

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

The Gallery of Lost Species by Nina Berkhout

1. *The Gallery of Lost Species* is rich in recurring images — a prevalent one is mirrors. Constance assembles an array of mirrors purchased in thrift stores in Vivienne’s room, and Vivienne later smashes them. Viv has a blade-like silver flask in her purse that she also uses as a mirror. What are some other examples of mirrors or mirrored surfaces in the book? Are the images benign, enchanting, threatening, or do they convey other messages?
2. “Of the two of us, I was the pragmatic one,” (p. 12) Edith observes about her sister Vivienne and herself early in the novel. As the story unfolds, do you agree with Edith’s assertion?
3. The book focuses on observing and classifying lost individuals and species, but labelling and naming is also significant. Perhaps most vivid example is Liam Livingstone. In the longer and abbreviated forms of the names Constance and Vivienne, there are many interesting associations and references. For example, Con and Viv bring to mind the word “convivial,” ironically the last word you would use to describe their relationship. Give other examples of what their names, separately or combined, might suggest.
4. A species relies on healthy pairings of members of that species in order to propagate and survive. Are there so many lost species in this book because there are so few pairings that are healthy and positive? Are there any pairings of characters in *The Gallery of Lost Species* that were or could have been positive, healing, and supportive?
5. “Someday what’s between them shall mean nothing. They will sabotage it themselves in time,” (p. 107) Constance remarks to Edith when Liam and Viv move away together. However, the remarks could also be about Henry and Serena, whose relationship Edith has recently discovered. To whom do you think the remarks are directed? Who else could they be applied?
6. Art is central in Viv’s and Henry’s lives. As Edith observes, “While my sister’s compositions were disguises underpainted with hidden

realities, my father's combinations of seashell, ivory, cornsilk, and lace were images of a cold loneliness" (p. 138-39). While art is both a passion and an at times painful outlet for both Viv and Henry, it is also solace for them, as well as for Constance and Edith. What would you say are Con's and Edith's artistic outlets?

7. What do you think frustrates Edith the most about her beautiful, enigmatic, tormented, and self-destructive sister?
8. What is the importance of Maman, the thirty-foot bronze sculpture of a spider matriarch that resides in front of the gallery where Edith works? Is Maman more of a benevolent or menacing symbol?
9. Edith's job at the gallery carries with it extensive rules, procedures, and restrictions for handling and preserving rare objects. Why does she gravitate to a job with such esoteric demands? Was it a response to dealing with her unique but bewildering family members? Provide examples of the ways in which Edith successfully and unsuccessfully handles her own rare objects — Viv, Con, and Henry.
10. What is the combined significance of Liam studying lapis lazuli in Andes, and of him bringing Edith a bonsai tree as a gift when he returns?
11. "Not a passionate one, are you," (p. 126) comments Raven about Edith's interest in museum studies. Provide examples of how Raven, Theo, and Nick seem to understand Edith and become a surrogate family to her.
12. Many forms of love appear to have been thwarted, met with degrees of disappointment, or been destroyed outright by the end of *The Gallery of Lost Species*. Has any love prevailed or re-emerged? Beyond merely surviving, does it look like any love in Edith's life will ever thrive and grow?