



OTHER MINDS and Other Stories

BENNETT SIMS

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Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion
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1. In her review for the American Booksellers' Association, bookseller Caitlin Baker wrote that author Bennett Sims is “**the master at exploring the horror in everyday mundane situations**”: How do the varied stories in this collection fit that description? As a group, discuss specific examples in the book that stood out the most to you in this regard.
2. With “La ‘mumma di Grottarosa” and “Medusa,” the collection is bookended by single-page stories accompanied by photographs: How did the length of these two stories affect your reading of them? Discuss your preconceived notions of how long or short a “short story” ought to be and then talk about whether these two stories altered your opinion. What might a single-page story be able to uniquely achieve?
3. The puzzle of “other minds”—what another might be thinking and why—is a core theme that runs throughout the stories in this collection: In the title story “Other Minds,” what causes the reader anxiety and paranoia? Talk about how technology is examined in this story.
4. In the sectioned story “Minds of Winter,” what revelations does the narrator have while watching snow fall? How is language like a virus? How does the blizzard relate to ideas of memory and mourning?
5. In the story “Pecking Order,” what happens to the man’s plan to compassionately slaughter their flock of chickens? How do they each feel about Simone? In what ways does the situation ultimately affect the relationship between the couple? Would you say there is a “pecking order” between them as well?

6. **“Death is just the stable framework, the cutout structure, within whose void a million mortal faces blur.”** (p. 78) — In the story “Portonaccio Sarcophagus,” what does our narrator notice about the ancient sarcophagus? What various thoughts does this detail lead to? How is the narrator’s mother and her declining memory intertwined in the story?
7. Discuss the effect of seeing images within the story “Portonaccio Sarcophagus,” and whether you believe it changed your experience of it.
8. Many of the stories prominently feature historical objects through which ideas of living and death are explored. Discuss the effect of this using the examples of *The Great Crack* in “Afterlives”; the mummified Roman girl in “La ‘mummia di Grottarossa’”; the mosaic Medusa protecting ancient manuscripts, books which **“extend mortal forms across immortal time”** (p. 203); in the story “The New Violence,” how is the imagery depicted on the ancient Etruscan jug different from that depicted in the *giallo* genre Italian horror film?
9. Consider how the idea of being haunted is depicted in various ways throughout the collection. First discuss the story “The Postcard,” where the investigator asserts: **“A ghost is the ongoingness of a memory, it stays behind on behalf of what it recalls, what it cannot forget, unfinished business...”** (p. 189) Who is haunted in this story? How does “The Postcard” investigate ideas of identity and memory? How do you interpret its ending? Which other stories stood out to you on this theme?
10. **“He had become possessed by someone else’s possessiveness, paranoia, obsession.”** (p. 21) The story “Unknown” starts with the seemingly harmless act of momentarily lending a cell phone to a stranger. How does the man’s perception of what happened during this brief moment in the mall affect his later thoughts and actions? What does he become obsessed with? Talk about how our complicated relationship with technology is investigated in this story as well.
11. Consider the story “Introduction to the Reading of Hegel”: If you are a person who is in the academic world, discuss how you felt about the graduate student’s experience while applying for a prestigious fellowship. Did it ring true to your own experiences in any way? If you are not in academia, what stood out to you the most about the applicant’s thought process while pursuing the opportunity. As a group, discuss whether you think this is unique to the academic world, or universal.
12. Thinking back over all of the stories in this book, which ended up being your favorite? What other connective themes did you notice in the collection? As a group, take turns sharing and explaining the reasons why.