



***She Is Haunted* by Paige Clark**

Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Even though the collection *She Is Haunted* is comprised of 18 short stories that vary in settings, eras, and characters, what common threads would you say the stories share? Which aspects of the collection resonated most deeply with you?
2. The first story is titled after famous psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who wrote the book *On Death and Dying*, which introduced the idea of the five stages of grief in the face of death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. What are the things that the pregnant main character has in her life that she cherishes? What is she most worried about? How is her relationship with God intertwined with the ideas on death that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross presented?
3. Although several of the stories center directly on the death of a loved one (consider “Times I’ve Wanted to Be You,” “The Cranes,” “She Is Haunted,” and “Dead Summer”) or the breakup of a relationship (consider “A Woman in Love,” “Fortune,” “Gwendolyn Wakes”), the resulting grief and methods of coping take many different forms. Talk about how the characters in these stories reacted to their situations and how they handled the overwhelming emotion of loss.
4. Many of the characters that appear in the collection have variations of the name Elizabeth, and the opening dedication reads: “For all the Elizabeths who have lived through this and more.” What effect did the commonality of the different characters’ names have on your reading? Who do you think the book is dedicated to?
5. In the early story “Lie-in,” identity—and the connection between language and identity—are explored through the character of a ballerina who has sacrificed everything for ballet, but is now reckoning with a career-ending injury. While on a global ballet tour, who is her husband Paul paired with? What are the different reasons why this causes so much jealousy for the injured ballerina? Why do you think this is the moment that she chooses to enroll herself in a Cantonese language class for the first time? Were you surprised by the ending of this story? Talk about what role you see language playing in defining a person’s identity; what might the experience be for someone who looks “like a native speaker” and is assumed to speak a given language, but does not? What does the Cantonese teacher reveal to the ballerina about her own name? Speak about how this character’s choice in their name relates to identity.
6. Communication and the many different forms that it can take are in focus in the story “Conversations with My Brother about Trees,” where how and why trees “speak” to each other is intertwined with scenes of a mother and her daughter over the course of her childhood into adulthood. The daughter reveals to the reader: “my mother was born in a foreign tongue. And though her English is perfect and her Chinese broken, I don’t understand her.”

What are some examples of how trees “speak” to each other? Why do you think the daughter might be so interested in this? How are the daughter and her beloved backyard sycamore tree similar?

7. Different facets of racism, specifically endured by East Asian women, are explored in the collection’s stories. What instances of physical attacks, fetishization, discrimination, and microaggressions stood out to you the most? Discuss the different scenes that depicted some of these experiences and what impact they had on you as the reader.
8. Beloved pet dogs appear as an important element in many of the stories in the collection, including “A Woman in Love,” which features Minnie, “a long-haired chihuahua cross—the color, shape and size of a sweet potato,” at the center of a newly divorced couple’s conflict. Early on we learn that Bettie and Bernard chose to have a medically induced abortion at three months of pregnancy. How does Bettie feel about this decision? Why do you think she becomes so singularly obsessed with either keeping Minnie in her life, or creating a clone of Minnie instead?
9. The story “What We Deserve,” set in an unspecified post-Covid future time, focuses on Rosa, now in her 80s and a resident in an aged-care facility, as well as flashbacks from her past. What realities of facility-care does this story explore? Were you surprised by any of the interactions of the residents, their care givers, and the families that come to visit, such as Rosa’s adult daughter Stella?
10. In “Safety Triangle,” the story’s narrator recounts a scene from a family vacation to the top of a volcano: how did each of the family members feel about this experience? What does the mother say to her daughter, our narrator, at the top of the volcano? What do you think the mother’s intentions were? Of this interaction, the narrator says: “How can I be a mother when I don’t know how to be a daughter?” What do you think the narrator’s expectations of herself were?
11. The story “Snow Angels” is centered on two college-age friends, with a beautiful coat being lent from one friend to the other tying the story together. Right away, Bethie is shown to be naïve and optimistic—playing in the snow like a child—while Stirling appears to be much more aware and realistic—protecting her friend from the freezing cold. What is their friendship like? What happens to Bethie while she is walking down the street, which Stirling witnesses? Describe each young woman’s reaction to this random act of violence. How does this experience change Stirling’s feelings about her beloved coat? In what ways does this story pay homage to the famous 1842 short story “The Overcoat” by Russian author Nikolai Gogol?
12. Many stories in the collection explore the experience of being present with a loved one as they are dying, and what comes next for the living. What specific emotions are examined in the story “Times I’ve Wanted to Be You,” where a widow, Beth, insists on only wearing the too-big clothes of her husband? What does Janie do for Beth? How do Beth’s emotions change over the course of the story?
13. Strong female friendships are depicted throughout the collection, from major to minor elements within the stories. Which relationships in particular resonated with you the most? Did any remind you of experiences you’ve personally had?
14. Many of the collection’s stories shine a spotlight on extremely complicated mother-daughter relationships. In “Why My Hair Is Long,” the narrator says: “Tell someone you do not speak to your mother and they always say

you should instead of *why*.” In this story, what was her childhood relationship like with her mother? How is her experience juxtaposed with that of her new boyfriend? Beyond just disliking a haircut given to the daughter by the mother, why was this act in particular so significant? How does the estranged daughter feel about her relationship with her mother as an adult?

15. The idea of forgiveness in close relationships—between friends, parents and children, couples—is present in multiple stories, including “Why My Hair Is Long”: is there anything the mother could have done to win forgiveness? In the story “Fortune,” we see two close friends consoling each other: what decision has each young woman recently made, prompting one to say aloud: “What can a person forgive?” Were there any other instances in the collection that struck you as further exploring this topic?
16. The story “Private Eating” opens with a woman telling a lie in order to appeal to a man who is a handsome doctor and a fierce vegetarian. We are also quickly introduced to the fact that the woman recently experienced a breakup based on a lie, with her ex claiming to want to raise their future children as Christians, but her conclusion was: “He would not marry a Chinese woman. His parents had won. The entire time they dated, the woman’s boyfriend had not been to church once.” Do you think her current behavior with the doctor is being affected by her previous failed relationship? In what ways does she make sacrifices for her new boyfriend? Does the doctor turn out to be as wonderful as she hopes he will be? What is the woman’s relationship with food like while she is dating him? Why do you think this is?
17. An imagined future experiencing the extreme effects of global warming is the underpinning of “Amygdala,” where brain surgery—in order to continue living on the planet—is commonplace. What is the world like in this future setting? Eliza chooses to have her left frontal cortex removed and Adam has his amygdala removed: what are the pros and cons of each surgery? What is their post-surgery life like? Did anything surprise you about this depiction of an overwhelming, current-day concern?
18. In “Dead Summer,” the story that ends this collection, we meet a young woman who has just lost her mother, having been in the hospital with her during her final days as she quietly passed away. What is the woman’s immediate reaction to her mother’s death? How does she treat the people closest to her in the aftermath of losing her mother? What effect did the constant reminders of heat versus cold have on you while reading this story?
19. In the title story, “She Is Haunted,” we’re met with an opening quote that questions our realities—that “your reality is the only reality” may be incorrect. What tone does this set for this two-part story? Do you think it is an idea that might extend past this story, to the collection as a whole? In Part I, our narrator is the ghost of a woman who has died of cancer and is now visiting her family members; upon visiting her mother, the ghost says: “I haunt not so she can see me, but so I can see her.” What realizations does the ghost-daughter have of her childhood and of her mother? In Part II, it is the mother that has died: what is her experience like witnessing her own funeral? Does she have any regrets about her daughter? Each part of this story shows us insight into the daughter’s and the mother’s realities: are they incompatible? Did the ideas explored in this story resonate with you on a personal level, considering relationships in your own life?