Charyn’s point is to make the real and the imagined sound equally implausible. . . . Charyn’s other point seems much broader: to show that all forms of power are pretty much alike, or at least connected—Hollywood, Capitol Hill, Kensington Palace, the Kremlin. Because Kosinski is a figure who proves (if we still need to learn it) that the craziness of American life may have more in common with the craziness of Russia and Europe than we like to think.” —*New York Times Book Review*

INTRODUCTION

Jerzy Kosinski was a great enigma of post–World War II literature. When he exploded onto the American literary scene in 1965 with his best-selling novel *The Painted Bird*, he was revered as a Holocaust survivor and refugee from the world hidden behind the Soviet Iron Curtain. He won major literary awards, befriended actor Peter Sellers, and was a guest on talk shows and at the Oscars. But soon the façade began to crack, and behind the public persona emerged a ruthless social climber, sexual libertine, and pathological liar who may have plagiarized his greatest works.

Jerome Charyn lends his unmistakable style to this most American story of personal disintegration, told through the voices of multiple narrators—a homicidal actor, a dominatrix, and Joseph Stalin’s daughter—who each provide insights into the shifting facets of Kosinski’s personality. The story unfolds like a Russian nesting doll, eventually revealing the lost child beneath layers of trauma, while touching on the nature of authenticity, the atrocities of WWII, and the fickleness of celebrity.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I’d met Jerzy Kosinski twice, and I was fascinated by both his mystery and his meanness. I was working as an editor for *Fiction* magazine and wanted to publish a section from a new novel of his that had not yet appeared in print. But when I asked Kosinski if we could publish the excerpt, he fell into a rage and began to quiz me, as if he were a member of his own secret police and I were his private prisoner. Nothing I said could quiet him down, and I escaped as fast as I could.

The next time we met he was much more subdued. He pretended not to recollect our first encounter at all. He was funny and quite generous. At first I wondered if he had an evil twin, and then I realized he was a consummate actor, always on call, like some strange Houdini, authentic and inauthentic in the very same moment.

This novel is an attempt to unravel Kosinski, to find the sympathy and pathos deeply hidden in the fabric of a “secret agent” who lived by lies and lies alone. As I reread Kosinski’s novels, they almost seemed like the work of a writer on his own secret maneuvers, masks within a mask. And I wondered if I could unvocer the man—or the boy—crouching behind the ultimate mask, if one could ever find it. As Kosinski says in the novel, “I lie even while I speak the truth.”





CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. The many narrators in the book often contradict each other in their observations of Jerzy Kosinski, and Kosinski himself proves to be a habitual liar. Can there ever be such a thing as a reliable narrator? Does the symphony of unreliable narrators in the novel work to reveal the truth in the character of Kosinski, or to further complicate and obscure it?
2. Many of the characters are fictional versions of real-life people, including actor Peter Sellers, Stalin's daughter, and Kosinski himself. How much did you know about these celebrities before reading the novel? What extra insights can readers familiar with the real lives of these characters uncover?
3. How does Jerome Charyn create sympathy for Kosinski? Does his character become more or less likeable over the course of the story? How do the different perspectives of the narrators affect your overall impression of Kosinski?
4. Several of the narrators first encounter the character of Kosinski through his writing and remark on the unsettling and unforgettable nature of *The Painted Bird*. Is it necessary to have read Kosinski's novels to appreciate the portrait Charyn draws of him in *Jerzy*? Does exploring the fictionalized life of the author make you want to read his books or avoid them?
5. Anya insists that *The Painted Bird* only needed ghostwriters to aid in the narration of the story, to "locate the thread that Jurek had lost in the writing." Is all narration a kind of embroidery that is akin to telling lies? Is the questionable authenticity of Kosinski's book more important than its story of an orphaned boy? What about the authenticity of Charyn's novel?
6. Charyn crafts *Jerzy* out of "beautiful, spare prose" (*Publishers Weekly*), whereas Kosinski famously relied on ghostwriters to set his dark stories to music in English. What role does music play in the writing of a sentence, and how important is lyrical language in telling a story?
7. Kosinski declares that he "cannot function without disguises and masks" and tells Ian, "the mask will save your life." What are the many masks—literal and figurative—that Kosinski wears throughout the novel? Are all of them necessary for his survival or for maintaining his precarious celebrity?
8. The relationship between Kosinski, dominatrix Anya, and the disturbingly young Gabriela is gradually revealed through several different perspectives. Who wields true control in the love triangle? Similarly, are the other narrators—Ian, Lana, and Martha—victims of Kosinski's sadomasochism and manipulation or willing accomplices?
9. "We're all painted birds, freaks with our own eccentric coloring, and wherever we fly, the unpainted birds peck at us and drag us to the ground," Gabriela observes. However, she tells Anya that she would still prefer to keep her color rather than disguise herself. What are the differences that make each character a "painted bird," attacked by the rest of society? To what extent do they "disguise their feathers" or conform?
10. The final section of the novel reveals Kosinski's childhood, which shaped him into the monster of a man shown in earlier chapters. Can certain events rip right through us and scar us for the rest of our lives? Does Kosinski's childhood experience justify his life of lies?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerome Charyn is the author of more than fifty works of fiction and nonfiction, including *A Loaded Gun: Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century*, *Bitter Bronx: Thirteen Stories*, *I Am Abraham: A Novel of Lincoln and the Civil War*, and *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson: A Novel*. Among other honors, he has been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, was named a Commander of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture, and is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Visit his website at www.jeromecharyn.com.

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