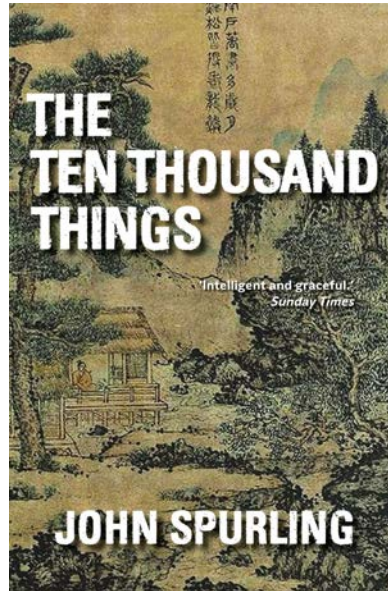


THE WALTER  
SCOTT PRIZE  
FOR HISTORICAL  
FICTION **10 YEARS**



## Readers' Guides



### 2015 Winner

## The Ten Thousand Things John Spurling

Duckworth

### About the author

John Spurling is an award-winning author and a prolific playwright, whose plays have been performed on television, radio and stage, including at the National Theatre. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the husband of Hilary Spurling. Other novels by John Spurling include; *The Ragged End* (1989), *After Zenda* (1995), *A Book of Liszts* (2011), *Arcadian Nights* (2015). *A Mirror for Monkeys* is due to be published in April 2020.

### About the book

*The Ten Thousand Things* takes us on a journey across fated meetings, grand battles and riveting drama.

In the turbulent final years of the Yuan Dynasty, Wang Meng is a low-level bureaucrat employed by the government of Mongol conquerors established by the Kublai Khan. Though he wonders about his own complicity with this regime he prefers not to dwell on his official duties, choosing instead to live the life of the mind. Wang is an extraordinarily gifted artist and his paintings are at once delicate and confident; in them one can see the wind blowing through the trees, the water rushing through rocky valleys,

the infinite expanse of China's natural beauty.

But this is not a time for sitting still as Wang must soon travel through an empire in turmoil. In his wanderings he encounters master painters, a fierce female warrior known as the White Tigress who will recruit him as a military strategist, and an ugly young Buddhist monk who rises from beggary to extraordinary heights.

*The Ten Thousand Things* seamlessly fuses the epic and the intimate with the precision and depth that the real-life Wang Meng brought to his craft.

## Discussion Questions

The story is told from the perspective of Wang Meng, now in prison, reflecting on his long life that has led up to this moment. In the opening chapter he strives to “see the pattern of his own life in the way I see a tree in a landscape and look to myself as someone else.” But how objective can one be in reconstructing their lives from memory? Does being an artist throw an additional dimension into this question? How reliable is the narrator in his old age and present circumstances?

Why does a man of Wang’s age, ancestry and education not have a better job? Is his wife correct when she accuses him of lacking ambition and is he a passive character? And relatedly, what role does fate play in the story?

How do encounters with other artists change Wang’s understanding and approach to art? How do they change him?

## Reviews

“Spurling has mastered many aspects of Chinese history and legend.” *Times Literary Supplement*

“I've never read anything like it... great feats of scholarship and imagination have gone into making these people, so distant from us in space and time.” *Literary Review*

“An intelligent, graceful meditation on the difficulties of reconciling spiritual life with the material world.” *The Sunday Times*

Women are portrayed in the book as being distinct from men and yet WhitTigress breaks with the story’s concept of what “being a woman” means.

Rivers, streams, flowing water are mentioned throughout the text. What is the significance of water in movement in the book?

With increasing importance placed on giving voice to BAME characters, historical figures and authors, how does *The Ten Thousand Things* contribute to our understanding of Chinese culture and appreciation of its history and more specifically of Wang’s contribution to both?

*(Questions supplied by publisher and author)*