

Mason And Dixon

by
Thomas Pynchon

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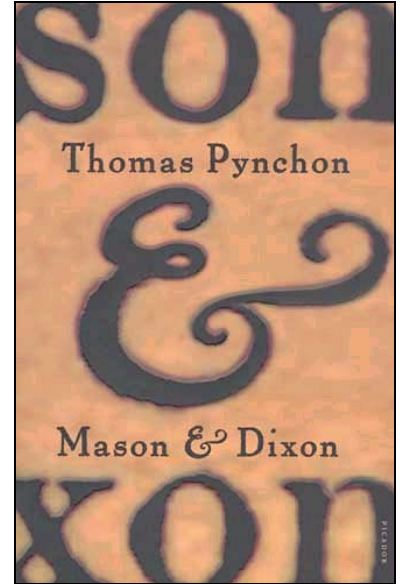
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READING GROUP GUIDE

Mason & Dixon

by Thomas Pynchon



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About this Guide

The following author biography, suggestions for further reading, and list of questions about *Mason & Dixon*, are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Mason & Dixon*.

About the Book

Mason & Dixon opens in Wade LeSpark's living room, in Philadelphia of 1786. The Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke embarks on his tale of the famous surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, who mapped the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland, for the after-dinner entertainment of the LeSpark family, including the twins Pitt and Pliny and their elder sister, Tenebrae. This framing narrative threads throughout the novel, as various family members come and go, sleep and awaken. Cherrycoke starts his tale with the meeting of gothic-natured Mason and romantic Dixon in 1760 as they prepare to embark, under the auspices of the British Royal Society, on a voyage to the Southern Hemisphere, where they are to observe the Transit of Venus and help determine the Solar Parallax. After having their voyage interrupted by a bloody sea-battle with a French ship, they finally arrive in Cape Town, South Africa, where they reside with the Vrooms and their lusty daughters. While awaiting the Transit, the astronomers become acquainted with the slave-culture of the Dutch colonies. After the Transit, they split up: while Dixon stays on at the Cape, Mason sails for St. Helena, where he takes further measurements with the clearly insane Neville Maskelyne, who will later become the Royal Astronomer and bedevil Mason's career. On the island, Mason is visited by the ghost of his wife, Rebekah, two years dead. Mason and Dixon reunite and sail back to London, where Mason unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile with his two young sons and come to terms with both his father

and the dead Rebekah. He promises his sons he will soon return, but instead accepts a commission to travel to America with Dixon and chart the disputed borderline between Pennsylvania and Maryland.

In America, the astronomers, now surveyors (much to Mason's distress), find themselves immediately embroiled in the peculiarities, intricacies, and moral ambiguities of American pre-Revolutionary politics and culture. They happen upon Ben Franklin in an apothecary shop, and he introduces them to colonial coffeehouses and conspiracies. Mason and Dixon then travel to meet with Colonel George Washington in Virginia, only to discover him enamored of "Indian hemp" and quite stoned. Moving first south, then west, they mark and measure the line with a motley assortment of characters: Stig and his crew of Scandinavian axmen; Armand Allegre, the exiled French chef pursued by an invisible and amorous mechanical duck; the good Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke; the renegade Professor Voam and his huge electric eel, which comes to serve as the expedition's compass; Squire Haligast, who spouts prophetic gibberish; and others equally eccentric. As they punch the line westward, Mason and Dixon begin to suspect they are at the mercy of forces invisible, and that the line they are creating is no mere boundary but something more powerful and potentially much more evil. The party meets up with Eliza, an escaped novice of the Widows of Christ, and Captain Zhang, a Chinese feng shui expert who awaits an epic battle with his nemesis, the Jesuit master-of-disguise Zarpazo. Together they travel deeper and farther west, leaving behind the world of Reason and Enlightenment and encountering the mysteries and denizens of the frontier.

An imaginary alternate ending is provided, in which the surveyors journey ever westward, through wilderness and on to mountains and prairies teeming with buffalo. But in reality, Mason and Dixon stop the line at the Native American Warrior Path and turn east again, back to civilization and the moral implications of what they have created. Before they sail for Europe, Dixon beats a slave-trader and sets free his slaves, vexing an angry crowd. Once back in England, the two men spend the twilight of their lives pondering their careers, the forces that enslaved them, and the fates they set in motion by creating the Mason-Dixon Line. Dixon lives with his mistress and two illegitimate daughters, hallucinates a journey to the center of the earth, and eventually dies of gout. Mason, who has remarried and fathered six more children, is stricken by his friend's death. He takes his son Isaac to visit Dixon's grave. Isaac not only consoles his father, but forgives him his many long absences during his childhood. Later still, Mason returns to America with his family to live in Philadelphia. After his death, his wife Mary returns to England with her children, but Rebekah's sons stay on to become Americans, as they always dreamed of doing during Mason's wanderings. "In America, the Stars are so close you won't need a Telescope," they once mused.

About the author

Thomas Pynchon is the author of *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Slow Learner*, a collection of short stories, and *Vineland*. He received the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974.

Other Works by Thomas Pynchon

The Crying of Lot 49

V.

Gravity's Rainbow

Vineland

Slow Learner: Early Stories

Discussion Questions

1. "Snow-Balls have flown their Arcs, starr'd the Sides of Outbuildings, as of Cousins, carried Hats away into the brisk Wind off Delaware, -- " It is clear from the first sentence that Pynchon has abandoned modern syntax for eighteenth-century prose, an ambitious undertaking. How does this serve the themes and action of the novel? Why do you think the author has chosen to write this way? Does it impede or enhance your reading of the novel? Which elements of the prose and language can be identified as archaic, and which elements can be termed modern?
2. The events of the novel are narrated by the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, who tells the story of Mason and Dixon after dinner for the entertainment of his family. How does he gain access to the details of the events? How does he fill in the gaps of events he doesn't actually witness? Do his perspective and morality color the narrative? Is he reliable? Does the fact that he is trying to entertain a youthful audience account for the appearance of talking dogs, conversing clocks, and mechanical ducks?
3. There are actually two narratives taking place simultaneously in *Mason & Dixon*: the story of Mason and Dixon and the framing narrative, set in the LeSparks' living room many years later, as the Reverend Cherrycoke tells his tale. How does the framing narrative serve the novel? How do the discussions, comments, and arguments by the framing characters affect the relation of the narrative? What undercurrents of tension can you identify in the framing narrative? How do they affect the "storytelling"?
4. Pynchon's works tend to spill over the edge of their pages into the real world, pulling in science, history, philosophy, and the arcane nature of popular culture. In *Mason & Dixon*, he has two worlds to flood into: the world of the eighteenth-century, and the modern world. Does he limit himself to the eighteenth-century? Is there a macrocosm -- or two macrocosms -- imbedded in the microcosm of *Mason & Dixon*?
5. Mason is an astronomer, Dixon a surveyor. But the opposing natures of their characters go much deeper than that. "Mason is Gothickally depressive, as Dixon is Westeringly manic" (p. 680). "Mason and Dixon would like to stay, one to fuss and the other to flirt" (p.27). Account for all the ways their natures are divergent. How does this serve the narrative throughout the novel?
6. Pynchon is nothing if not playful with language. Any reading of his work is more enjoyable if you keep your eyes open for allusions, illusions, tricky metaphors, symbols, puns, pop-cultural references, and more. Share and discuss your discoveries with fellow readers, and try to determine whether they serve the narrative or simply display the author's sense of literary playfulness.
7. "Mason, pray You, -- 'tis the Age of Reason . . . we're Men of Science," states Dixon (p. 27). How, then, do they account for ghostly visitations, giant beets, and talking dogs?
8. The Reverend Cherrycoke says, "As to journey west . . . in the same sense of the Sun, is to live, raise Children, grow older, and die, carried along by the stream of the Day, -- whilst to turn Eastward, is somehow to resist time and age, to work against the Wind, seek ever the dawn, even, as who can say, defy Death" (p. 263). How does this observation resonate throughout the novel during Mason and Dixon's travels?
9. The Mason-Dixon Line is seemingly insignificant, merely "Five degrees. Twenty minutes of a day's Turn," as Dixon notes (p. 629). But, as later events testify, it becomes symbolic of much more than

that, -- the division of a country. Do the characters have any sense of the significance of what they are creating? Mason asks, "Shall wise Doctors one day write History's assessment of the Good resulting from this Line, vis-à-vis the not-so-good? I wonder which list would be longer" (p. 666). Why does Captain Zhang declare that the line's feng shui is the "worst I ever saw" (p. 542)? What moral implications do Mason and Dixon face as they create the line? What other lines and boundaries are there in the novel?

10. "Whom are we working for, Mason?" inquires Dixon (p. 347). Later, he says, ". . . Something invisible's going on, tha must feel it, smell it . . . ?" (p. 478). Conspiracies abound in Pynchon's oeuvre, and Mason & Dixon is no exception. Identify the conspiracies, real and imagined, in the novel. Are they rooted in paranoid speculation or in real events? Do they find any echoes in modern conspiracy theories?

11. On pages 349–352, Cherrycoke and Uncle Ives argue about the nature of history. To understand history, Ives says, "You look at the evidence. The testimony. The whole Truth" (p.352). Cherrycoke, in contrast, sees history as "a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep." Which definition do you think Pynchon credits? Which do you? Who, according to Cherrycoke, is best able to convey history?

12. In chapter 53 (p. 511), the novel embarks on an entirely new narrative, that of Eliza, a novice in the Widows of Christ, and Captain Zhang, the feng shui expert who rescues her. The source of the new narrative turns out to be a bawdy book that Tenebrae and Ethelmer secretly read in 'Brae's bedroom. However, the new narrative soon melds into the one being told by Cherrycoke. How does Pynchon account for this? How is it resolved? What does this tell us about the nature of storytelling and writing?

13. A Quaker reminds Mason and Dixon that the sugar they enjoy is "bought . . . with the lives of African slaves, untallied black lives broken upon the greedy engines of the Barbadoes" (p. 329). Dixon later declares, ". . . we lived with Slavery in our faces, -- more of it at St. Helena, -- and now here we are again, in another Colony, this time having drawn them a Line between their Slave-Keeper, and their Wage-Payers, as if doom'd to re-encounter thro' the World this public Secret, this shameful Core . . ." (p. 692). How do the surveyors respond to slavery throughout the book? Do their awareness and their response change?

14. Pynchon offers up an alternative ending, sending the surveyors farther and farther west, ". . . away from the law, into the savage Vacancy ever before them . . ." (p.709). What purpose does this false ending serve? What do Mason and Dixon discover as they voyage on?

Recommended Further Reading

Undaunted Courage, Stephen Ambrose

The Black Flower, Howard Bahr

The Magus, John Fowles

Cold Mountain, Charles Fraizer

Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All, Alan Gurganus

Middle Passage, Charles Johnson

Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy

Master and Commander, Patrick O'Brian

All Souls' Rising, Madison Smartt Bell

Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time,
Dava Sobel

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