

# THE VILLAGE IDIOT

Steve Stern

Paperback 978-1-68589-077-3

eBook 978-1-61219-983-2



“Stern has blended biography and fabulism into a frothy picaresque that ... vibrates to the “sweet celestial confusion” of Soutine’s painting: delirious and earthy, reverent and irreligious.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Poignant, richly colorful... An outstanding portrait by a writer at the top of his form.”

—*Kirkus, STARRED Review*

## INTRODUCTION

**A wild, effervescent, absinthe-soaked novel that tells of the life of the extraordinary artist Chaim Soutine.**

Paris, 1917. Amid the carnage of World War I, some of the foremost artists of the age have chosen to stage a boat race. At the head of the regatta is Amedeo Modigliani, seated in a bathtub pulled by a flock of ducks. But unbeknownst to the competition, he has a secret advantage: his young friend, the immigrant painter Chaim Soutine, is hauling the tub from underwater. Soutine, an unwashed, misfit artist (who incidentally can’t swim) has been persuaded by the Italian to don a ponderous diving suit and trudge along the floor of the river Seine. Disoriented and confused by the artificial air in his helmet Chaim stumbles through the events of his past and future life.

Wildly inventive, as funny as it is heartbreaking, *The Village Idiot* is a luminous fever-dream of a novel, steeped in the heady atmosphere of a Paris that was the cultural capital of the universe, a place where anything seemed possible.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. *The Village Idiot* is based on the life of the artist Chaim Soutine, yet the author has clearly taken great liberties with the facts. Should there be a limit to how far a writer is allowed to distort and alter a character’s real-life biography for his own ends?
2. The narrative of *The Village Idiot* leaps about in time. What is gained (or lost) in juggling the chronology of a character’s life in such a manner? What do you think is the author’s motive for this method of telling Soutine’s story?
3. In the novel, all the events of Soutine’s life become available to him while he is encased in a heavy diving suit at the bottom of the Seine. How does this device serve to unfold his story? How does the legend of the Angel of Forgetfulness (p. 6) inform Soutine’s experience in the *scaphandre* (diving suit)?

## THE VILLAGE IDIOT

4. Soutine is characterized throughout the novel as unwashed, misanthropic, and disagreeable, and yet he is mentored and championed by Amedeo Modigliani, his polar opposite in every respect. What is it about Soutine that invites Modigliani's affection? Do you as a reader share that affection?
5. What does *The Village Idiot* have to say about the nature of obsession?
6. Soutine's relationships with women are checkered and ambivalent, and sometimes touched with cruelty. What elements in his life might help explain his inability to find lasting intimacy?
7. Does the gift of Soutine's visionary genius as a painter compensate in your mind for his shortcomings as a man? Does it excuse in any way his often unkind and even savage behavior?
8. The book is suffused with elements of the fantastic—the repeated visitations of figures out of Jewish folklore, the transformation of the girl in the brothel, the talking dog, etc. Given that the novel describes the life of an actual historical character, what do you think of the choice to exceed the bounds of reality throughout the narrative?
9. Since Soutine's head is confined to a diving helmet subject to toxic buildup during the whole of the book, the unreal episodes he experiences might be attributed to hallucination. On the other hand, they can also be perceived as literal events. Which are they? Could they be both?
10. In the orthodox Jewish community in which Soutine was reared, it is a grave sin to violate the Second Commandment, which forbids the making of images. Such an act is considered tantamount to idolatry. What impact might it have on an artist's sense of himself to pursue an art predicated on the violation of the laws of his culture? How might such a consciousness of violating his native tradition affect his work?



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Stern's fiction, with its deep grounding in Yiddish folklore, has prompted critics such as Cynthia Ozick to hail him as the successor to Isaac Bashevis Singer. He has won two Pushcart Prizes, an O'Henry Award, a Pushcart Writers' Choice Award and a National Jewish Book Award. For thirty years, Stern taught at Skidmore College, the majority of those years as Writer-in-Residence. He has also been a Fulbright lecturer at Bar Elan University in Tel Aviv, the Moss Chair of Creative Writing at the University of Memphis, and Lecturer in Jewish Studies for the Prague Summer Seminars. Stern splits his time between Brooklyn and Ballston Spa, New York.

### MORE TO DISCOVER

Find more resources for your book club at [www.mhpbooks.com](http://www.mhpbooks.com).

