



MY VOLCANO by JOHN ELIZABETH STINTZI

Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. *My Volcano*'s opening paragraphs introduce us to the first sighting of the mysterious Central Park volcano. In describing the jogger and her most pressing concerns that day, the media and their coverage, the public and their reactions to the news and the jogger: why do you think the author chose these elements to be the start of the novel? What tone does this set for the book? What other social commentary did you notice throughout the novel?
2. On June 2, 2016, two important events occur: a volcano sprouts from New York City's Central Park, and Dzhambul—a central Mongolian nomadic herder—is stung by a bumblebee dusted with unusual pollen that is “near-luminescent purple” (page 12). What do these two very different events have to do with each other? How does this early mention of the color purple tie in with other events in the novel?
3. Shortly after the novel begins, we are introduced to the first of several concise nonfiction vignettes that recount the dates, names, ages, and manners of death of violent murders that occurred in the United States in 2016, during the exact same time as the fictional volcano's timeline. What do all of the murders have in common? What overall effect do you think they have on the novel?
4. Reconsider the epigraph the author chose for *My Volcano*: “**Reality is nothing but the opinion of power.**” What do you think this means? How does it tie in with the themes of the book?
5. *My Volcano* features a plethora of imaginative fantastical elements, both physically—*large boulders animating into a destructive headless golem, a magical opal, a tent with octopus legs*—as well as psychologically—*mirrors of selves, past and present time crashing into each other, inhabiting others' bodies*. Which elements had the strongest effect on you? Did the use of these surreal lenses help you reconsider any real-world issues in a new way?
6. Write down on a piece of paper what you think the 3 main themes are of *My Volcano*. Take turns sharing your opinions and explaining why each stuck out the most to you. After hearing from everyone in the group, did your original opinion on the themes remain the same or change?
7. Duncan and Hitomi's work in Japan has them busy trying to uncover the origin of a folktale with versions existing in multiple languages and countries: “**The tale is simple, short, without a maxim or a clearly identifiable moral. In every version, a stranger-figure... comes down from the peak of a volcano... and slowly destroys everything.**” (page 40) How does *My Volcano* explore mythology and storytelling through the various characters, settings, and time periods?
8. Young Angel, having time-traveled to Moctezuma II's Aztec city-state of Tenochtitlan, 500 years in the past, physically unites with “**a small wisp of a cloud, gray and crackling with little lightning bolts**” (page 18)

who helps Angel to speak the language; when the startled Mexica people ask Angel who he is, **“the voice had him say, in Nahuatl, that he was a child of Chantico”** (page 29). According to Wikipedia: “In Aztec religion, Chantico is the deity reigning over the fires in the family hearth.” Why do you think the cloud describes Angel as “the child of Chantico”? What connection does this have to other elements within *My Volcano*?

9. Many characters in this book are described as being “angry,” such as both the lightning cloud and Angel on page 38: **“All I know for sure is that whoever I am, I am always angry. Just like you.”** Who else is experiencing anger? Why do you think this emotion is occurring as a connective thread throughout the novel?
10. The character Makayla works at Easy-Rupt in San Francisco, a start-up that offers **“discreet emotion-managing services in the form of secure, soundproof booths that clients could rent for thirty-minute sessions, starting at \$150 for the bare minimum, with some packages charging as much as \$2,000 and up... to discreetly, safely, and comfortably emote, usually in private”** (page 50). Who has access to this service and why is it in demand enough to be a viable business? What do you think the author was trying to say with this element of the book?
11. The novel focuses on a small diverse set of characters, from all over the globe, showing us their particular perspective of the potentially life-ending catastrophe occurring on planet Earth. What was the effect of seeing the events unfold through the very different characters’ perspectives? What statement do you think the author is making on the topic of global interconnectivity through these characters, despite being siloed from each other by factors ranging from language, nationality, profession, age, sexuality, race, class, and more?
12. Volcanoes erupt—either slowly and quietly, or quickly and violently—when there is some manner of shifting and built-up pressure from within. Through the lens of volcano as metaphor, discuss each of these core characters from the novel, and what “personal eruptions” each is experiencing and why:

Aithne Elgin	Akutagawa Hitomi	Angel Barros Vargas
Ash Griffis	Dr Duncan Olayinka	Galina Sadykova
Jahan Mokri	Joao Favero	Makayla Brooks
Ramineh Niazi	Therese Lusk-Lawther	white trans writer
13. How are these various core characters connected to each other? Draw a diagram showing the connective threads between them.
14. How are bodily transformations explored in *My Volcano*? Which characters experience discomfort in some way with the body they are in? Did the wildly different explorations affect your thinking of how people experience living in their bodies?
15. The idea that there can be many versions of one thing, be it a person, a city, an event—is explored in multiple ways in *My Volcano*. In the case of Ash Griffis, how is the idea of duplicity of self explored in the present setting of Hilo and New York City? How is the idea further explored in the past setting of his life 15 years prior, as an NYU student watching out the window as planes hit the Twin Towers, when Ash thinks: **“It wasn’t until another face appeared beside his, staring groggily out the window, that he realized that the sight from his window was wrong. The shape of the face—which was part of an entire being that had an orange hue—was almost unrecognizable to him as his from fifteen years ago.”** (page 188)? What other examinations of duplicity stuck out for you in *My Volcano*?

16. The nameless character referred to as “white trans writer” lives an unhappy life in the New York City metro area, focused intently on writing a sci-fi novel whose main character, Gish, is on a distant exoplanet, VULCA-9D, **“attempting to adjust to a geologically overactive yet impossibly civilized world.”** (page 26). How are the white trans writer and their fictional character Gish similar? What other interpretations did you have of the white trans writer?
17. We learn early on that people—including both Duncan and Aithne—have “life-stream videos” capturing and live-broadcasting their private lives inside their homes. Duncan has multiple cameras in his small Tokyo apartment which his love interest, Aithne, watches, but we learn that hundreds of strangers watch him as well. Makayla is one of them, whose reason for viewing is: **“Seeing that man existing in his life, banal as it was, made Makayla feel like she was suspended in the quiet air, or floating on a waveless sea. She felt like so much more was possible for her and the people she loved than pain.”** (page 106) Were you surprised by the “life-stream” element in this book? Do you have any new opinions of real-world digital connectivity or sharing on social media? How about in the wake of Covid-19?
18. What happens to Dzhambul after he is stung by the bee? Consider the following lines: **“As more humans joined Dzhambul’s ranks, things got easier... All that was clear to Dzhambul was that the sense of the self should be never-ending. That the herd, collected and connected at the fullest bandwidth, was correct.”** (Pages 109-110) What are Dzhambul and his network seeking? As the novel progresses and the volcano has erupted, what becomes of Dzhambul’s network?
19. The beverage company Sun Chunk Juice Co. recurs throughout the novel. They have a global enterprise with lemon tree farms in India; they are one of the many businesses that places huge billboards on the new volcano; their many large-budget lemonade commercials are described in detail, and all feature the slogan “WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, WE’VE GOT YOU COVERED”—what were some memorable scenes from their commercials? What role do you think Sun Chunk Juice Co. plays in the book?
20. In this novel, we see a wide range of reactions to an overwhelming global problem: some people try to tackle head-on the issue of a massive, fast-growing volcano in New York City, learning all they can about it; some people deny its very existence; some people try to capitalize on it; some people choose to accept it and adjust to a new life with it. How do these various reactions mirror those that are occurring now, in our own lives? Discuss what you think the author was trying to achieve.
21. We are introduced to an elderly woman named Old Otherwise—living a solitary life, unnoticed, in Homer, Alaska—who is kept busy building a diorama: **“As the years went on, civilizations began to sprout. Rough wooden human figures began to stick together in bunches, spread throughout Old Otherwise’s huge shadow box. The first figure she’d carved, the figure of Young Otherwise—her first self—remained and was slowly blended into the communities.”** (page 206) Who is this character? What role do you think she plays in the book? How is she connected to the other characters and elements of the novel?
22. The author chose to structure the book into larger sections titled PRIMARY WAVE, SECONDARY WAVE, SURFACE WAVES, and then STILLNESS. What largely takes place in each of the 4 sections? How do the titles and sections connect with the major themes of the novel?
23. *My Volcano* has multiple endings, on pages 280, 291, and 306. What effect did it have on you, and how do you think it’s fitting for the book and its central themes? Talk about the final lines of the book and your interpretations of them.