



Reading Group Guide for **Jokerman 8** By Richard Emidio Melo

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Jokerman 8 is a rockin, rollin wild-eyed journey through the American eco-saboteur movement, and a restless multi-stranded narrative about two pasts that can never be reconstituted: happy childhoods and forests.

About the Book

A west coast posse of forest radicals based out of San Francisco State University, *Jokerman* engages in a wild array of pranks—they sink whaling ships at harbor in Iceland, skydive into the winter forest of British Columbia on a bend to save a pack of wolves from a government-sponsored slaughter, and stage a Tree-In in a southern Oregon old-growth forest. *Jokerman* spikes trees, jerryrigs tractors, spoils traps, and conserves enough energy to laugh and drink beer at the end of the day.

In numerous subplots encompassing both present and past, a young husband flees San Francisco for Portland during the Draft, another young husband sets himself on fire in front of what he thinks is Robert MacNamara's office in the Pentagon, and the Yippies succeed in levitating the Pentagon, inspiring the *Jokerman Eight* to respond by building a pyramid next to the Pentagon.

Written in a polyphonous prose where every tendency is contrapuntal to another — rollicking yet meditative, whirlwind yet lax, lush yet stark, ghostly yet grounded, complex yet accessible — the novel bears comparison to Edward Abbey's 1975 cult eco-classic *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and can best be summed up by its final (and shortest) sentence: "Live happy." *Jokerman 8* is about laughing more and taking the world less seriously; about learning to swim and fly; about following gentle impulses; about not sitting still while Earth's flora and fauna are shaved, poisoned, and burned off the planet's surface; and about daughters and sons learning what it is they are about.

Questions for Discussion

1. *Jokerman 8* contains several father-daughter relationships. What do these relationships illustrate?
2. The *Jokerman* troupe cares deeply about pulling off their pranks in such a way that no one gets hurt. For example, they spike trees in a manner to keep loggers out of harm's way. Are the troupe's actions as non-violent as they wish to believe?

3. The book's prologue takes place in 1991, the year of the first Gulf War. Yet among this group of activists, the Gulf War and the events leading up to it are never mentioned. Is the Jokerman troupe closed off from the world outside their immediate circle? Do they see only the parts of the world that matter to them?
4. The Pentagon -- did it levitate or not? What difference does it make?
5. Is the book cynical or optimistic?
6. The book's two main characters, Jude and TS, rarely speak. How does this affect the story as it unfolds?
7. The book includes numerous references to songs, pop cultural icons, and other cultural touchstones. What effect do these have on the reading experience.
8. Why does 60s counterculture weigh so heavily on a storyline that takes place primarily 20 years later?
9. If you have read Edward Abbey's *Monkey-Wrench Gang*, how do the two books compare and contrast?

Critical Praise

"*Jokerman 8* is full of vivid descriptions . . . the tone of the novel is passionate, euphoric and Whitman-esque. . . . *Jokerman 8* surely evokes that capacity for love, the untidy, idealistic valentine that the environmentalist sends to the world."—*The Believer*

"Melo has a way of making the most preposterous event seem plausible and *Jokerman 8* avoids melodrama and never loses its carefree spirit. In his first novel, Melo produces a work that is sweet and stirring, like taking a weekend furlough in the Siskiyou Forest before setting some SUVs on fire."—*Portland Mercury*

"*Jokerman 8* moves from voice to voice in an easygoing style and storylines are merged as Melo moves from the 1960s to the 1990s. U2 fans will enjoy Melo's subtle references. It's a wonderful book with rich, unforgettable characters and carries the message from beginning to end: Live happy."—*The Oregonian*

"Like the Dylan songbook its title invokes, *Jokerman 8* is freewheeling and deeply felt, moving and cymbal-crashing funny. It is also that rarity: an angry, politically-minded work of exuberant high spirits. A great first novel." **Andrew Lewis Conn**, author of *P: The Novel*

"My first thought when I started reading *Jokerman 8* was, 'Damn it, why didn't I write this book?' Then I set to work trying to figure out how to plagiarize it. Finally, I had sit back & give in to its crazy brilliance--which is all its own and unstealable. Written with love for all of us babies blinking in the silent home movies of the 60s and 70s, *Jokerman 8* reminds us of who we meant to be and how we intended to live in this wack-ass world."—**Ariel Gore**