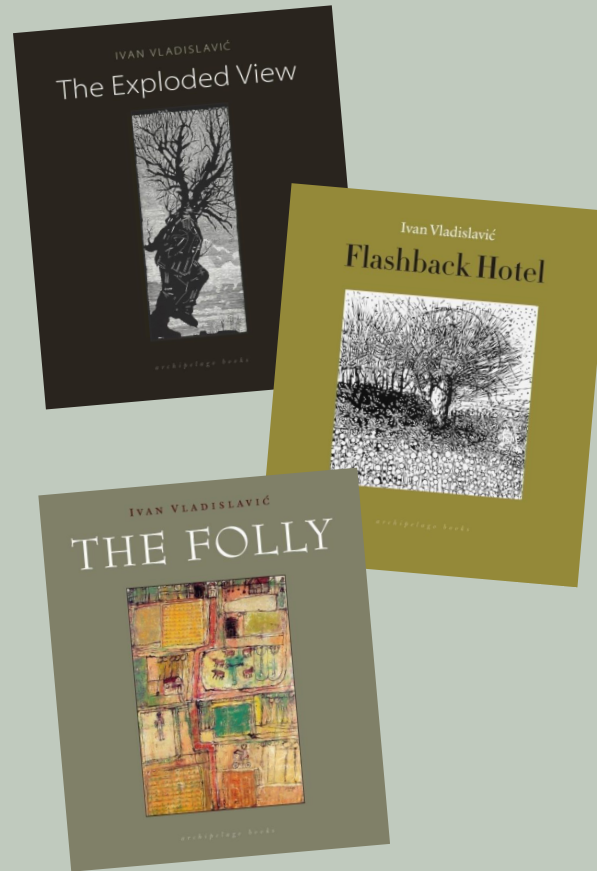


ALSO FROM  
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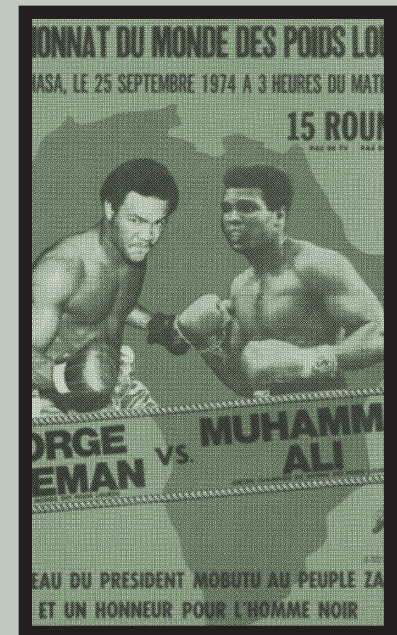
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# The Distance

## A DISCUSSION GUIDE



South African novelist Vladislavić delivers a moving, closely observed study in family dynamics in a time of apartheid . . . Vladislavić's tale unfolds with grace and precision. A memorable, beautifully written story of love and loss.

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The text alternates between Joe and Branko's perspectives, with both characters narrating in the first person. Their sections toggle between the past and the present. What is the effect of this interweaving of voices and times? How would you respond to one of the questions Branko poses: "Can a story ever belong equally to two people?"
2. In the novel's first sentence, Joe declares that he "fell in love with Muhammad Ali" in 1972. Later, Branko says he prefers not to think of it as "falling in love." In Joe's sections, meanwhile, he continues to bring up "falling in love with Muhammad Ali." Discuss the significance of this phrasing.
3. Why is the title of the novel *The Distance*?
4. Names have a special weight in the novel: Both Muhammad Ali and Joe change or attempt to change their names. Simon Templar, the protagonist of Leslie Charteris's Saint series, goes by multiple aliases. Branko's son releases his film under a false name. Why are names so important to this text?
5. At one point, Joe says, "You could say I fell in love with the writing rather than the boxing. After all, I never saw Ali box." Later, he talks about never having heard Ali's actual voice. What roles do different kinds of media—newspaper, radio, television, YouTube, notebooks, books, film—play in the novel?
6. How are characters developed in this novel? What do Branko, Joe's notebooks and scrapbooks, and Joe's first-person sections reveal about Joe, and in what ways are these lenses different from one another?
7. Branko remarks that "we are a family of secret-keepers, secret-stealers and secret-dealers. We want to be found out." What does he mean?
8. The "politics" that halted plans for Muhammad Ali's visit to South Africa, vaguely limned in newspaper clippings, are described more in depth in the novel's final chapters. Discuss how the distance between the U.S. and South Africa is characterized at different points in the novel.
9. When Joe first enlists Branko's help in writing his book, he says: "Making things up won't do any good. I need to remember things as they actually were." Toward the end of the novel, Branko says, "It's not just the blow-by-blow accounts that fail me: it's all the reports. . . ."
10. Muhammad Ali confounds Joe and Branko's expectations vis-à-vis manly behavior and race. What impact might this have in the novel as a whole?
11. Much attention is paid to how different people wield language: Joe takes on accents and mannerisms from books he reads; boxing commentators are said to "like nothing better than a pun"; and Muhammad Ali's catchphrases are discussed at length. Why does Joe in particular examine language so closely? What do the ways he interacts with language reveal about him?
12. Why does Vladislavić begin every chapter with an epigraph? Why has he chosen these titles and images to preface each chapter?
13. At various points in *The Distance*, parallels are drawn between boxing and art and between writing and boxing. How do the novel's different characters view writing, and how might "writers and fighters" and artists be related? Consider the boxing commentators, Muhammad Ali and his various biographers, the figure of Leslie Charteris, and the brothers themselves.