

Reading Group Guide to *THE 6:41 TO PARIS* by Jean-Philippe Blondel



Cécile, a stylish 47-year-old, has spent the weekend visiting her parents in a provincial town southeast of Paris. By early Monday morning, she's exhausted. These trips back home are always stressful and she settles into a train compartment with an empty seat beside her. But it's soon occupied by a man she instantly recognizes: Philippe Leduc, with whom she had a passionate affair that ended in her brutal humiliation 30 years ago. In the fraught hour and a half that ensues, their express train hurtles towards the French capital. Cécile and Philippe undertake their own face to face journey—In silence? What could they possibly say to one another?—with the reader gaining entrée to the most private of thoughts. This is a psychological thriller about past romance, with all its pain and promise.

Discussion Questions

—Discuss the way the point of view moves back and forth in *The 6:41 to Paris*. Do you think the author favors one character over the other? Does the male or female perspective feel more authentic or is each equally conveyed?

—Cécile and Philippe spend much of the train ride ruminating on the bad ending to their relationship. Discuss the differences in their memories of how they once viewed one another and what has changed.

—A feeling of tension and suspense builds as the novel progresses. Discuss the ways the author creates these elements and how they're heightened during the train journey.

—To what degree does their chance encounter on the train enable or force Cécile and Philippe to reckon honestly with their behavior and the path each has taken since parting some three decades earlier? How does each of them differ in this respect?

—Discuss the role of Matthieu in the narrative and in the past relationship between Cécile and Philippe.

—Both protagonists have just visited their hometown after some time away. Discuss the different ways each regard that town and recall it in their youth. What role does the metropolis of Paris play in their lives today?

—This is a novel translated from French whose characters have quintessentially French names. Do you think a similar story could be set aboard the 6:41 to Penn Station in New York? Discuss how might it be different?

—What do you think about the ending given what we've learned about these two characters in the course of the novel?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean-Philippe Blondel was born in 1964 in Troyes, France where he lives as an author and English teacher. His novel *The 6:41 to Paris* has been a bestseller in both France and Germany.

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-PHILIPPE BLONDEL

—How did the idea for *The 6:41 to Paris* come to you?

Well, first, I often take the morning train to Paris, when I have to go and see my French publisher or journalists, and I noticed that, like Cécile in the novel, I bring with me my laptop, some books and magazines and I don't do anything. I daydream and I listen to the conversations around me, trying to invent or reconstruct the lives of the passengers. But I must confess that the very first inkling I had of *The 6:41 to Paris* was when I was waiting in line at my local post office about 15 years ago. Just before me in line there was a man who wanted to send a parcel. He had to give his name to the lady who worked at the counter. It was a very complex Polish name, full of *k*, *y*, and *w* and she wrote it without a single mistake. The man congratulated her, adding that usually people made a lot of mistakes when they wrote his name. The woman looked up and said: "So you don't remember me at all, do you?" Surprised, the man asked: "Should I?" and the woman quietly replied that maybe yes, since they had dated for three or four months 25 years before. Everybody at the post office thought: "Oh, My, God," and felt both embarrassed and amused.

—When you were writing from the point of view of the female character, what did you draw on to make sure you got her voice right? Did you ask a woman/women for their opinion before the book was published?

I never ask anybody's opinion about what I'm writing, but I made sure that my wife read the manuscript first. Actually, it's not that difficult for me to "become" a female character. All you have to do is listen and watch. When you spend a lot of time observing

people—whether they are men or women—you notice their expressions, the little details that give away their hopes and their frustrations, the tone of their voices, the words they use, their sighs. It's very moving, actually. That's how you plunge into characters. Listening. And sympathizing.

—How much of *The 6:41 to Paris* comes from personal experience? In other words, you are roughly the same age as the two characters in the novel. Do you identify with them?

Do you know what? I love those two characters. Both of them are a part of me. I was 48 when I wrote the novel. Physically, I'm close to what Philippe Leduc has become and, let's say, I have seen better days, physically speaking—and I, uh, was not that flabby and soft when I was younger. However, I do think I have Cécile's determination and strength. After all, I wrote my first novel when I was 19, sent 19 different manuscripts to all the French publishing houses for 19 years (and they were all refused, of course), and was published when I was 38. Refusals never deterred me. I knew that the most important thing for me was writing, and that publishing was of course a dream, and a kind of goal, but not the reason why I was writing. So, you see, I can't choose. They've both got bits of their lives that belong to me, but I do believe those bits belong to any of us, actually.

—What do you think happens as the two step off the train in Paris? Are you planning to continue this story in another book?

I wanted this kind of open ending, because I wanted the readers to be active and to imagine the end of the story as they wished. Personally, I think she's going to yield. They're going to have coffee in a bar near the Gare de l'Est, and they'll try to engage in a conversation. After all, it's time for them to forgive each other and themselves, isn't it? However, I don't think I'm going to write a sequel. Cécile and Philippe are free now. They belong to the readers.

—What was it like for you to read the translation of your own novel, *The 6:41 to Paris*, in English?

You know what? When I received the novel translated into English, I didn't dare touch it. I was impressed. Moved. More than that, I must confess there were tears in my eyes. I just thought that it would never happen. You know, when you've been teaching English and English literature for 25 years and trying to do the best you can for Anglo-Saxon writers, to make the pupils love them and read them, it just felt ... My god, I can't find the word. I was so grateful. Then, when I started reading it (reading or re-reading), I stood in awe of the translator, Alison Anderson. How had she managed to get into my head like that, unknown to me? I hope I'll meet her one day to thank her.

You can listen to Jean-Philippe Blondel reading from *The 6:41 to Paris* and discussing the novel at Shakespeare and Company Bookstore in Paris by [clicking here](#):

<https://soundcloud.com/shakespeareandcompany/jean-philippe-blondel-on-the-641-to-paris>