

Book Club Guide

Minds of Winter by Ed O'Loughlin

1. *Minds of Winter* is a work of historical fiction. What does O'Loughlin accomplish by telling the story in this genre? Discuss how real and fictional characters intermingle, or, how fictional characters are brought to life in a real, historical backdrop. How would the story change without this historical element?

2. How does "The Snow Man" by Wallace Stevens, the poem that stands as the epigraph to *Minds of Winter*, serve the story that follows? How do the last three lines (below) capture the novel's over-arching theme? How does *listening* allow characters to survive or even thrive during their time in the arctic?

"For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

3. In the prologue to *Minds of Winter*, horologists delve into the mystery of the chronometer lost during the Franklin expedition that returns disguised as a carriage clock. The chronometer appears, disappears, and reappears throughout the novel. How does this object act as a talisman or red herring in pursuing the mystery being explored?

4. *Minds of Winter* begins with an elaborate society ball in Tasmania that juxtaposes political and military machinations with trite society intrigue: "The white planks of the deck were a snow field; the dancers were swirls in a blizzard, figments of a winter dream." (52). How does this opening sequence set the stage for the characters, storylines and themes that follow?

5. In finding out that her grandfather and Nelson's brother followed a similar trajectory as they made their way in the arctic, Faye observes: "Maybe stories converge at the poles. Like the lines on the map." (238). How does this observation of converging stories inform the entire collection of stories in *Minds of Winter*? Are there logical and perhaps mundane reasons for why these stories seem to intersect — at both poles, in fact — or is Faye suggesting something bigger and perhaps more mystical?

6. J.R.R. Tolkien once observed the following about the fictional maps designed to accompany his fantasy works: "They are more than illustrations, they are a collateral theme. I showed them to my friends whose polite comment was that they reduced my text to a commentary on the drawings."¹ How do the maps included throughout *Minds of Winter* enhance — or distract from — the novel's storylines?

7. Exploration and mapping were historically male-dominated pursuits. In *Minds of Winter*, several women influence the explorers and voyages. Discuss the female

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

characters who play significant roles or make important appearances in the novel's different exploration stories. How do the influences of these female characters affect this pursuit?

8. Family relationships and connections are clearly important throughout the novel, but are they largely a burden or a blessing? Give examples of both.

9. In his report that concludes *Minds of Winter*, RCMP Sergeant Peake writes, "Some people slip through the cracks." (488). Is Peake right in asserting that the people in his report, whom he does not know, have slipped through the cracks? Or, is being seen and remembered by us, the readers, enough? Discuss Peake's conclusion, considering that people die two deaths: first, their physical death; and second, their death when the last person who remembers them dies.

10. Is Faye and Nelson's final fate tragic or romantic? Is it surprising?