

TRAVELS IN ELYSIUM

BY WILLIAM AZUSKI

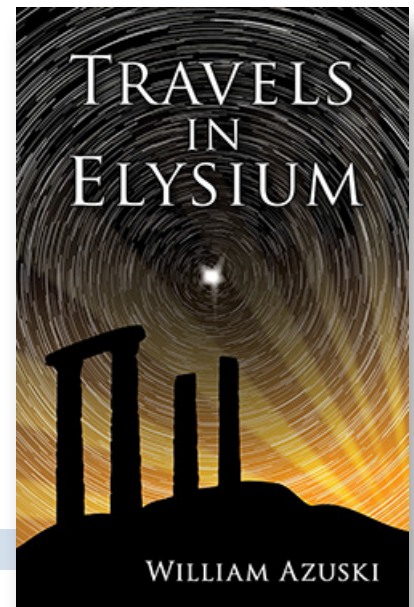
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About Travels in Elysium

When young Nicholas Pedrosa lands the job of a lifetime as an archaeologist's apprentice on a Greek Aegean island, the horizon is blue, his dreams limitless; he's escaped a life of slow death in the grey English provinces.

Yet landing on the scarred volcanic island of Santorini, his expectations are abruptly dashed as he blunders into a funeral procession — that of his own predecessor.

Thus begins a chain of events that seems purposely designed to undermine his confidence in people's motives and conduct, in the meaning of truth, even in the nature of reality itself. Nothing is quite what it appears to be on this island that famously boasts more churches than houses, sheer drops from thousand-foot cliffs, bubbling lava vents, sporadic earth tremors, and an everyday reality so intertwined with myth and folklore it is often impossible to pull the threads apart. Neither the job he applied for, nor its relentless demands upon him. Neither his boss, the autocratic yet strangely mesmerising Marcus James Huxley, nor the ancient Minoan city that is being raised on the island's southern peninsula.

Buried under a 100-foot blanket of volcanic ash, the ancient city has been preserved like a fly in amber, yielding frescoes so exquisite it's been said that an ancient people once created here an image of heaven on earth. But then, on one fateful day some 3,500 years ago, this luminous civilisation was extinguished in an instant that still seems to resonate through time, the erupting volcano tearing the island apart with the force of a 100,000 Hiroshimas.

Yet digging down through the ash that has preserved streets, houses and temples virtually intact, they find a city that is eerily deserted. Where are the entombed bodies, victims of a panic escape, people turned to stone by the falling ash? Everything has been neatly put away, amphorae, cooking utensils, grains and spices. Of the living or the dead, there is not a single trace, neither a fallen body nor even an animal bone.

As Huxley pursues his forensic investigation over the peninsula, reconstructing events in the hours and days before the ancient island met its doom, the psychological pressure he exerts upon his young apprentice tightens relentlessly, notch by notch. Pressures his dead predecessor knew only too well. What does Huxley want from his new apprentice and why? Can this broken ruin of an island really be the remains of Plato's Atlantis, as Huxley now secretly plans to proclaim to the world — or is that, too, just another elaborate deception? What great secret is the archaeologist hiding, as the dig advances over the peninsula with an almost reckless haste?

Over his head, out of his depth, Nicholas Pedrosa suddenly finds himself in the middle of two great mysteries, one ancient, the other numbered in days. Yet as he discovers through experiences that are at times shocking and at times sublime, it is in Plato's mind, and in his metaphysical genius, that the ultimate answer to the mystery resides.

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Travels between islands, mythical, legendary, real... The location and inner meaning of Plato's lost legendary Atlantis... Classical themes of freedom, the destiny of the soul, life and death, and the nature of reality. One could hardly hope for a richer trove of discussion topics. We hope these few pages will act as something of a companion guide to the *Travels*; and that they will enrich your reading experience and your own journey along the way... As archaeologist and author JM McDowell states in her review of the *Travels*: "We are with 'Nico' on his journey. We are meant to question not only what we read and what it means, but also our own preconceptions and ideas."



Discussion Questions

1. Arriving on Santorini, Nicholas 'Nico' Pedrosa blunders into the funeral of his own predecessor, Benjamin Randal. What suspicions are aroused that Benja's death might not have been an accident as first claimed?
2. Almost from the moment of Nico's arrival, Marcus Huxley warns his new apprentice that appearances are deceptive, and that he should take nothing at face value. Part Socratic teaching on the deceptive nature of reality, part warning about the current and future perils they face, can you offer any examples of how appearances in the novel are repeatedly proven to be deceptive?
3. When Nico first learns that Huxley might have discovered the site of Plato's legendary lost Atlantis under Santorini's blanket of volcanic ash, it appears to be a cruel hoax — why? What convinces Nico it was not a practical joke after all, but the vengeful betrayal of a secret?
4. When Nico veers dangerously towards exposing the Atlantis secret at Huxley's ancient-style symposium at Monolithos, the archaeologist's contempt for Plato's legend becomes apparent for all to see. But is that, too, a deception?
5. Apparently driven by revenge, Sam recalls finding a mysterious book in an antiquarian bookshop in Paris — *Travels in Elysium* — its anonymous author describing exotic travels among islands mythical, legendary or real, in the lands of the living and the dead. Why is Huxley so incensed by Sam's revelation?
6. Reciting a passage from the book in spite of Huxley's fury, Sam relates a fifth possible theory for Atlantis, the so-called Plato's Conundrum, an ancient theory which argues that Atlantis is less a place on the map than a sophisticated metaphysical device or 'god game' engineered by the philosopher himself, one capable of magnifying the purity and corruption, idealism and cynicism of the human soul wherever Atlantis is 'discovered'. What satirical reasoning does the anonymous author give for its existence?
7. Once Huxley proclaims the discovery of another Atlantis to the world, how does Plato's Conundrum become apparent; manifesting itself in the archaeologist's own conduct, in the lives of his colleagues, and the island at large?
8. Who is revealed to be the anonymous author of *Travels in Elysium* and why has he long repudiated authorship of the book?
9. After Nico enters the excavations at night, on the trail of another mysterious apparition among the exhumed ancient houses and temples on the hill, Huxley finally admits that his apprentice's first instincts were right: the archaeologists are on the threshold of Atlantis. Confronted by Nico's scepticism now, Huxley challenges him to peer beyond appearances, and see Atlantis for what it really is. Why does he swear Nico to secrecy — what dangers do they face?
10. As Nico falls headlong into Huxley's complex psychological game, in which truths, lies and distortions all play their deliberate or incidental part, what tricks or inducements does Huxley deploy to keep his ambivalent new apprentice on the island? In what way does Huxley believe this approach will push his apprentice to deliver what is expected of him?
11. When Benja's body is found in an excavated Minoan house at the dig, chaos descends upon camp. Who is blamed for exhuming the body of Nico's predecessor and why? Who proves to be ultimately responsible for the crime, and why?

12. What is the one fatal flaw in Huxley's hypothesis that the idyllic civilisation buried under the ash was Plato's lost Atlantis? Why is his second-in-command, Adrian Hunt ('Hadrian'), so incensed, as Huxley presents his case?
13. If there are other motives for Huxley proclaiming the discovery of Atlantis, what might they be?
14. As Nico returns from Athens on Huxley's mission to meet with supporters, journalists and government functionaries, why does he feel betrayed? How does he now think of Atlantis?
15. Who is it that equates the utopia of Plato's Atlantis with the mythical island utopias of the afterlife, Elysium, the Isles of the Blest and the Isles Beyond Sunset? What reasoning does he give?
16. Huxley is described as suffering from an incurable disease as he relentlessly pursues his ambition at the dig — what is that disease, and why is it described as incurable? What quality of Nico's — and those of Huxley's previous apprentices — does he secretly crave?
17. What devastating personal secret has Nico buried deep inside, and why is Huxley's archaeological dig provoking such conflict within him?
18. What upsets Nico most in the house of the death frescoes?
19. Huxley states his conviction that an understanding of death, and what lies beyond it, will change humanity and the world at large. Why does he believe this?
20. As the dig progresses, the sheer volume of fragments and potsherds retrieved reach plague proportions, and seem to curse Huxley. Why? In what sense are they symbolic of his own condition, and symbolic of Atlantis' fall into evil and corruption?
21. Four characters initially step into the house on the hill to peer beyond their own horizons in the Oracle of the Dead. Why is Huxley so incensed by their reports, and why did he decline to join them? When finally pushed to investigate the phenomenon for himself, what is it that he sees? What conclusion does he draw?
22. The author has used hallucinogenic/narcotic metaphors to describe some of the physiological and psychological effects upon the travellers in the ancient house on the hill, 'house 34'. What possible reasons could there be in using such metaphors?
23. When Anna rediscovers her lost love, Renato, in her travels in house 34, why will she have to battle fate to save him? And when finally she turns her back on the house on the hill, and the love of her life, what is it that she wishes most about Renato? What does she learn about fate?
24. Why is Sam's developing relationship with Aris so troubled? Apart from the conservative mores of island life, the pressure of Aris' family and friends, what other metaphysical influences are playing a powerful role?
25. From his frequent travels in house 34, Sam returns with an explanation about life after death that Nico finds both astonishing and daunting. What is that explanation?
26. Frustrated by appearances in his search for the truth, driven to the point of madness by variations in number, shade and nuance — why does Huxley eventually come to realise their "Protean genius?"

27. Their lives have been dominated by “islands, mythical, legendary, real” — from the charred remains of the volcano on which they live and work, to the lush ancient island they are seeking to recover from the ash; from the island idyll the ‘Symposiasts’ seek, to the islands beyond death that Huxley becomes increasingly obsessed with. As he finds himself cast back in time to Santorini’s moment of fiery destruction, what wrenching revelation does Huxley experience about these many island variations, and about the nature of heaven and hell?
28. What traumatic childhood experience did Huxley himself endure that he relives in his final travels in house 34, and how did it colour his attitudes towards reality, his contempt for the notion of fate, and his ruthless determination to puncture the illusion of reality?
29. The village priest, Constantine Nannos, starts the novel as a bitter enemy of Huxley and his ‘heathen’ dig. Yet following his own travels in house 34, he returns to his deathbed with a revelation so shocking to his bedrock Christian faith that Huxley fondly chides: “They will burn you, Papás.” What was that revelation?
30. In his own travels in house 34, Dr Stavros Sanassis finds himself in ancient Athens, and finally confronts an elderly Plato as the philosopher completes his Atlantis dialogues. Seeing the havoc wreaked among his friends and upon his island, he demands the truth from the horse’s mouth: *what is Atlantis?* What astonishing revelation does Sanassis return with?
31. Despite island rivalries and the menacing shadow of the Junta, *Travels in Elysium* conveys a certain innocence about island life and its traditional values. As the story progresses, however, cynicism, greed and opportunism become increasingly evident. What examples does the author give of this symbolic change, and how is the change related to Plato’s *Conundrum* and *Atlantis*?
32. Why does Azuski set the novel in the period of the brutal regime of the Colonels? What symbolic parallels are there between ancient Athens that saw the trial and death of Socrates, Plato’s Atlantis dialogue *Critias*, and the fall of Atlantis?
33. Nico’s final vision of the City of Light has been described as “beautiful and compelling.” Can you name ways in which the accumulated lessons learned by the travellers in house 34 allow the creation of Nico’s vision? What is its quintessence?
34. *Travels in Elysium* has been hailed for its striking use of metaphor, but what does Azuski have to say about metaphor beyond human language? How does metaphor reveal itself in the characters’ discoveries about the nature of reality?
35. Can you find metaphor codes scattered throughout the book that already reveal or point to the dramatic final ending?
36. As he leaves the island, Nico recalls Huxley’s boast that “before this thing is finished, I shall prove that death does not exist.” Given the book’s shock ending, and its sudden transformation of reality, does this new reality validate or refute Huxley’s claim?

Critical Acclaim

"Alternately lyrical, allegorical, sensual and spine-tingling, William Azuski takes the reader on an exciting voyage of discovery, an allegorical tale of the search for the very meaning of existence. It takes the reader to that place where myth, mysticism, nature and human obsession converge. [...] It is a journey worth taking. Four trowels* for William Azuski's marvelous *Travels in Elysium*." — **Bill Gresens**, *Book Reviews, Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center, University of Wisconsin*.

* *Four trowels = run right out to your local book store and buy the hard cover!*

"This extraordinary novel, part murder mystery, part metaphysical thriller, kept me guessing until the very last page. The intellectual duel between the troubled hero and his ruthless mentor is mesmerising. William Azuski's treatment of the Atlantis legend is completely original and I have rarely read a novel with such a strong sense of place. The bizarre landscapes of Santorini and the daily lives of its people, both ancient and modern, are vividly evoked. Anyone who enjoys the work of Umberto Eco, Orhan Pamuk or Carlos Ruiz Zafón should try this book." — **Geraldine Harris**, *author, Egyptologist, and a member of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford*.

"Mr Azuski is a master at setting the scene and placing the characters and action in the landscape. [...] The narrative of the excavation is cleverly entwined with the mythology of the afterlife and there is a good twist in the plot. [...] All in all an excellent book which I could not put down and a recommended read for anyone interested in Greek culture!" — *Archaeologist and historian Haighleagh Winslade*.

"Like Eco and García Márquez, Azuski conjures a remarkable sense of an exotic place. The reader is immersed in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of Santorini under the military junta of the early 1970s and in the mystical reality that intersects with the mundane world. [...] His characters are complex and offer insights into the mysteries and ancient puzzles that surround them as they delve into a lost city—and into their own thoughts and beliefs." — *Archaeologist and author JM McDowell*.

More reviews on [Iridescent Publishing](#).

About the Author

William Azuski was born in the United Kingdom, and is of British and Yugoslav descent. Travelling widely through the Mediterranean since childhood, his frequent sojourns in Greece included several months on Santorini in the 1970s, an experience that provided firsthand experience for this exceptional novel's local setting. Writing as William Miles Johnson, Azuski is also author of the critically-acclaimed *The Rose-Tinted Menagerie*, an Observer Book of the Year (nonfiction), and *Making a Killing*, an end of the world satire, both titles recently republished by Iridescent in ebook form.

