*Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse

*Siddhartha* is a Hermann Hesse novel written in 1951. It is a Buddhist tale which follows the protagonist, Siddhartha, as he searches for nirvana. Curiously, the story is set around the time the Buddha became enlightened and started teaching (the man himself actually has a cameo early on).

Plot

Siddhartha is the son of a Brahmin, the highest caste in Hinduism. He is quick with his studies, devoted in his practices and yearns for some kind of spiritual connection with Atman, the One, eternal and unchanging, which he believes lies in his deepest Self.

He outgrows the teachings of his elders and, still looking for Atman, tries his hand at asceticism. This fails him as well and so, after hearing of a wondrous teacher (the Buddha) and gaining a brief audience with him, resolves that he will never find what he is looking for by following the teaching of others.

Following his own inner ‘voice’, he heads into a large town where he gets a job with a merchant. He excels at the work and is able to remain completely detached from the trappings his work brings; money, fine clothes, honour, sex, etc. despite indulging all of them. While Siddhartha is in the town, Hesse emphasises the sense of superiority he feels over the people around him, whom he sees as weak-willed and ill-disciplined. He does however come to envy the base happiness and sensual contentment they seem to find some meaning in. Eventually, over the course of years, Siddhartha himself falls prey to his desires, loses his discipline, and immerses himself in worldly pursuits.

When he finally hits rock bottom, he leaves the town and is just about to commit suicide when, instead, he falls into a deep sleep by a river and regains his courage and sense of purpose. As he is wandering, revitalised and recharged, Siddhartha meets a wise old ferryman named Vasudeva, whose simple lifestyle and aura of calm appeals to him. He ends up living and working with Vasudeva who teaches him how to ‘listen to the river’.

While he is making spiritual progress with the ferryman he runs into his lover, from his wayward days as a merchant, and his (previously unknown to him) son whom she has raised for the past several years. The boy’s mother dies from a snake bite and Siddhartha tries to raise his son by himself but the solitary life of the ferrymen is no life for a youth. Siddhartha is in constant inner turmoil over his disobedient, spoiled son until the boy runs away, returning to the city where his mother lived.

With this obstacle out of the way, Siddhartha eventually attains enlightenment.