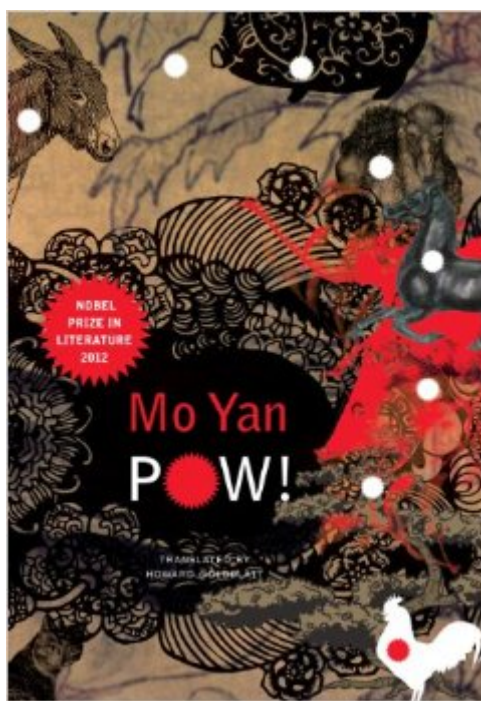


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# POW!



## Synopsis

In this novel by the 2012 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Mo Yan, a benign old monk listens to a prospective novice's tale of depravity, violence, and carnivorous excess while a nice little family drama—in which nearly everyone dies—unfurls. But in this tale of sharp hatchets, bad water, and a rusty WWII mortar, we can't help but laugh. Reminiscent of the novels of dark masters of European absurdism like Günter Grass, Witold Gombrowicz, or Jakov Lind, Mo Yan's *POW!* is a comic masterpiece. In this bizarre romp through the Chinese countryside, the author treats us to a cornucopia of cooked animal flesh—ostrich, camel, donkey, dog, as well as the more common varieties. As his dual narratives merge and feather into one another, each informing and illuminating the other, Mo Yan probes the character and lifestyle of modern China. Displaying his many talents, as fabulist, storyteller, scatologist, master of allusion and cliché, and more, *POW!* carries the reader along quickly, hungrily, and giddily, up until its surprising dénouement. Mo Yan has been called one of the great novelists of modern Chinese literature and the New York Times Book Review has hailed his work as harsh and gritty, raunchy and funny. He writes big, sometimes mystifying, sometimes infuriating, but always entertaining novels—and *POW!* is no exception.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 440 pages

Publisher: Seagull Books; Tra edition (December 15, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0857420763

ISBN-13: 978-0857420763

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.4 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (19 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #924,697 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #233 in Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > Asian > Chinese #46799 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Literary

## Customer Reviews

*Pow!* is a book that I greatly enjoyed reading, but would not widely recommend. Crazy, huh? That's the problem. To the vast majority of readers, *Pow!*, I fear, would seem a crazy romp, without being able to connect the narrative to Chinese history, current Sino events, and Buddhist teachings which make for a less jolting ride. It seems to me hard to sustain interest in a postmodern, Rabelaisian

picaresque for 386 pages, especially given that two improbable story lines are woven together like a braid, unless there's a more meaningful context that the reader can recognize in the text. That said, if you groove on other works by the Nobel-winning Mo Yan, this is a, ah, feast. While Rabelais may get the edge on the amount of meat consumed (and that by no means is certain), Mo Yan gets the nod for variety: beef and pork (of course), donkey, mule, dog, horse, leopard, sheep, goat, camel, and cat. But I digress. There are dual runaway narratives in *Pow!* In one, a most unreliable narrator recounts how his family rose to prominence in his village thanks to their good fortune riding the coattails of the local Wutang/big man figure, who feeds and provides for the village. Impermanence being what it is though...oops. There I go again, getting ahead. The second story line is a trip. For the most part, it's a narration populated with ghosts, phantoms, and spirits. Yet it also intersects with what most would consider reality 101. It includes narration of a meat festival that could have been penned by Gabriel Marquez. And, it intersects at the end with the more down-to-earth previously mentioned narrative when...I did it again. It also helps to make one's self familiar with the Wutong cult in China, as the narrator has taken refuge in a decrepit temple.

Mo Yan's essential afterward to "*POW!*" titled "Narration Is Everything" spells out the author's reason for writing this book: for the "solace" it provided him. "Relying upon the splendor and fullness of a narrative to enrich one's bland life and overcome character flaws." He goes on to say, [s]een in that light, the story line of *POW!* isn't all that meaningful." Agreed. The narrative is Mo Yan's effort to "recapture his youth by prattling away with his tale." For the reader the problem is that the narrator "is a boy who endlessly sprouts lies," a boy who babbles on for the joy of hearing his own voice. Think back to your own childhood ramblings: Clark Kent-like power or Clark Gable-like sex appeal. So what begins as good clean fun (well, not always so clean) becomes increasingly tedious with the account of each new heroic episode or conquest. If you are in the mood to tackle Mo Yan - ironically his pen name means "Don't Speak" - on the strength of his 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature, I suggest that you start with one of his earlier books, "*Red Sorghum*" (1993) or "*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*" (2004). The New York Times Review of *POW!* ("*A Meaty Tale, Carnivorous and Twisted*" by Dwight Garner, January 1, 2013) agrees that it "goes down a bit roughly. You will be some time in digesting." For all of that, however, the reviewer asserts that the book is "staunchly adult in its concerns . . . putting a knife in white and taking it out red." That strikes me as overly generous. The book's implicit (and, yes, at times quite explicit) references to shady business practices, consumerism, government corruption and sexual wantonness, among others, are made in passing, as part of the penumbra of life in late 20th Century China.

I can't really claim to write a review of this that will help anyone else, except perhaps to warn other readers that they may well find themselves joining my desperate cry: Can somebody help me understand this?\* The book's cover -- a beautiful cover, I must say -- calls this "a comic masterpiece." But it is difficult to appreciate the comedy in a setting that is so strange to us. It is even difficult to tell whether the strangeness is because the rural community is removed spatially from city life, removed by a few decades in time, or simply removed from normal reality. The structure is simple enough. A young man with an interest in joining a monastery visits with a master known only as the Wise Monk. His life story to date, recounted in normal type, is repeatedly interrupted in italics by things that occur in the temple where he is speaking, starting with the incursion of his own libidinous thoughts, and quickly moving to the arrival of a rain-soaked woman who disrobes in front of him and gets him to suckle her breasts. And that's only the start; these episodes soon become overtly surreal. Meanwhile, the young man's life story is taking a similar course from quasi-normality to excess. The village leader in this farming community has hit upon a way of injecting animals with chemical solutions so that their meat weighs more and lasts longer. The profits are such that soon all the villagers have given up all other kinds of farming and the entire village has become a slaughterhouse. I count myself a dedicated carnivore, but the descriptions of cooking and eating more and more repulsive cuts of more and more repulsive animals becomes so stomach-turning that I could even see myself becoming a vegan! As it was, I had to skim large sections to survive to the end of the book.

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