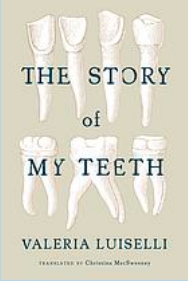
Discussion Guide



The Story of My Teeth
Valeria Luiselli

Coffee House Press
2015
195 pages
ISBN: 978-1566894098

Teeth and Oral Health

Summary

Gustavo 'Highway' Sanchez is a late-in-life word traveler, yarn spinner, collector, and legendary auctioneer. In his quest for a perfect set of pearly whites, he finds unusual ways to raise the funds, culminating in the sale of the jewels of his collection: the teeth of the 'notorious infamous' like Plato, Petrarch, and Virginia Woolf. Written in collaboration with the workers at a Jumex juice factory, *Teeth* is an elegant, witty, exhilarating romp through the industrial suburbs of Mexico City and Luiselli's own literary influences.

Questions

1. “I was born in Pachuca, the Beautiful Windy City, with four premature teeth and my body covered in a very fine coat of fuzz. But I'm grateful for that inauspicious start because ugliness, as my other uncle, Eurípides López Sánchez, was given to saying, is character forming.” Why does Highway describe himself as ugly? And how does he think his teeth contribute to his appearance?
2. Highway says that the four natal teeth present at birth was caused by a rare condition called Congenital Prenatal Dentition. According to scientific literature, “The occurrent of natal and neonatal teeth is an uncommon anomaly, which for centuries has been associated with diverse superstitions among different ethnic groups…Premature eruption of a tooth at the time of birth or too early is combined with many misconceptions. They are further accompanied by various difficulties, such as pain on suckling and refusal to feed, faced by the mother and the child due to the natal tooth/teeth. Some families are so superstitious that the afflicted child may be deprived of parental love. The family hopes that the offending teeth be removed as soon as possible.[i] How does this superstition effect Highway? How did the nurse’s explanation for the phenomena, “Genetics is a science full of gods” appease Mr. Sánchez?
3. Highway’s father uses his teeth “to pare his nails.” What is the significance of using the word *pare*? What are some other ways people might misuse their teeth? How did his father’s nail biting contribute to Highway’s early obsession for collecting unusually assorted objects?
4. Throughout the story, Highway weaves in descriptions of his teeth. In Chapter 1, he says, “I was eight years old, and all my milk teeth had already fallen out. They had been replaced with others as wide as shovels each pointing in a different direction.” Why are primary teeth sometimes called “milk teeth?”

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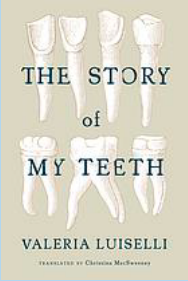

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5. How did Highway come to possess Marilyn Monroe's teeth? Why did he value them?
6. Why did Highway suggest a "hyperbolic auction" to Father Louis? "I could tell stories whose degree of deviation from the value of the iconic section of the related objects was greater than zero… By means of my hyperbolics, I could restore an object's value through an elegant surpassing of the truth…The stories I would tell about the lots would all be based on facts that were occasionally exaggerated, or to put it another way, better illuminated." How did he form the idea to his sell his own teeth? How did this auction become his unraveling?
7. Why does Highway enlist Jacob de Voragine to write his life story? How does de Voragine's version differ from Highway's telling?
8. In telling the story of a "simple man," Luiselli uses philosophy, history, and literature to craft an eloquent and strange prose. Is she effective? How so? What did you like most about the story?
9. Did this story help you reflect on the purpose of teeth or their importance? How so?

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[i] Mhaske S, Yuwanati MB, Mhaske A, Ragavendra R, Kamath K, Saawarn S. Natal and neonatal teeth: an overview of the literature. ISRN Pediatr. 2013 Aug 18;2013:956269. doi: 10.1155/2013/956269. PMID: 24024038; PMCID: PMC3759256. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3759256/

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