

Jack Holmes & His Friend
by Edmund White

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Jack Holmes & His Friend*, a novel about two men's lives and loves in New York City, from the sexual revolution of the 1960s to the conservatism of the 1980s.

About this book

Jack Holmes, an impressionable young Midwesterner, has just moved to New York, a city teetering between the beatnik and hippie eras in the mid-1960s. Jack strikes up a friendship with Will Wright, a blue-blooded Yale graduate who is determined to become a famous novelist. Jack is shocked to find himself falling in love for the first time—with a man. Will rebuffs his best friend, and Jack starts prowling the streets of Greenwich Village nightly for unsatisfying substitutes for Will.

Will publishes his first novel, and Jack realizes that the heroine is based on his friend Alex, a debutante whose posh uptown life has become gossip between Jack and Will. When Jack finally introduces his two closest friends, it seems almost inevitable that Will and Alex will fall in love.

Ten years later, Will runs into Jack and rekindles their friendship. It is the 1970s now, and Will is facing a midlife crisis: he has failed as a novelist, his marriage is boring him, and he craves adventure. Will falls for a friend of Jack's, yet again: the smoldering Italian heiress Pia. Jack finds himself falling in love with Will all over again, but both must now figure out how to balance libertine impulses with the dawn of a new era: the AIDS crisis, when sexual politics become a matter of life and death.

For discussion

1. Discuss the structure of the book, which alternates between Jack and Will's perspectives. Which narrator did you find more sympathetic? Who do we get to know better? What might be the reason for making Will the first-person "I" narrator of the novel, rather than Jack?
2. We first meet Jack in college, and Jack feels that he is "entirely self-invented." (7) What kind of first impression does he make as a college student? Why does he keep his childhood hidden from his friends?
3. Consider the setting of the novel: New York City through the 1960s and '70s. How does New York look and feel in the novel? How does the city change over the years of Jack and Will's friendship? How do sex and marriage take on different roles in Jack and Will's circle of friends?
4. When Will reveals that he is writing a novel, Jack observes, "Whereas Will usually sounded self-deprecating in the best aristocratic fashion, when it came to his 'art' he was starting to sound pompous in the usual naïve American way." (69) How do Will's successes and failures in the publishing world change his self-image? Does Will sound

like a talented writer, or does he have “simply a knack for stealing well,” as Jack suspects? (141)

5. Will and Jack find themselves in two romantic triangles: first with Alex, then with Pia. Why does Will pursue women he meets through Jack, twice? Why does Jack allow himself to be implicated in Will’s romantic affairs? How do Alex and Pia, in turn, try to maintain their independence while involved with Will?
6. Compare Jack and Will’s attitudes toward romance in their twenties and their thirties. How do their approaches toward love and sex differ, and how are they similar? Which seems more honest about his feelings of lust and love? Explain.
7. When Will runs into Jack a decade after they became friends, Alex says, “I hope you didn’t scare him off by talking about our reversion to nature.” (188) Discuss the state of Will and Alex’s home in Larchmont. What does their house reveal about the state of their marriage?
8. Discuss Will’s religious faith. How does his Catholic upbringing affect his morals? How does he reconcile his faith with his adultery?
9. Will’s phase as a sexual libertine ends abruptly when he learns about “GRID—gay-related immune deficiency” from his doctor. (378) Why does Will react so strongly to the news of this disease? How does the advent of AIDS also affect Jack’s lifestyle?
10. Jack has three significant love affairs in the novel: Billy, Rupert, and Harry. Compare these three lovers. What attracts Jack to each of them? How do Billy and Rupert measure up to Jack’s feelings for Will? Why does Jack decide to settle down with Harry, and how does monogamy change him?
11. Discuss how sex is depicted in the novel. Which sex scenes are the most erotic, and which are most disturbing or heartbreaking?
12. Jack reveals at the end of the novel, “I know Will thinks I introduced the worm into the apple when I brought Pia out to Larchmont. Actually I invited her to go with me as protection.” (374) What kind of protection did Jack seek from Will and Alex, and why? Was Pia able to offer Jack any protection in the end? Why or why not?
13. Discuss Will and Alex’s role as parents. How do they interact with their young children, Palmer and Margaret? Consider the scene at the end of novel, when Will takes Palmer to Brooks Brothers for his birthday. What kind of bond exists between father and son, and what might threaten that bond?
14. Compare the era of *Jack Holmes & His Friend* to the present day. How have friendship, romance, and marriage changed in recent decades? How do men interact differently with each other, and how do men and women connect differently now? What are the greatest similarities between the era of the sexual revolution and today?

Suggested reading

Edmund White, *Hotel de Dream* and *City Boy*; Michael Cunningham, *By Nightfall*; Chad Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*; Alexander Maksik, *You Deserve Nothing*; Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*; Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*; Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*; Thomas Mallon, *Fellow Travelers*; Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*; Colm Tóibín, *The Empty Family*; Stephen McCauley, *Insignificant Others*; James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*; Beryl Bainbridge, *The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress*.

Edmund White is the author of many novels, including *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, *The Farewell Symphony*, and, most recently, *Hotel de Dream*. His nonfiction includes *City Boy* and other memoirs; *The Flâneur*, about Paris; and literary biographies and essays. White lives in New York and teaches at Princeton University.