

PAGE-TURNER

## TO THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN!

By **Sally McGrane**, FEBRUARY 17, 2014

A decade ago, when Pius App retired from the banking-software company he had founded in Davos, Switzerland, the Hotel Schatzalp, which sits on a sunny plateau a thousand feet above the that city's ticky-tacky downtown, was on the brink of ruin. The building—an imposing Jugendstil manse, constructed as a state-of-the-art sanatorium at the turn of the twentieth century and reachable only by foot or funicular—had been in decline ever since an antibiotic cure for tuberculosis was discovered. “I always liked this place,” said App, looking around at the grand building, which was converted to a hotel in the fifties. “We decided to try to save it.”

App, who is hale and good-humored, knew that he would get to put his engineering degree to use dealing with antiquated electrical systems and the property's old-fashioned ski lift. What he didn't realize was that a literary degree would have been helpful, too. The Schatzalp is the only sanatorium mentioned by its real name in Thomas Mann's “The Magic Mountain.” In the novel's opening pages, it is described as “the highest of the sanatoriums,” built so far up the mountain that “they have to bring their bodies down on bobsleds, in the winter.” Each year, the hotel draws a small but dogged cohort of “Magic Mountain” pilgrims.

Even Mann didn't think “The Magic Mountain” would find more than a few hundred readers. Instead, this “odd entertainment,” as Mann called it, went on to become one of his greatest successes. It is the story of a young engineer, Hans Castorp, who travels to Davos to visit his sick cousin at a luxurious tuberculosis sanatorium, and, instead of three weeks, ends up staying for seven years. Castorp

contracts a mild fever on arrival and, with the collusion of doctors who are perhaps as interested in the sanatorium's bottom line as they are in the health of their patients, comes to the conclusion that a life revolving chiefly around extravagant meals, daily rest cures, love affairs, walks in the woods, philosophical discussion, and plenty of free time to learn about botany, opera, and the occult suits him better than office work. The extremely likable Castorp's sojourn involves butter and milk and getting his blood drawn. But it is also a journey to the underworld, undertaken as he strives to understand the meaning of life and death.

For all the alpine clarity of its prose—even minor characters come completely to life—the book is not a light read. “It’s always a difficult task to read from page one to page, I don’t know, one thousand fifty-four,” said App. “But I’m confronted with many questions.”

Guests have wanted to know about everything from the romantic symbolism of blue flowers to how often the book alludes to “Maria Mancini,” the brand of cigar that Castorp smokes (not to be confused with the sanatorium’s “quicksilver cigars,” used for taking patients’ temperatures). Luckily, App was able to locate a word-searchable version of the book’s text through a university in Japan. “It works!” he said. “It’s always a small wonder for me, because of the umlaut.”

Still, people like the two giddy comparative-literature professors I met at breakfast constitute a minority of paying guests, and the Schatzalp does not advertise its literary heritage. “Sometimes I have to tell my employees, ‘We are not a sanatorium.’ And I don’t want to read it on TripAdvisor, ‘It’s not a hotel; it’s a sanatorium.’ ”

The staff, however, has become accustomed to literary fanatics. After assuring me that the Schatzalp was indeed the setting for “The Magic Mountain,” the twenty-something hotel bartender told me about the gruesome pneumothorax treatment described in the novel, which involves punching a hole in the lung, then filling it with gas; he confided, unbidden, that the underground passageway used to transport corpses to bobsleds without disturbing the other guests still exists, then offered a commentary on the state of the health of Madame Chauchat, the beguiling, chronically door-slamming heroine of the novel—which, the bartender confessed, he had not yet read.

The fictional “International Sanatorium Berghof” is probably not modeled on the Schatzalp. When Mann visited Davos in 1912, his wife was being treated for a minor lung complaint at the nearby Waldsanatorium (now the thoroughly modernized Waldhotel). Mann, who slept at a regular inn during his several-week stay, decided almost immediately to use his impressions of sanatorium life as material for a short story. He envisioned “The Magic Mountain” as a humorous companion piece to the almost-finished “Death in Venice.” At the time, there were some two dozen sanatoriums in the area; App, like other literary scholars, believes that the Berghof combines features from several of these. “You must remember, the Berghof is not a real place,” App said.

Still, there’s a reason for the thrillingly eerie feeling of déjà vu that overcomes a “Magic Mountain” reader on stepping inside the Schatzalp for the first time. “Maybe our luck here is that, at the time when everybody renovated the old buildings, they didn’t have money to renovate the Schatzalp,” App told me. “I think we have the last slamming door left in Davos. All the others are equipped with pneumatic equipment.”

The passage of time—one of the topics Mann handles with such insight in “The Magic Mountain”—brings changes that demand quick thinking. Once, App recalled, a guest arrived and started asking hotel employees where he could find the meeting place for the duel. The melancholy visitor had a Slavic accent, and bore an uncanny resemblance to the character of Naphta—the brilliant, cynical, incurably ill Jesuit from a persecuted Jewish family who undertakes to win Castorp over to his dialectical way of thinking before finally killing himself with a pistol in a duel. Naturally, the proprietor wanted to help.

“This dueling place, it’s pretty clearly defined, where it is, if you know the area,” he said. However, a few years earlier, the river overflowed, and a dam was built there. “It’s difficult to say to someone who is looking for a romantic place with the river flowing by, ‘That place no longer exists,’ ” App said. So he directed the guest to a different spot—one that looks similar, but is located on the other side of the hotel. “At least I did my best,” he said.

“I’m just the custodian of the place here, by accident,” App said, as snow began to fall outside and, somewhere in the bar (which used to be the X-ray room), a man lit

a cigar. “But I think I’m able to do this, and I hope Thomas Mann would like the stories I tell. That Naphta was coming to see the dueling place, but it was no longer available, so we made another one.” He paused. “I hope Thomas Mann would like that, but I’m not sure.”

*Sally McGrane is a journalist based in Berlin.*

*Photograph by Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos.*

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