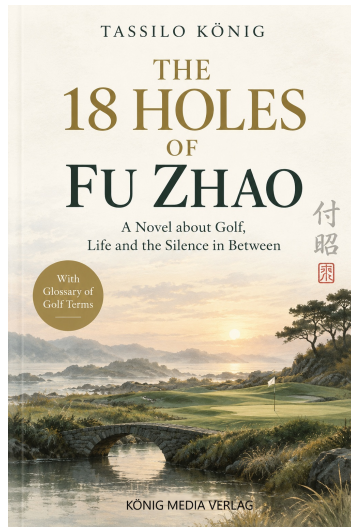




The 18 Holes of Fu Zhao

Tassilo König

READING SAMPLE

Prologue and Hole One – Expectations

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Prologue

The evening before the tournament, I sat alone on the terrace.

Spring had arrived only a few weeks earlier.

The air was still light, untouched by the heavy warmth of summer.

Birds filled the evening with effortless song.

Far beyond the trees, dark clouds gathered quietly on the horizon, promising the season's first thunderstorm.

The setting sun rested gently on my back, while the stone wall behind me slowly returned the warmth it had gathered throughout the day.

The fragrance of basil, rosemary, and Moroccan mint drifted softly across the garden.

Several boxes of brand-new golf balls lay on the table before me.

Preparing them had become part of my ritual.

Before every important round, I balanced every ball I intended to play.

A small electric device spun each ball at high speed until it found its perfect balance.

When it finally rotated without the slightest wobble, I drew a thin equator line around it with a permanent marker.

Later, on the green, that line would help me aim every putt with quiet precision.

My golf bag rested beside my chair.

As always, I cleaned every club once more.

It made little sense.
I already washed them carefully after every round at the
golf club.
The ritual calmed me.
The grips felt clean.
The clubheads caught the last light of the day.
Even my new putter glowed softly in the evening sun.
I sharpened the grooves of my wedges one final time.
Then I stopped.
Something inside me refused to become quiet.
Tomorrow was tournament day.
Nothing unusual.
In the twenty-four years I had been playing golf, I had
entered well over a hundred tournaments and played
hundreds of rounds.
And yet...
The familiar flutter returned.
Just as it always did.
That strange blend of excitement and quiet anriet.
Years earlier, when I still performed as a saxophone
player, stage fright had been my constant companion.
I knew these emotions well.
What if I play well?
What if I don't?
What if I finally lower my handicap?
What if I fail?
Will my body hold up?
What will the others think?
I leaned back.
The evening sky slowly surrendered to crimson.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.
Birds circled lazily overhead.
Silence settled around me.
The breeze grew a little stronger, yet it remained soft
and warm.
And then the question came:
Why does a small white ball have such power over me?
A golf ball has no opinion.
A golf ball does not care.
It does not judge.
It does not praise.
It simply waits.
So why can a golf ball awaken such joy?
Such anger.
Such pride.
I had no answer.
I stood up and walked over to my golf bag.
Maybe putting things in order will help, I thought.
A little distraction has its own kind of wisdom.
Inside one of the side pockets I found tees of different
lengths, a pitch repair tool with a ball marker, a few
practice coins, a well-worn glove, and the familiar little
pencils used for keeping score.
Then...
I noticed a small folded piece of paper.
I couldn't remember ever seeing it before.
Curious, I unfolded it.
There was only one sentence.
Written in a handwriting that felt strangely familiar.
Tomorrow, we play together.

FU ZHAO

I stared at the note.

Fu Zhao.

My Buddhist Dharma name.

The name Fu Zhao was given to me by Lama Fo Fu during my Buddhist ordination in 2002.

福照 (Fú Zhào) – roughly “illuminated by happiness,” “happiness shines,” or, more poetically, “light of blessing.” 福 means happiness/blessing, and 照 means to shine or illuminate.

I always translate for myself as: “The early bird catches the worm”.

I had not heard it...

or spoken it...

for a very long time.

Slowly, I turned the paper over.

The back was blank.

No signature.

No explanation.

Nothing.

Only emptiness. Only those words.

Tomorrow, we play together.

That night I slept badly.

Not because of the tournament.

Because of a question.

Who had written the note?

And how could they possibly know that I would be playing a tournament the next day?

It would take me a long time to understand...

That was never the real question.

The real question was this:
Who is walking beside me?

Hole One – Expectations

„The shot is never born in the club.It is born in the mind.“

Fu Zhao

I have always loved early-morning tournaments.

The sun hangs low above the course.

Dew turns every blade of grass into a mirror.

The flags barely move.

The first light catches the cool morning air, making it
shimmer almost invisibly.

A rolling ball leaves a trail across the green.

The air smells fresh.

Unburdened.

The last cool breath of the night slowly gives way to the
warmth of a new day.

It could not have been a more beautiful morning for golf.

Perhaps...

it already was.

I had risen early.

My back didn't hurt.

Neither did my knee.

The drive to the club had been effortless.

As always, I arrived an hour before my tee time.

There was no hurry.

There never is.

On the practice range, I took my time.
One small basket of balls was enough.
The irons flew straight.
Even my driver felt surprisingly light.
By now, at sixty-four, I had accepted that I would never
become a long hitter.
Strangely enough...
accepting that had made golf easier.
The putting green filled me with quiet confidence.
The ritual of balancing the balls the night before had
done exactly what I had hoped.
Whenever I lined up the equator mark and struck the ball
with a square putter face, it rolled exactly where I
intended.
Not perfectly.
Golf is never perfect.
But well.
Remarkably well.
For the first time that morning, a dangerous thought
entered my mind.
Today could be different.
Perhaps today would be one of those rare rounds...
Perhaps even my best.
Holding on to that quiet hope, I walked toward the first
tee.
Several groups were already waiting.
As always, the starting times were running behind.
And as always...
the performance began.
One player proudly introduced his new driver.

Another casually mentioned the seventy-eight he had shot the previous weekend.

A third explained - without anyone asking - that his handicap was far too high and didn't reflect his true ability.

Everyone laughed.

Everyone looked relaxed.

Everyone lied.

And everyone knew it.

There is an old saying among golfers:

Nowhere do people tell bigger stories than on a golf course.

The little performance around the first tee reminded me of birds of paradise during mating season.

Everyone seemed eager to prove that they belonged.

Yet behind every smile...

I saw the same nervousness.

By tradition, the player with the lowest handicap teed off first.

One smooth practice swing.

Relaxed.

Elegant.

Effortless.

Then...

the strike.

The ball sailed down the center of the fairway as if it were following invisible tracks.

A murmur of approval drifted through the group.

"Nice shot."

The next player stepped forward.

Longer.

Straighter.
Of course.
Why wouldn't it be?
Something inside me shifted.
Only ten minutes earlier I had felt completely at ease.
Now I didn't.
My heartbeat quickened.
I have never liked being able to feel my own heart
pounding inside my chest.
My driver suddenly felt heavier.
My mind became louder.
Just don't embarrass yourself.
Every drive so far has been longer than yours.
They're all watching.
The opening tee shot in a tournament is unlike any other.
It won't win the tournament.
But it can change the player who is about to begin it.
The starter called my name.
My stomach tightened.
Now it was my turn.
There was no way back.
I began my pre-shot routine.
Tee the ball.
Step behind it.
Find the target line.
One relaxed practice swing.
Square the clubface.
One final look toward the fairway.

While I had been waiting, I had noticed an elderly man standing a little apart from the others near the tee marker.

I was certain I had never seen him before.

And yet...

there was something strangely familiar about him.

He wore simple linen clothes in soft earth tones.

Sandals.

Silver-gray hair tied loosely at the back.

A short gray beard.

His hands rested quietly behind his back.

Nothing about him seemed unusual.

Except that he somehow didn't belong there.

Or perhaps...

he belonged there more than anyone else.

He was smiling.

Not at me.

Not at the others.

Simply...

smiling.

"You seem busy," he said.

I looked at him.

"Not yet."

"Oh," he replied gently.

"You already are."

"Busy with what?"

"With tomorrow."

He nodded toward the golf ball on my tee.

"With shots you haven't even played."

I frowned.

For a moment I forgot everyone waiting behind me.
I forgot the tournament.
I forgot the fairway.
I looked at him.
"Do we know each other?"
He smiled.
"Perhaps."
"What if I hit it out of bounds?"
The old man nodded.
"Then your ball will be out of bounds."
I shook my head.
"No. I'll embarrass myself."
He smiled.
"That's interesting."
"What is?"
"A moment ago, you wanted to play golf."
He paused.
"Now you want to make a good impression."
His words landed with surprising force.
The starter was waiting.
My playing partners were waiting.
The ball was waiting.
Only my mind...
had already reached the fifth hole.
"Why am I so nervous?"
The old man looked at the ball.
"Because you're playing two rounds."
I frowned.
"What do you mean?"
He pointed toward the tee.

"One round is here."
Then he gently touched his forehead.
"The other one is up here."
I said nothing.
After a while he asked,
"Which one is harder?"
For the first time that morning...
I laughed.
"The one in my head."
He nodded.
"Then that's where you begin."
"How?"
"By playing only this shot. Only this one."
"Not the next?"
He smiled.
"Not the next."
"Not the one after that."
"And certainly..." ,
his eyes drifted toward the clubhouse,
"...not the prize ceremony."
"Not my handicap?"
He smiled.
"Not your handicap."
"Only this one shot."
He nodded.
"Only this one."
I stepped behind the ball again.
To stay away from the out-of-bounds on the right, I had
already decided to play a gentle draw.
I took a slow breath in.

And let it go.
Then...
I smiled.
Only a little.
For one brief moment...
everything became quiet.
I swung.
The ball took off.
Not perfect.
Not spectacular.
But safely down the middle of the fairway.
I was in play.
That was enough.
When I turned around, the old man was gone.
Or perhaps...
he was still standing there.
Against the bright morning sun, I couldn't tell.
Then I heard his voice.
"The first opponent on any golf course...
...is never the course.
It is the story..."
his voice became almost as quiet as the wind,
„...you tell yourself about the next shot."

End of the reading sample. The story continues in the book.