

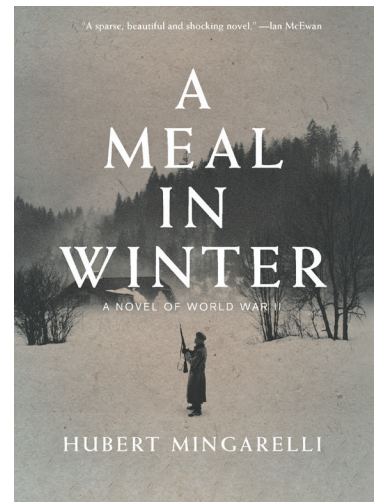
# The New Press Reading Group Guide

## *A Meal in Winter*

*A Novel of World War II*

by Hubert Mingarelli

translated from the French by Sam Taylor



### QUESTIONS

1. *A Meal in Winter* opens with three German soldiers being awoken to stand attention in the brutal cold, so cold that it comes as “a shock . . . as if it entered through your eyes . . . like icy water pouring through two holes.” Why do you think Mingarelli opens with this description of the setting? (pp. 4–5)
2. Emmerich is the slowest to wake up. From this first interaction between the German soldiers, what do you expect of their relationships with one another for the rest of the novel?
3. Mingarelli begins building toward the moral dilemma very quickly, hinting at it even in the first chapter. It ends with the narrator foreshadowing, “Because we didn’t talk about it, we felt the pressure building up inside.” What is the moral dilemma the Germans must face? Is there more than one? (p. 6)
4. The soldiers decide to tell their base commander they would prefer to hunt for Jews rather than shoot them. They even skip breakfast in order to leave before the first shootings of the day commence. Do you sympathize with the soldiers’ request, given the two horrible choices they face? Why or why not? (pp. 8–9)
5. Emmerich worries about his son often, and Bauer and the narrator seem to have a tacit agreement to give him advice although they are not parents. What is Emmerich’s point of concern? Why do you think he is so focused on his son’s fate, even though he is the one at war? (pp. 13, 17)
6. While still at camp, the narrator mentions he had a good dream but won’t tell anyone about it. It is a silent rule among the soldiers to keep dreams to themselves. Does Emmerich violate this in some ways by talking about his son? Why or why not? (pp. 9–10)

7. As the narrator reveals Emmerich's impending fate—a tragic death come springtime—he describes the surroundings of the Polish village as dawn arrives: “A pale sun hung in the sky, as distant and useless, it seemed to us, as a coin trapped under thick ice” and says that they walked under an “aluminum sky.” How does this description reveal the narrator's feelings about the future ahead of him? (pp. 24–25)

8. Emmerich finds an underground den, noticeable only by the rising heat from a small chimney flue that had melted frost on the trees nearby, in which a Jewish man is hiding. When the man comes out without a fight, why is the narrator so bothered by the hat the man is wearing? (pp. 80–81)?

9. The soldiers are banned from killing Jews on sight and instead must bring whomever they find back to camp. How does this new rule complicate or alleviate the dilemma the soldiers now face? (pp. 39, 58)

10. The majority of the plot involves the soldiers cooking a meal—from finding kitchen utensils in the cabin to slowly adding ingredients like salami and vodka, from how to keep the fire alive to negotiating how and when to eat. Why do you think Mingarelli focuses so much on this stew? And why do the soldiers?

11. The Polish soldier who joins the group is described as having “a monstrous smile, like a dead fish without teeth” when he discovers the Jew sitting in the cabin and then later smiling like “an animal.” What kind of associations or emotions did this bring up for you? Did you have compassion for him by the end of the story or did you dislike him? (pp. 94, 121)

12. Does the Polish soldier's dog play a role in the group dynamic during the meal? Did you feel the dog was a positive or menacing presence?

13. Why are Bauer and the narrator so reticent to offer the Jewish man some of their stew? Have you experienced how sharing a meal can change how you see another person?

14. Each character's manner of eating and the tools they use to eat are described in detail. Did you feel that we learn something about each character through these descriptions? If so, what? (p. 125)

15. Toward the end of the meal, Emmerich proposes they should let the Jew go. Why do you think Emmerich's mind has changed? What do the soldiers debate? How does the narrator understand this dilemma in hindsight? (pp. 126, 137)

16. After the meal, the Jew is described as going back into the storeroom of the cabin: “He moved

silently, as light as a bird.” Why was it significant to the narrator that the Jew moved silently? (p. 136)

17. Emmerich is the only father and the only one of the three German soldiers to die in battle. Does he hold a symbolic role in this story? Does he represent something larger than just one man’s story, and if so, what is it?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Hubert Mingarelli** is the author of numerous novels and short story collections, as well as fiction for young adults. His novel *A Meal in Winter* was shortlisted for the 2014 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and was selected by Indies Introduce in the United States. He lives in Grenoble.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

**Sam Taylor** is a translator, novelist, and journalist. His translated works include Laurent Binet’s award-winning *HHhH*. His own novels have been translated into ten languages.