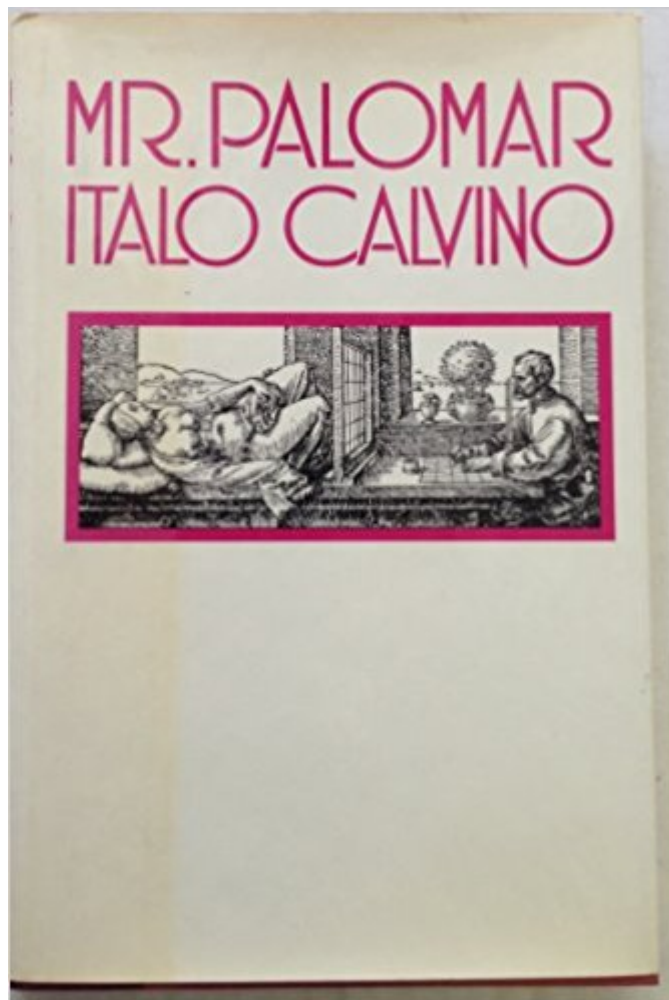


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Mr. Palomar



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Customer Reviews

Italo Calvino's book, "Mr. Palomar," is a superbly crafted novel about an intellectual quest for order and reason in a chaotic and unreasonable world. Should this sound like rather dry and uninteresting reading, be assured that it is not. Calvino is a great story teller, and in Mr. Palomar he has found a character that provides him with a medium, a vehicle, to deliver stories of great beauty, humor, wit and pathos. In books about the theories of complexity and chaos there is usually a chapter dedicated to the task of explaining that it is only in the boundary between order and chaos that all of the really interesting things are possible, including life. Mr. Palomar's mistake is in thinking that things would be better (or, at least he'd be less anxious) if he could just figure out how to get everything to calmly step over to the "ordered" side of the line. He is the twentieth century's Don Quixote, not on a romantic quest but an intellectual one; not fighting off the advancing windmills (that battle has already been lost), but desperately trying to reason his way into a moment of Zen-like clarity and peace. It may seem that Mr. Palomar brings to his task of putting the world in order a formidable intellect. He is, indeed, very bright and often brilliant. But Calvino implies early and often that Mr. Palomar doesn't so much possess an intellect as he is possessed by one. Mr. Palomar may have the illusion that he brings his intellect to bear on one thing or another but, in truth, his intellect has its own agenda and Mr. Palomar is simply along for the ride. It is Mr. Palomar's inability to escape his own intellect that produces both the funniest and saddest moments in the book. The chapter entitled "The Naked Bosom" reads like the misadventures of a philosophical "Mr. Bean." In it, Mr.

Here is another great example of how versatile a writer Italo Calvino was. His work always had a philosophical side to it, and in *Mr. Palomar* that side almost takes over completely. Mr. Palomar is the main character (in fact, one of the only characters) and the world simply befuddles him to an extent that he needs to find order and meaning in everything. His attempts are often very funny, but how they're all inevitably spoilt is even funnier. Probably the best example of this is the section entitled "The Naked Bosom" - Palomar tries to find a way to both not deny himself the natural pleasure of seeing a topless sunbather and not denying the naked sunbather dignity and respect. His attempts cause him to pass by the sunbather so frequently that she gets up in a huff. Good intentions, bad implementation. The book circles around similar themes, but within many different contexts. Palomar looks at waves, rhapsodizes on mating turtles, examines the night sky, examines the patrons of a cheese shop, etc. Mr. Palomar is always in natural and real-life situations, but over-analyzing them to a degree almost of unreality. Though it sometimes reads like a very heady, and bordering on the pretentious, book, it's actually a very funny book about trying to find meaning in life, and the inevitable problems one will likely have in finding meaning all by oneself. It almost reads like a parody of intellectualism; of someone so thirsting for knowledge that they forget their very surroundings and paradoxically neglect themselves and others in the process. The more Palomar examines the world, the less he feels comfortable in it, and the further he seems to drift from people and society.

The 27 reveries of Mr. Palomar are filled with paradox; in them we find gently profound ruminations on the cosmos as well as the embarrassments of ordinary human interaction. This is a book that makes us see the world around us in a different way. Mr. Palomar, who shares the name of the observatory, is the emblem of the person as observer. Whether it is the ocean or the heavens, a cheese shop or an Aztec ruin, Mr. Palomar attempts to see and to comprehend what he sees. But the general theme of his attempts at observations is ultimately the failure, or at least the inadequacy, of his attempts. Much of the book has an Aristotelian quality, which perhaps is not so surprising, considering that Mr. Palomar's enterprise, the attempt to understand the universe through careful observation, is Aristotle's approach as well. Much of the contemplation follows Aristotelian lines. Mr. Palomar is often immersed in Aristotelian efforts of categorization, of conceptually separating a part from the whole, and facing the question that looms so large in Aristotle: When can we derive the properties of the whole from the part, and when is the opposite true? Then again, the reader is reminded of Aristotle's "Parts of Animals" when Mr. Palomar describes the running giraffes and how each part of the giraffe's anatomy appears to be suited to a

separate species, or when Mr. Palomar watches through his skylight as a gecko captures, ingests, and digests an insect. But counterpoised with this, you have genuine "Walter Mitty" type moments when the real world interrupts the reverie. Mr.

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