

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## Martin Dressler by Steven Millhauser

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- *Martin Dressler* is subtitled *The Tale of an American Dreamer*. Why is Martin described as a dreamer and what is his dream?
  - What has this novel to say about the American Dream and the quintessential American myth of the self-made man?
  - What are the causes of the dissatisfaction that Martin often feels e.g. p. 129 “he felt, even as he turned over the idea of a fourth cafe in Brooklyn, a little sharp burst of restlessness, of dissatisfaction, as if he were supposed to be doing something else, something grander, higher, more difficult, more dangerous, more daring.”
  - Style of Millhauser – the book begins in a dream. Every major event seems to have an initial dreamlike atmosphere.
- When Martin was a child, one of his chores was rolling Tecumseh out onto the sidewalk each day. How does the image of the cigar-store Indian change and develop over the course of the novel and what does it signify?
  - How do these images manifest themselves in the Grand Cosmo? What does that say about how Martin’s life, and the world itself has changed in the intervening years?
- Why does the troupe of actors at the Vanderlyn make such an impression on Martin? (p. 11-12) The image of the two feet on the bed seems to haunt him. How did that image affect his decisions?
- Martin is well aware that the grand hotels of his youth embody a paradox: they must be old fashioned and aggressively modern (p. 70). Is that still true? What does that say about people’s desires?
- Mr. Westhoven likes to call himself a “preserver” or “reconciler.” What does he represent to Martin?
- How would you describe the four-way relationship between Martin & the three Vernon women? (Did Mrs. Vernon set a trap for Martin?)
- How would you describe Caroline?
  - Air of mystery
  - Secret passions
  - Or simply stupid and inert
- What is it besides Caroline’s sexuality that attracts and fascinates Martin?
- What were Caroline’s feelings toward Martin? What did she want?
- Why is it impossible for Martin to look on Emmeline in a sexual light?
- How would Martin’s life and work been different had he married Emmeline?
  - What is significant about the evening visit she and Martin pay to the Dressler site?
- Why are Caroline and Emmeline so dependent on each other?
- Can she be thought of as an enabler to Caroline?
- What roles does Martin mentally assign to the women in his life? Does he compartmentalize love and sex? if so, what effect does such a compartmentalization have on his emotions?
  - Mrs. Hamilton
  - Alice Bell (sex object?)



**Skokie Public Library**

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- Dora and Gerda (prostitutes)
- Marie Haskova (What was her payoff? Did he simply use her?)
- Mrs. Vernon
- Caroline
- Emmeline
- Claire Moore
- What is the role of Martin's family in this book?
  - Seems to resent their intrusion
  - Only make one appearance at his wedding in the last ¾ of the book
- What was the significance of the Brooklyn Bridge?
  - Could see it from the architect's window (Rudolf Arling)
- In an interview with Publisher's Weekly (5/6/96) Millhauser said that with the Grand Cosmo, "I wanted to stretch the real into the fantastic without actually snapping it." At what point did the narrative depart from the real and become the fantastic?
- Why does Martin compare Harwinton with God? How have the opinions and theories of those like Harwinton characterized the 20th century? How do they continue to rule our world? (Role of advertising and psychology behind advertising)
- How does Martin's dream compare with the dream of Walt Disney? How do the Grand Cosmo and Disney World aim to create alternative worlds that are self-contained and even better than the outside world?
  - How do both of these institutions encourage a blurring in the distinction between "real" and "fake?"
  - What can we infer from the presence of "authentic German cigarmakers" at the Grand Cosmo?
  - Why did Martin have an actor impersonate him in the Grand Cosmo?
  - Would you have wanted to live there?
- Why did the Grand Cosmo fail?
  - Ahead of its time?
  - Too grandiose?
- Is it possible for Martin ever to be satisfied with the status quo?