

## The Electric Hotel by Dominic Smith

### Summary

*The Electric Hotel* winds through the nascent days of cinema in Paris and Fort Lee, New Jersey—America's first movie town—and on the battlefields of Belgium during World War I. A sweeping work of historical fiction, it shimmers between past and present as it tells the story of the rise and fall of a prodigious film studio and one man's doomed obsession with all that passes in front of the viewfinder.

For nearly half a century, Claude Ballard has been living at the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel. A French pioneer of silent films, who started out as a concession agent for the Lumière brothers, the inventors of cinema, Claude now spends his days foraging mushrooms in the hills of Los Angeles and taking photographs of runaways and the striplings along Sunset Boulevard. But when a film-history student comes to interview Claude about *The Electric Hotel*—the lost masterpiece that bankrupted him and ended the career of his muse, Sabine Montrose—the past comes surging back. In his run-down hotel suite, the ravages of the past are waiting to be excavated: celluloid fragments and reels in desperate need of restoration, and Claude's memories of the woman who inspired and beguiled him.

### Discussion questions

1. The Electric Hotel is in many ways a celebration of the birth of cinema and an exploration of some of the characters, technologies and professional conflicts that accompanied the rise of this new entertainment. Did this framing of the story add to your interest in the novel? Were there elements of the development story that appealed to you particularly? Or that surprised you?
2. Our world is so full of still and moving images it is hard to imagine how miraculous the projection of moving images must have seemed to an audience seeing them for the first time. Do you think the author captures the wonder of these moments? Which scenes show this most effectively?
3. The story unfolds as Claude Ballard's recollection of his extraordinary life and career. He moves from Alsace to Paris in 1894 with his sister Odette who is suffering from tuberculosis. He works as a photographer in an asylum and she is cared for in a special ward in the hospital. His fascination with moving images is ignited when he attends a showing by the Lumière brothers in a hotel basement. How does this encounter change his life? What facets of his character are most excited by the possibilities of moving images - his creativity, his enquiring nature, his technical facility, sense of adventure, or something else? How does Claude respond to the opportunities before him? Is there an equivalent development in

media/technology today that offers the opportunities that Claude saw in the advent of moving pictures? •

4. The subject matter of some of Claude Ballard's early show reels is quite diverse. What did you think of the use of the cinematographer to show footage of patients suffering from 'hysteria'; the death of Claude's sister; the cheeky, flirty bathing scene featuring Sabine? What form of non-cinema entertainment does this remind you of? How have our ideas of what can be considered entertainment developed and how might they differ from the audiences in the early 20th century?
5. We first meet the actress Sabine Montrose when she is playing Hamlet in New York, her performance disrupted by the cheers coming from the neighbouring theatre where Claude Ballard is exhibiting his show reels to a vocal and enthusiastic audience. We know it is the evening of her 40th birthday. What sort of woman is she? Is she ahead of her time, a woman in charge of her own fate? A femme fatale trading on her beauty? An artist striving to produce great work? Something else? Is she lonely? What do you make of her entourage with Pavel and Helena?
6. On his global tour Claude picks up the Australian, Chip Spalding, the world's first stunt man and when he arrives in America he is soon involved with Hal Bender the money man, spruiker and ambitious son out to avenge his father's death. How does the relationship between these three men develop? What do each of them bring to the joint enterprise? Were you impressed by the visionary nature of their undertaking? Are they friends as well as business associates? Is their relationship governed by power, status, position? Did you especially like or dislike any of these men? Why?
7. Sabine meets the dying woman Dorothy Harlow as part of her research into the role she is to play in the film *The Electric Hotel*. How does she respond during the visit – is it merely research or is there a more profound reaction? How would you describe it? Why do you think she decides to adopt Dorothy's children? How would you describe her as a 'parent'?
8. At the premier of *The Electric Hotel* Claude speculates on the experience of the audience who are for the first time see a narrative told via film. As a filmmaker he sees "sixteen lies per second" as the film spools through the projector. But he realises the audience experience is different, that "in the theatre, every actor walked onstage at the end...to take a bow and relinquish their roles...In film, for better or worse, there was no renunciation of the conceit". Would this have been a real risk with an audience seeing a narrative film for the first time? What impact does the absence of the "relinquishing" of the role have on the audience? What are the consequences for Sabine? Why does she disappear with the children? Is her reaction understandable? Are there other forms of storytelling where the line between the storyteller and the story can blur?
9. After the film is forced to close Hal, Claude and Chip end up in Belgium, intent on filming battles in WWI. Claude is captured by the Germans and his filmmaking expertise pressed into service to create propaganda films. Would the production of propaganda films during wartime been a new form of psychological warfare during WWI? From what you know of Claude's character and resourcefulness would you have expected him to comply with the German requirements? What do you know about the timing and reasons behind the US entry into WWI?
10. In the opening chapter of the book we meet Martin Embry, an expert in film history. The story unfolds, we presume, in a long, ongoing conversation between Claude and Martin. What opportunities are created by the introduction of Martin Embry and his expertise in film restoration and research? Did anything about the ending of the story surprise you?