

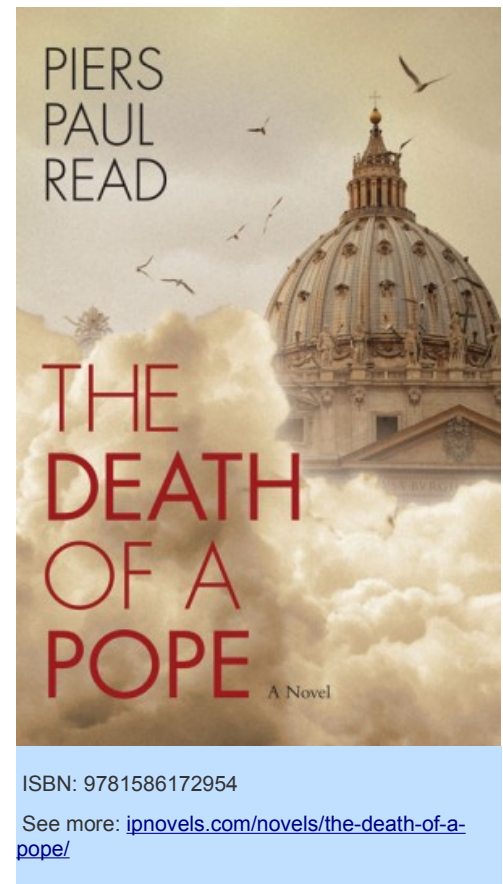
The Death of a Pope **Reading and Discussion Guide**

About *The Death of a Pope*

The Death of a Pope is a fast-paced theological thriller set in London, Rome and Africa during the last months of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. A former Jesuit, Juan Uriarte, working for a Catholic relief agency, Misericordia, is looking for a supply of poison gas. For what purpose? Can we take at face value his own explanation? Why did he leave the priesthood? What are his present beliefs about the state of the Catholic Church?

Three quotations appear as epigraphs to *The Death of a Pope* and set the context for the ideas treated in the drama. The first is from Pope Benedict XVI, reminding us that Jesus was not Spartacus - 'he was not engaged in a fight for political liberation'. The second is from the theologian Hans Küng, denouncing the system whereby conservative popes appoint conservative cardinals who will ensure the election of a conservative successor. The third is from the British journalist Polly Toynbee who, in her column in the *Guardian* in 2002, stated that 'the Pope kills millions through his reckless spreading of AIDS'.

However, the story involves more than ideas. We learn about the inner workings of the Curia in Rome, and the British secret service; and we share the human emotions of the diverse characters involved - a young journalist, Kate Ramsey; a British secret agent, David Kotovski; a Catholic priest, Father Luke Scott; a Dutch Curial Cardinal, Cardinal Doornik; his secretary, Mosignor Doornik; and finally the charismatic aid worker, Juan Uriarte.



Q & A with Piers Paul Read, Author of *The Death of a Pope*

What inspired you to write this book?

Since the early 1960s I have been interested in Liberation Theology. At Cambridge University, I subscribed to a Catholic Marxist magazine *Slant* which held that the only effective way to help the poor, particularly in the Third World, was through political revolution of the kind seen in Cuba. The Sandinistas in Nicaragua took this line. However, I was persuaded by the then Cardinal Ratzinger in *The Ratzinger Report*, published in 1985, that the use of violence for political ends was a perversion of the Gospel, and I witnessed the tragic consequences of such misguided zeal when I went to El Salvador in 1990.

Please tell us a little about the storyline of the book

The story opens at the trial of three men at London's Old Bailey charged with conspiring to use the poison gas Sarin in a terrorist attack in Spain. Two young journalists who are covering the trial, Kate Ramsey and David Kotovsk, become acquainted during the lunch breaks. Kate is fascinated by one of the accused, a Basque, Juan Uriarte. Uriarte, works with refugees in East Africa. He claims that he planned to use the Sarin gas to deter the Muslim Janjaweed in Dafur. The jury believes him. The three men are acquitted.

The narrative now divides, one stream following Kate Ramsey as she travels to Rome to interview the charismatic Uriarte about his work; the other following David Kotovski to the headquarters of the British Secret Security Service, MI5. Kotovski, it turns out, is not a journalist but the analyst at MI5 who gathered the evidence for the trial. He remains convinced that Uriarte is planning a terrorist attack - but where, and against whom?

Who is the main character?

The dominating character in the novel is the anti-hero, Juan Uriarte, a man who is intelligent, idealistic, charismatic, manipulative and charming. It is easy for the reader to understand why Kate fall in love with him when she accompanies him on a trip to a refugee camp in Uganda. From Uriarte's exchanges with Kate, we learn why he left the priesthood in El Salvador and now favours direct action to help the poor. His anger is directed not just at military *juntas* but also the conservative leaders of the Catholic Church - in particular the ailing Pope, John Paul II, and the Prefect for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger.

The novel has the structure of a thriller but is a critique of the Liberationism of Uriarte. Who embodies orthodox Catholicism?

Kate Ramsey was raised as a Catholic and has an uncle who is a Catholic priest, Father Luke. He has been side-lined in his diocese for his traditionalist views but serves on a committee in the Vatican working on the new English translation of the liturgy. He therefore makes frequent visits to Rome. He loves his niece and in a number of encounters we see his dismay at her rejection of the Catholic faith.

Are there other characters who exemplify trends in the Catholic Church?

Cardinal Doornik is an important character, both in terms of the plot of the novel and its critique of liberal Catholicism. He is the Prefect of a fictional Congregation for Catholic Culture, embodies 'the spirit of Vatican II', and is considered *papabile*. There is also his conservative secretary, Monsignor Perez.

The title of the novel, *The Death of a Pope*, refers to the last days of Pope John Paul II. Why set a fictional story in real time in this way?

The last days of a pope always stir up speculation as to who will succeed him, and this was particularly true prior to the conclave that elected Josef Ratzinger as Benedict XVI. Had the reign of a conservative 'Polish pope' been an aberration? Would a liberal pope succeed him? The readers know the outcome of the conclave, but that need not destroy the tension in the story: think of Frederic Forsythe's *The Day of the Jackal*, where we know that the attempt to assassinate General de Gaulle will fail.

What were the greatest challenges in writing the story?

The plot is intricate and complex, and it was difficult to put all the pieces of the jig-saw in place. It was not just a matter of time and place, but of the changes in Kate's perception of the men in her life - Father Luke, David Kotovski and above all Uriarte. In this sense, *The Death of a Pope*, is not just a theological thriller but also a problematic love story.

Discussion Questions for *The Death of a Pope*

1. Why are two Irishmen co-defendants with the Basque Juan?
2. What is the 'angle' Kate Ramsey first means to take in her coverage of the trial?
3. Why did Kate Ramsey choose to study theology at Oxford?
4. Why was Father Luke Ramsey permitted by his bishop to retire from parish work at the age of sixty?
5. What does Father Luke tell Kate about his time as a seminarian that is later used by Uriarte?
6. Why does Kate go to Uganda?
7. What is the difference between the Catholic traditionalism of Father Luke and Monsignor Perez?
8. The refugees cared for by the Catholic charity Misericordia are victims of the Lords Resistance Army. What is the political programme, if any, of the LRA? What is the role of religious fanaticism in the world's affairs mentioned in the novel? Kotovski's role model, his grandfather, boasts that it was the Poles who raised the siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Turks. Is force in the cause of religion ever justified? Does the end ever justify the means?
9. What is the effect does working with the refugees in Lbala have on Kate? Why does she feel 'a different person'? (p.88)

10. What role does satire play in the novel? Consider the depiction of Kate's former boyfriend, Barney; of Monsignor Perez, or the Contessa Freschi. What more do we learn about Father Luke, and the state of the Church, from the retreat he gives to community of women religious in England?
11. When Uriarte visits Kate, recuperating at a hotel in Malidi, he comes from Cairo. What was he doing in Cairo?
12. Why does David Kotowski break into Kate Ramsey's house and read the letters from a previous boyfriend?
13. During the exchange between Kate and Uriarte when they are in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, what does Uriarte say that might alert the reader as to his intentions?
14. What does Kate think she is smuggling back from Cairo to London for Uriarte?
15. On her return to her parents' house in England, Peacock's Farm, what does Kate's brother Charlie say to provoke her? Is there any truth in what he says?
16. In Father Luke's argument with Kate on their walk from Peacock's farm, what is the chief issue on which they differ? What is it that Kate says she has never heard mentioned in a sermon? What does Father Luke consider to be at the heart of the Catholic faith?
17. What do the three members of the British Secret Service - Kotovski, Ashton and Paget - think that Uriarte might have to gain from perpetrating an atrocity in Rome during the papal conclave?
18. What does Kotovski hope to learn about Kate when he visits her uncle, Father Luke Scott?
19. How does Uriarte persuade Cardinal Doornik to fall in with his plans?
20. What does Kate discover when she goes to Uriarte's home in Rome?
21. What does Uriarte say to assuage Kate's jealousy? Is it convincing?
22. What action does Monsignor Perez ask Father Luke to condone when he confesses to him at the Palazzo Freschi? Why does Father Luke refuse him absolution?
23. What argument does Uriarte use to persuade Kate to fall in with his plans?
24. What are the different elements in Kate's confusion as she walks through the crowd towards the Vatican Press Office during the papal conclave?
25. At the very end of the novel in the section entitled 'Rendition' we enter the mind of Juan Uriarte for the first time. How much of his thinking comes as a surprise? To what extent have we already deduced what he feels for Kate? Can we sympathize with his aims? Do we now see Uriarte as a sincere idealist or a deluded fanatic? To what extent is our judgement affected by his attitude towards Kate?