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## BOOK CLUB NOTES THE UMBRELLA CLUB DAVID BROOKS

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During World War I a friendship between two young Englishmen, Axel and Edward, is forged on the battlefields of France. There, inspired by barrage balloons, they develop a mutual fascination that will change the course of their lives. After the war, as his passion for flight and freedom consume him, Axel sets off to balloon across the highlands of New Albion, a largely unexplored island north of Australia. When he fails to return, Edward travels to the island to solve the mystery of his friend's disappearance and retrace his final journey. What he finds there will challenge his sanity and his faith.

*The Umbrella Club* is a darkly compelling adventure into the depths of the human soul and to the frontiers of colonial exploration. In the aftermath of war, when there is nothing left to fear, sometimes the only possibility for recovery is flight.

1. In reading Axel's letter to Rachel, Edward observes that their enthusiasm in the accounts of Axel's adventures and their shared enjoyment in subsequent exotic adventure stories acted as 'a kind of counterpoint to what was happening to us at Hallstaynes.' (p. 75) After her death, Rachel is seldom mentioned by Edward, although from this point on he explores his own exotic adventures.

In what ways do these adventures address the trauma of the loss of Rachel?

2. In many ways, Edward is a restrained and taciturn narrator.

How does the novel manage to convey a sense of Edward's emotional life while still maintaining a sense of Edward's restraint?

3. Throughout the novel, there are a number of compelling narrative drives – to see whether Edward's adventure is a success; to ascertain the truth of the winged creatures; to find Axel (living or otherwise); to understand something of the mysteries of the natives of New Albion; to 'solve' the conspiracies behind the elusive Paul Stein (among others).

When you were reading, what were the most compelling aspects of the narrative?

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4. In New Albion, there are many seemingly elusive mysteries that Edward is attempting to understand.

Do you think that Edward has enough information to make sense of these mysteries, or do they remain elusive? If so, why?

5. 'You can't just take up any Idea or Mission. It has to have a certain shape, a particular contour. And it is the Shadow that determines it. The Idea is in the shape of the Shadow. And the Shadow itself is determined by the things that happen to you.' (p. 6)

Axel Glover's Idea, or Mission, is the balloon ride over New Albion. How does Edward's Idea differ from Axel's? What shape determines the contours of Edward's mission?

6. Upon an early test-flight of a balloon with the Colonel, Edward observes that 'we were on the verge of escaping, although whether it was from our lives, or the past, or something else, we couldn't at the time have said, and I'm not sure I could hazard even now.' (p. 40)

What new perspectives does ballooning offer Axel and Edward?

What does ballooning come to signify later in the novel?

7. In Edward's search for Axel, there is the curious diversion to the young child Louisa Warburton. Axel had sent her the letter in which Axel claims to have seen the mysterious winged creatures.

Why does Axel describe this only to Louisa?

8. In a rare lucid moment, Paul Stein argues that the legend of the winged people might have been caused by the incessant desire of Axel Glover to confirm his own dreams: '... if you ask them a question they'll give you the answer they think you want, or that his own stupid interference might be making the thing exist in the first place. What is it, *memelos*? *muramemelos*? What were they before he interfered? Did they exist? Did he think he could come here and re-write reality?' (p. 160)

What is the significance of Edward's later seeming confirmation of Axel's dream?

9. In the depths of New Albion, Axel writes back to Edward: 'It is a detritus. A moral and experiential detritus. We cannot throw it away from us, and it will not sink. It has always been like this, even before the War. It is a part of us, almost our nature. All we can do is drift away from it, or rise above it.' (p. 99)

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Much of the trauma of war is implied rather than stated, though there are also allusions made to a traumatic pre-existing aspect of human nature.

To what extent is Axel's Shadow caused by the War?

To what extent by things that preceded the War?

What do you think he means by 'moral and experiential detritus'?

10. After having seen the winged creatures, Edward becomes becalmed over a wide featureless landscape. It is here that he notices his shadow had virtually ceased moving.

What does this shadow represent?

If the shadow ceases moving at this point, what is signified here?

11. 'It is impossible to know anything very much about a place or the people in it from letters or verbal reports, much as we might like to think otherwise.' (p. 137)

Edward's own narration is ironically an account of a place and experience, expressed through words and images. In what ways, then, does Edward's account of his journey become a description of the inexpressible?

12. There are a number of references and allusions to the adventure stories of Joseph Conrad. In these stories, the external landscape often comes to reflect the internal landscape of the mind.

In what ways does the setting of New Albion allow Edward to process his understandings of the past?

13. As the ship leaves New Albion, Edward looks back and has 'the sense of New Albion growing slowly smaller, like a story that had finished somehow, a fable, a metaphor for something there was no guarantee I would ever fully understand.' (p. 232)

While the narrator himself suggests the ungraspable nature of comprehending his own experiences, what understandings do we have?

If Edward's experiences are a fable, what do you think is its message?

14. Edward's final dream recasts him alongside Axel, observing the burning boat while escaping to shore, in the manner described by Ken of a possible explanation for the fate of

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the Germans. In what ways does this new perspective offer a further, different way of understanding Edward's experiences?

15. How do you interpret the final paragraphs of the book?

Is Axel alive or dead?

When Edward writes 'let the bones lie', what does he really mean?

16. There is a great deal of laughter in *The Umbrella Club*. Harry Allender's laugh is almost legendary. Natives in New Albion have been known to die of a laughing sickness. The natives at Harry's mission laugh almost demonically as they tear apart the Mura.

What is the significance of laughter in the novel?

17.                   The self-same moment I could pray;  
                          And from my neck so free  
                          The Albatross fell off, and sank  
                          Like lead into the sea.  
                          Coleridge: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

The albatross is a bird of the Southern Ocean and is not found in the tropics, and yet this novel abounds with their absent-presences. What is the significance of this?

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