



Siddhartha

Herman Hesse (1832-1898)

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Siddhartha, published in 1922, tells the story of a young man who undertakes a journey of self-discovery in ancient Nepal during the time of the Gautama Buddha. He leaves home to seek enlightenment in the ascetic life of a beggar and eventually meets with Gautama, the Buddha, but chooses to follow his individual path instead of joining the order. Crossing a river to the city, he settles and becomes a rich businessman and the lover of the beautiful courtesan Kamala. Finding his luxurious life empty in middle-age, he returns to the river, where he adopts a humble way of life and gradually finds peace and enlightenment. He crosses paths with former friends and lovers over the years in ways that deepen his (and our) understanding of the mysterious connectedness of all things in the cyclical unity of nature.

Hesse wrote *Siddhartha* to cope with his 'sickness of life'. In doing so he lived a reclusive life and immersed himself in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. The book's structure reflects the three stages of life for Hindu men, the four noble truths, and the eight-fold path. The result is a mesmerizing mixture of religious legend and modern novel, written in a simple, graceful style that harmonizes the tensions in the contrasting forces of life.

Hermann Hesse (July 2, 1877 – August 9, 1962) was a Swiss poet and novelist best-known for his novels *Siddhartha*, *Steppenwolf*, and *The Glass Bead Game*. He was born in the Black Forest region of Germany to a Swabian Pietist family that served as missionaries in India and later ran a publishing firm that specialized in theological texts and schoolbooks. It seems fitting that his work has a persistent theme of the search for spiritual authenticity and self-knowledge. As a young man he worked in antiquarian bookstores until publication of *Gertrude* in 1904 enabled him to make a living as a writer. He moved to Bern in 1912 and became a Swiss citizen in 1923. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946. His popularity waned in the 1950's, but his popularity revived in the 1960's as the counterculture found resonance in his work, largely due to the influence of Timothy Leary and Colin Wilson.