



## ***Fifteen Dogs by André Alexis***

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### **About the author:**

André Alexis was born in Trinidad and grew up in Canada. His most recent novel, *Fifteen Dogs*, won the 2015 Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. His debut novel, *Childhood*, won the Books in Canada First Novel Award, the Trillium Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. His other books include *Pastoral* (nominated for the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize), *Asylum*, *Beauty and Sadness*, *Ingrid & the Wolf*, *Despair and Other Stories of Ottawa and Lambton*, *Kent and Other Vistas: A Play*.

Source: *Coach House Books* (<https://chbooks.com/>)

### **About this book:**

— *I wonder, said Hermes, what it would be like if animals had human intelligence.*

— *I'll wager a year's servitude, answered Apollo, that animals – any animal you like – would be even more unhappy than humans are, if they were given human intelligence.*

And so it begins: a bet between the gods Hermes and Apollo leads them to grant human consciousness and language to a group of dogs overnighing at a Toronto

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veterinary clinic. Suddenly capable of more complex thought, the pack is torn between those who resist the new ways of thinking, preferring the old 'dog' ways, and those who embrace the change. The gods watch from above as the dogs venture into their newly unfamiliar world, as they become divided among themselves, as each struggles with new thoughts and feelings. Wily Benjy moves from home to home, Prince becomes a poet, and Majnoun forges a relationship with a kind couple that stops even the Fates in their tracks.

André Alexis's contemporary take on the apologue offers an utterly compelling and affecting look at the beauty and perils of human consciousness. By turns meditative and devastating, charming and strange, *Fifteen Dogs* shows you can teach an old genre new tricks.

Source: Coach House Books (<https://chbooks.com/>)

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Which dog are you most drawn to? Least? Why?
2. Can you imagine how the story might have been different if Alexis had chosen cats? What about elephants or mosquitoes?
3. Hermes and Apollo's wager is decided by whether or not one of the dogs is happy at the moment of its death. Is it fair to evaluate the quality of one's life by the quality of one's end-of-life? How accurate of an evaluation is this in the case of the dogs?

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4. The form of the apologue is meant to be a moral fable: a pleasant vehicle for a useful lesson, often with animals as stand-ins for human characters. What are the central lessons that Alexis means to teach us in Fifteen Dogs?
5. Prince's poetry delights some of the dogs and enrages others. He is arguably the most isolated of the original pack. Is Alexis suggesting that art is essentially divisive? Or is Prince's place in the pack a reflection of the nature of being an artist?
6. Who is more cruel, the gods or the dogs? Why?
7. Does the version of humanity Alexis presents reflect your own? In what ways do they differ?
8. The premise of the book is a dispute between Apollo and Hermes, who represent two very different views on humanity and human endeavour. How does Alexis's choice to frame the question of human happiness this way influence our reading of the book's outcome(s)?
9. Some readers find themselves more moved by the deaths of the fifteen dogs than they would have been if it had been fifteen humans. Why do we sometimes have more compassion for animals than people? Can you think of examples of this in the real world?
10. True to canine nature, Atticus's pack is ruled by brute power and a clear sense of hierarchy. But Hermes and Illustration by Evan Munday Apollo's wager is about happiness, not power. What is the relationship between power and happiness for the dogs? Is there a clear correlation?
11. Can you write a dog poem using the rules on page 173 with the name of a dog you know?

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12. If you are familiar with Toronto, did the book allow you to think about the city's landscape differently? If you aren't, did the book offer a vivid sense of place? Why or why not?

13. The novel is preoccupied not only with human consciousness, but also with self-consciousness. What does this suggest about human nature?

14. Do you find the violence in this novel to be gratuitous? It has been said that violence results from inarticulateness; is it strange that the dogs seem to become more violent after they have come to possess the gift of (human) language?

15. What does the novel have to say about the relationship between thought and language? If in some way language determines the parameters of our thinking, how does that premise underscore or complicate this idea?

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