

THE WORLD WITHOUT US

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B L O O M S B U R Y

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Reading Group Questions

The World Without Us

Mireille Juchau

1.

Many of the characters in *The World Without Us* grapple with loss and absence. They find various ways to express this. Tess watches her mother Evangeline pushing the old Peg Perego pram:

It was packed with paint, solvent and palettes, with sketchbooks and canvases and a waterproof cover so that it could stay out in all weather, night and day. Whenever Tess saw it, parked alone in the cow paddock, her heart raced till she remembered – no baby in there, just tubes of oils leaking on to the patterned lining. (11)

While Evangeline crafts a memorial to her lost child, dangling the packaging of Pip's medication from trees, Tess herself has stopped speaking, but communicates through her writing. Meg's sketches enable her to express some of the feeling she otherwise restrains.

How do characters' rites of mourning express their personalities and histories? How much mourning might be beyond language, and in what ways might language, in its various forms, offer consolation? Can language limit or inhibit mourning?

2.

Alberto Manguel's review of *The World Without Us* in *The Guardian* comments on its poetic style. He writes: 'Almost any page of this astonishing novel offers proof of a writer of great poetic power'.

What makes a work of prose poetic? Is it its imagery – the vision of a bereaved mother under her umbrella, pushing a pram through fields at dawn, or of trees with their winter branches 'blown bone clean'? Which images stand out for you? Can a 'poetic' novel express things another might not be able to? What is the difference between prose and poetry? Is the poetic something to do with emotional expression, and the ache and pull of deep emotional currents? Poet Edward Hirsch in *How to Read a Poem* has said that he feels, in the poems he loves best, that he is 'in the presence of the heart's voice arguing with itself'. Is that part of this novel's power?

3.

The novel's landscape, like its characters, is damaged, struggling and resilient. How does the landscape relate to characters' emotional states? This novel has been discussed as an example of climate fiction, or climate change fiction (cli-fi, like sci-fi). Do you find this labelling helpful in considering the novel? Does the novel contain elements of other genres? How does it combine these elements? How does the novel's exploration of environmental issues affect its characters' lives and decisions?

4.

Motherhood and parenting are central to the novel. As well as the depiction of strong bonds, Juchau explores disconnection and silences between parents and children, and for those mourning a child, or the opportunity to be a parent. In your reading, which relationships were most resonant? How does Juchau depict the interwoven nature of communities, and the complex enmeshments within families?

5.

Although the novel circles around trauma – Pip's illness and death, and the events that precipitated the destruction of the commune – its focus is as much on resilience and re-making. Geordie Williamson captures this in his review in *The Australian* when he describes the novel as 'a bright, bracing marvel of a book despite the bleak stuff from which it is made'.

What are some of the ways its characters re-imagine their lives? How do place and migration affect this re-making of lives? What role does creativity play?

6.

The novel's love stories are dynamic and shifting, highlighting moments of connection and affection between an array of characters, rather than a more conventional romantic dyad. What is the role of Jim, and how does his relationship with Evangeline affect the healing she undergoes, and how does her place in his life alter him? Which other strands of the novel's love stories did you find affecting or striking?

7.

The novel is full of secrets and mysteries. The novel's structure is itself hive-like, with the hum of intersecting energies, and the intricate and delicate rhythms and patterns. How did this affect your reading? How does it express the novel's overarching ideas about interconnectedness, story and community?