

# THE NAME OF THE ROSE

by Umberto Eco



## THE AUTHOR

Umberto Eco (1932-2016) was born in a small city near Turin, Italy. His father was an accountant who wished him to pursue a career in law, but in the midst of his legal studies, he turned instead to medieval literature, earning his doctorate in that field at the University of Turin in 1954. For the next twenty-five years, he worked in journalism and academia, establishing a reputation as a medievalist and semiotician (semiotics involves the study of the meaning and interrelationship of symbols in language and culture). He was considered somewhat of an avant garde type because of his advocacy of the concept of the open text - the notion that symbols, including written ones, mean whatever the reader makes them mean, since their meaning is shaped by what the reader brings to the text.

In 1978, he began writing a novel for the fun of it, intending to use his knowledge of the Middle Ages to produce a mystery of such complexity that it could serve as an open text, capable of being read with many layers of meaning. The result was *The Name of the Rose*, published in 1980 to immediate critical and popular acclaim, and followed shortly thereafter by a major motion picture directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring Sean Connery. Eco was flabbergasted that his work should find such a broad audience (though one critic noted that, in the summer of its publication, *The Name of the Rose* was “the most often started and least often finished book of the season”), and began to wonder whether he might have another novel in his brain. He, in fact, published two further novels - *Foucault's Pendulum* in 1988 and *The Island of the Day Before* a few years later.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In his old age, Adso of Melk recalls a momentous week in November, 1327. With his mentor William of Baskerville he traveled to an abbey in the Apennines. William had been sent there to mediate a dispute between a papal legation led by the inquisitor Bernard Gui and a group of followers of the reformer Michael of Cesena, hoping to secure a safe passage for Michael to Avignon, where he might receive a hearing for his ideas.

When William arrives at the abbey, he is given a second task - to solve the mysterious death of a monk named Adelmo, whose body had recently been discovered outside the monastery walls. In the next few days, two more monks, Venantius and Berengar, are found dead, one in a vat of pig's blood and the other in a bath. Both have black fingertips and black tongues. On the day the papal

delegation is to arrive, Severinus the herbalist is found dead, and the monk Malachi dies shortly thereafter. The inquisitors, as Abo the abbot feared, use the series of unexplained deaths as a justification for examining the monastery, and find that the abbot has been harboring former followers of the condemned heretic Fra Dolcino. Bernard Gui, the inquisitor, is convinced that these men, Salvatore and Remigio, are responsible for the murders, and orders them burned at the stake, along with a young village girl whom he suspects of witchcraft. At this point, the abbot dismisses William from the case.

William, having already unlocked the key to the labyrinthine library, solves the case a few hours later, discovering that the librarian, Jorge of Burgos, had poisoned the pages of a copy of the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, fearing that comedy was the greatest of all heresies. The sequence of events involved in the murders is then quickly unraveled - Berengar found the book, and enticed Adelmo to trade sex for access to it. Adelmo, mortified by the sin he had committed, threw himself from the monastery walls. Venantius, Berengar, and eventually Malachi all died from the poisoned pages. Severinus had been killed by Malachi because he had found the book, which Berengar had left outside the herbarium. After Jorge confesses, he begins to eat the pages of the book. In the ensuing struggle, Adso's lantern is overturned, setting the library on fire and ultimately burning down the entire monastery. In the chaos that follows, Adso rescues the girl, though Salvatore and Remigio perish.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- William of Baskerville - A former inquisitor who had entered upon the life of a wandering monk, he is the protagonist of the novel who is called upon to unravel the mysterious deaths occurring at the abbey.
- Adso of Melk - William's "squire," and Watson to his Holmes; at the time of the narrative, he is a young man, largely a passive observer. He is the narrator of the novel.
- Abo - The abbot of the monastery, he is cautious, seeking to avoid trouble at all costs.
- Adelmo - The monk whose death begins the chain of events that make up the narrative, it turns out that he has thrown himself from the monastery walls in remorse after having carnal relations with Berengar, the assistant librarian of the monastery.
- Berengar - The assistant librarian, he discovers the forbidden manuscript of Volume II of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and trades his knowledge for sex with Adelmo. He is poisoned by examining the toxin-treated pages of the forbidden book, and drowns himself in a bath seeking relief from its effects.
- Venantius - He, too, is poisoned by the toxins on the pages of the forbidden manuscript, and is found dead in a vat of pig's blood.
- Severinus - The monastery herbalist, he assists William in his investigations, and is murdered by Malachi, Jorge's confederate, when he discovers the book left outside the herbarium by Berengar.

- Jorge of Burgos - An elderly monk, and the head librarian of the monastery. On a trip to Spain to acquire ancient manuscripts, he brought back with him a copy of Aristotle's work on comedy. Considering laughter to be the ultimate heresy, he hides the book in the deepest recesses of the labyrinthine library, and treats its pages with deadly poison so that anyone who reads it will poison himself in the process. He tries to eat the pages of the book when he is discovered by William, and in the ensuing struggle a lantern is kicked over, which destroys the library and the monastery with it.
- Salvatore - A former Dolcinian (a heretical group that advocated violence to reform the church) who has become a monk in the abbey. Hunchbacked and speaking a gibberish compounded from many languages, he is condemned by the inquisitors of the papal legation.
- Remigio - Another former Dolcinian, he is arrested and taken to Avignon for trial and immolation.
- Bernard Gui - Chief papal inquisitor and head of the papal legation, he refuses to compromise with the followers of Michael of Cesena, and threatens William himself with prosecution if he continues to pursue his investigation of the murders.
- The peasant girl - A local village girl who makes herself available for sexual encounters with the monks in exchange for food for her family, she initiates Adso into the world of carnal pleasures.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“For what I saw in the abbey then (and will now recount) caused me to think that often inquisitors create heretics. And not only in the sense that they imagine heretics where these do not exist, but also that inquisitors repress the heretical putrefaction so vehemently that many are driven to share in it, in their hatred for the judges. Truly, a circle conceived by the Devil. God preserve us.” (Adso, p.50)

“‘Then we are living in a place abandoned by God,’ I said, disheartened.

‘Have you found any places where God would have felt at home?’ William asked me, looking down from his great height.” (p.155)

“Legions of scholars have wondered whether Christ laughed. The question doesn't interest me much. I believe he never laughed, because, omniscient as the son of God had to be, he knew how we Christians would behave.” (William of Baskerville, p.161)

“‘But is this purity?’ I asked, horrified.

‘There must be some other kind as well,’ William said, ‘but, however it is, is always frightens me.’

‘What terrifies you most in purity?’ I asked.

‘Haste,’ William answered.” (p.385)

“Laughter frees the villein from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears poor and foolish, and therefore controllable. But this book could teach that freeing oneself of the fear of the Devil is wisdom. When he laughs, as the wine gurgles in his throat, the villein feels he is master, because he has overturned his position with respect to his lord; but this book could teach learned men the clever and, from that moment, illustrious artifices that could legitimize the reversal. Then what in the villein is still, fortunately, an operation of the belly would be transformed into an operation of the brain. That laughter is proper to man is a sign of our limitation, sinners that we are. But from this book many corrupt minds like yours would draw the extreme syllogism, whereby laughter is man’s end! Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the villein from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is the fear of God. This book could strike the Luciferine spark that would set a new fire to the whole world, and laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for canceling fear. To the villein who laughs, at that moment, dying does not matter: but then, when the license is past, the liturgy again imposes on him, according to the divine plan, the fear of death. And from this book there could be born the new destructive aim to destroy death through redemption from fear. And what would we be, we sinful creatures, without fear, perhaps the most foresighted, the most loving of divine gifts?” (Jorge, p.474-5)

“Jorge, I mean. In that face, deformed by hatred of philosophy, I saw for the first time the portrait of the Antichrist, who does not come from the tribe of Judas, as his heralds have it, or from a far country. The Antichrist can be born from piety itself, from excessive love of God or of the truth, as the heretic is born from the saint and the possessed from the seer. Fear prophets, Adso, and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them.... Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for truth.” (William of Baskerville, p.491)

“I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs. I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental. I arrived at Jorge seeking one criminal for all the crimes and we discovered that each crime was committed by a different person, or by no one. I arrived at Jorge pursuing the plan of a perverse and rational mind, and there was no plan, or, rather, Jorge himself was overcome by his own initial design and there began a sequence of causes, and concauses, and of causes contradicting one another, which proceeded on their own, creating relations that did not stem from any plan. Where is all my wisdom, then? I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe.” (William of Baskerville, p.492)

“A narrator should not supply interpretations of his work; otherwise he would not have written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations.” (Postscript, p.505)

“The author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text.” (Postscript, p.508)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Umberto Eco is a deconstructionist and advocate of “open texts,” insisting that “A narrator should not supply interpretations of his work; otherwise he would not have written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations.” What are some of the characteristics of *The Name of the Rose* that make it “a machine for generating interpretations”?
2. In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, the character of William of Baskerville is clearly modeled on that of Sherlock Holmes. While the superficial characteristics of the detective may be similar, however, the nature of the mystery and its solution are very different. How does the postmodern mystery composed by Eco differ in critical ways from the classical mysteries created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?
3. The debate between the papal legation and the reformers in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* is over the question of ownership of private property, which the reformers denied. The real issue at stake, however, is the matter of papal authority. Compare this situation with the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Why is it necessary for one whose authority is being threatened to challenge the theology and practice of those who are threatening it?
4. Discuss Jorge of Burgos’ discourse on laughter near the end of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. Is fear as important to right thinking and right living as Jorge states?
5. How is the setting of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* in 1327 crucial to a proper understanding of the novel? Why is it important that the story occurs during the Avignon papacy?
6. In what ways is the character of William of Baskerville in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* a forerunner of Nominalists like William of Ockham?
7. In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, Jorge of Burgos believes that the best way to prevent the baleful influence of falsehood is to keep people from being exposed to it. Do you agree? Which is more beneficial, avoidance of false ideas or exposure to them? Is any type of exposure good, or only that done in a way that exposes the falsity of such ideas? Support your conclusion with incidents from the novel.
8. When William of Baskerville and Adso first visit the library in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (Second Day, Compline, p.163), they see a message appear on the pages of a book, “as if an invisible hand were writing ‘Mane, Tekel, Peres.’” How does this reference to the incident of the handwriting on the wall in Daniel 5 relate to the plot of the novel?
9. In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, William of Baskerville says, “The simple grasp a truth of their own, perhaps truer than that of the doctors of the church.” Discuss the ways in which the novel utilizes the concept of the “wise fool,” in which wisdom beyond their understanding comes through the words of the simple.

10. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* makes numerous references to apocalyptic and the end of the world. Within the framework of the novel, discuss the extent to which Bernard Gui takes on the role of the Antichrist.
11. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* takes its title from a poem written by Bernard of Cluny around 1140. The last line of the novel is also taken from this poem - *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus* ("yesterday's rose endures in its name, we hold empty names"). The author stated that he chose the title deliberately as an "empty name" - one that is capable of so many interpretations that the reader is forced to supply his own. How does this approach cohere with Eco's postmodern philosophy? How did the movie version of *The Name of the Rose* undermine the author's intention?
12. The fact that Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is a satire indicates that the author understood the power of laughter; the negative reaction of his critics indicates that they did, too. The power of laughter is also a key subject in the climactic dialogue between Jorge of Burgos and William of Baskerville at the end of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Write an essay in which you outline the responses of the two combatants in Eco's novel to Erasmus' playful yet serious work of satire. Be sure to cite specifics from both works in developing your arguments.