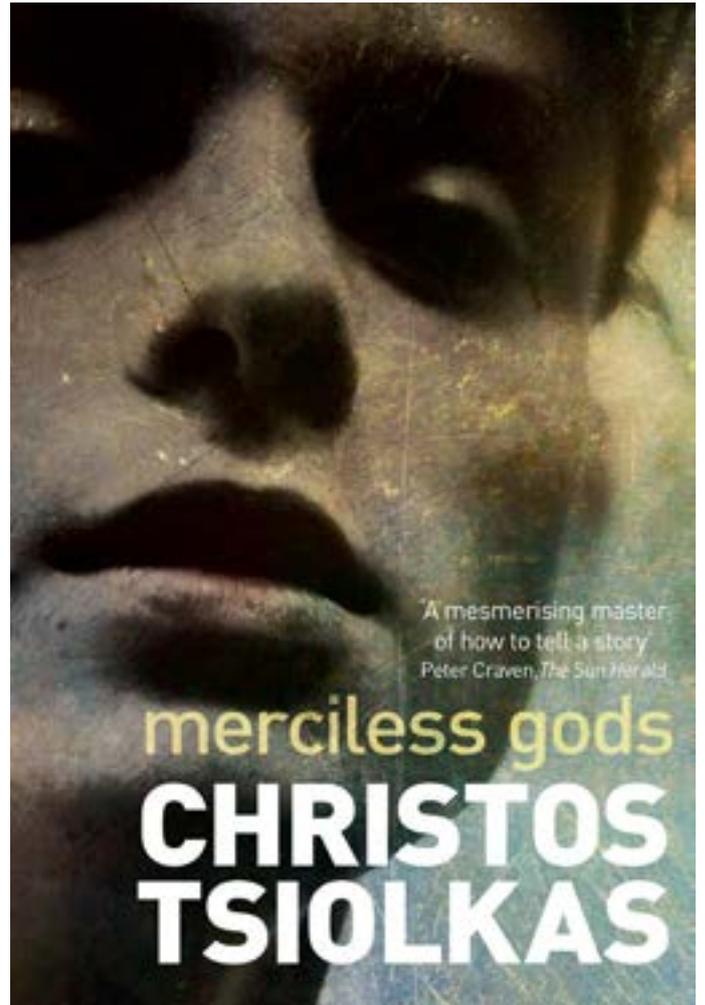


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

Love, sex, death, family, friendship, betrayal, tenderness, brutality, sacrifice and revelation ...

This incendiary collection of stories from acclaimed writer Christos Tsiolkas, bestselling author of *The Slap* and *Barracuda*, takes you deep into worlds both strange and familiar, and introduces you to characters who will never let you go and situations that will haunt you forever.

About the author

Christos Tsiolkas is the author of five novels: *Loaded*, which was made into the feature film *Head-On*, *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe*, which won the 2006 Age Fiction Prize and the 2006 Melbourne Best Writing Award. He won Overall Best Book in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2009, was shortlisted for the 2009 Miles Franklin Literary Award, longlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize and won the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal for his novel, *The Slap*, which was also announced as the 2009 Australian Booksellers Association and Australian Book Industry Awards Books of the Year. He is also a playwright, essayist and screen writer. He lives in Melbourne. Christos' latest novel is *Barracuda*, which was published here and in the UK to rave reviews in late 2013 and became an instant bestseller.

Review Quotes on Christos Tsiolkas

'... one of the most significant contemporary storytellers at work today.' - Colm Toibín, author of *Brooklyn*

'... there is not a more important writer working in Australia today.' - *Australian Bookseller & Publisher*

'... one of our most important novelists.' - *Age*

'Tsiolkas has become that rarest kind of writer in Australia, a serious literary writer who is also unputdownable, a mesmerising master of how to tell a story. He has this ability more than any other writer in the country ...' - Peter Craven, *Sun-Herald*

'One of the most astute chroniclers and critics of our age and culture, Tsiolkas is a passionate, poetic, political polemicist, but his critiques take the form of enthralling stories that are peopled with characters that bounce off the page.' - *Adelaide Advertiser*

'Tsiolkas is a hard-edged, powerful writer ... leaves us exhausted but gasping with admiration.' - *Washington Post*

For discussion

- ☞ Consider the opening story, *'Merciless Gods'*. What do we learn about each of the characters through the stories they tell? In what ways is the collection that follows both a book of stories, and a book about storytelling?
- ☞ Many of Tsiolkas' stories involve shocking or violent expressions of prejudice, racism, homophobia and intolerance. How does the author use these moments of tension to challenge the reader's assumptions? In particular, consider *'Civil War'*, *'Tourists'*, and *'Petals'*, *'Porn 1'*.
- ☞ Discuss the different ways in which the characters approach the issue of sexuality. In what ways does it both challenge and affirm their sense of self?
- ☞ Consider the stories *'The Disco at the End of Communism'* and *'Civil War'*. Discuss the ways in which death affects the living. What do each of the characters learn about themselves through the act of grieving and remembering?
- ☞ 'Mong. Wog. Maco...slut and fag and pofter and dyke. She did not trust their ease with words that hurt so much. She refused to believe that they had been exorcized of their venom and their cruelty.'
(*'Sticks, Stones'*, p. 21)
Consider the power of these kinds of words throughout the collection. In what ways do the characters both identify with and feel deeply victimised by these labels?
- ☞ Discuss the ways in which travel acts as a catalyst for change or revelation for the characters. In particular, consider the stories *'Tourists'*, *'The T-shirt with a Fist on It'* and *'Hung Phat'*.
- ☞ In what ways is the idea of 'God' explored in Tsiolkas' narratives? How do you think the title, *Merciless Gods* reflects the stories within the collection?
- ☞ Consider the ways the author explores issues of class, education and the 'intellectual elite'. In what way does Tsiolkas challenge the relation between knowledge and power?
- ☞ Discuss the ways in which the stories of parent and child are inextricably linked throughout the collection. In particular, consider *'The Hair of the Dog'*, *'Saturn Return'*, *'Genetic Material'*, and *'Sticks, Stones'*.
- ☞ Which of the stories in the collection affected you the most? Why do you think this was the case?

Suggested further reading

The Slap – Christos Tsiolkas

Barracuda – Christos Tsiolkas

An Elegant Young Man – Luke Carman

The Turning – Tim Winton

The Boat - Nam Le

Bodysurfers - Robert Drewe

Ugly Man - Dennis Cooper

Animal People – Charlotte Wood

Candy – Luke Davies

Praise – Andrew McGahn

Porno – Irvine Welsh