



HUNGRY GHOST THEATER: A NOVEL by Sarah Stone

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CONVERSATION STARTERS

At the Edge

- Why does the novel begin with the stage play of Inanna and Ereshkigal? How does the play, based on ancient Sumerian myths — “You must surrender your golden robe to pass through this gate”— foreshadow the themes of the novel?
- Julia tells the children about Dante’s Inferno, “The only way out was through hell, which is all ice at the very bottom.” What does it mean that the deepest layer of hell is ice, and why do you have to go through it? Is this true of the characters in the novel? In what way might it be true of your own life?
- As part of our introduction to Arielle, we receive this description: “She has the look of a silver fox, sharp-faced, white-blond hair and translucent skin, her head tipped to one side. As if she were both intently listening and on the verge of disappearing back into the forest. Little changeling.” What kinds of experiences do you imagine such a child will have?

Rescue

- How do “the public nightmare” (the references to contemporary events like Abu Ghraib and the book Ray is writing on the history of warfare) and “the private nightmare” shed light (or darkness) on each other in the novel?
- What do you make of the fact that “Ray had a secret admiration for all warriors, their recklessness, their vivid lives?” Does this have an impact on Arielle?
- The novel goes into detail on Eva’s work as a scientist in neurochemistry, mesolimbic systems, etc. What effect does this have on how you see the more personal events, such as Arielle’s mental illness?

Rescue (continued)

- Arielle tells her parents about the United States and Korean history, “You think you’re protecting someone, but you’re really enjoying your power.” She may be accusing *them* of hypocrisy in their attempts to protect *her*. Is it a valid accusation, or a symptom of her addiction and mental illness?
- Ray becomes exasperated with Arielle and says, “You have no idea of your own strength. You are capable of being anything you could ever want to be. Don’t sell yourself short.” Arielle laughs “in disbelief” before Ray begins to yell again. What is Ray not understanding about his daughter?
- Robert, Eva, and Arielle see a wedding on the streets of Seoul. “Her parents both watched the brides for a moment, wistfully, as if Arielle weren’t there, as if she couldn’t see them calling up her other phantom self, the one the drugs had never yet managed to kill.” Is this phantom self the part of Arielle that harms with drugs, the part of herself that her parents love, or both, or neither?

Stage Fright

- Julia “considered herself sensibly agnostic, was interested in myths primarily for their illumination of Jungian psychology and their dramatic potential.” How would you describe your own relation to myths and religious beliefs?
- Piers says to Julia, “I don’t know when you’re acting,” and she replies, “What else would I be doing?” The theme of people acting when they interact runs through the novel. Do you feel that you’re acting when you talk to people? Always? Does it trouble you that people may be acting when they talk to you?
- When Julia is jealous over Robert’s affair with Alyx, he tells her, “We don’t have to follow other people’s rules, Jules. We’re not like them.” When it comes to jealousy, do you think some people are really not like others?
- After Piers tells Julia of his stage fright, she tries “to imagine what it was like to be so thoroughly yourself that you could no longer be anyone else.” Are you able to become someone else at times? Is the ability to become someone else an ordinary part of human experience, or is it rare, something only a few people (like actors) experience? Is it disturbing to think that other people, even people you love, are acting when they’re with you? Is it disturbing to think that they’re not? Julia’s expression of sympathy for Jules at the end of the chapter is both genuine and fake. Could you accept sympathy like that?

Stage Fright (continued)

- Julia doesn't seem to think she has a personality, thinking "her efforts to develop a personality—what was a personality?—had come to nothing. As near as she could figure out, she didn't entirely exist." And "Whenever you opened your mouth to talk about your own life, you made it into a story, and the truth of it, whatever that was, slipped even further away." Does Julia lack a personality or does she simply lack faith in her own internal qualities?

News of the World

- Alyx says to the theater group, "It's our job, right? To bear witness to the things our audiences don't want to see or think about? But they come to us because, at some level, they count on us to show them what they already know. What a relief it is to stop denying it all. And once they face it, they can take action." Is this the purpose of art? If you're an artist and feel that it's the purpose of at least your art, how would you try to achieve it? Robert's way?
- Why does the novel switch to first-person in this section, and with "Jessie" as the narrator, a character we haven't even met before? Is the switch effective?
- I didn't know who I was during the torture improv or when I didn't recognize Selene." Jessie purports to know herself, yet says this. Does she know herself, or is she trying to convince herself that she is fundamentally, without any exception, a good person? How often do you think people try to convince themselves or others of either?
- Jessie says, "If I'd been in Milgram's lab, I would have refused to deliver the shocks, or at least the highest level of the shocks." But then she says, "I still don't know what I might be capable of if I lived indefinitely in the country of the strong." Do you believe that anyone is capable of anything, of torturing other people in the "right" circumstances? Would you be capable of anything?

Ravenous: A Ghost Story

- Different sections of the novel focus on different characters, so the "main" character changes throughout the book. In this chapter it's Katya, but is there one character who overall is the main character, or is it fluid? Who would be the "main" character? What effect does the fluidity have?
- After eating chicken, Katya thinks, "Just because you're the same person doesn't mean you're the same self. A tiger lives inside, and it needed some meat." Then she thinks, "Oh, please ... there is no tiger inside you. The worst kind of lie is a lie you tell yourself." And then, "Katya wonders if everyone has these fights in their head or if she's

Ravenous: A Ghost Story (continued)

losing it.” Is it a sign that she’s losing it?

- “Maybe Katya’s superpower is the ability to name other people’s superpowers.” What does this imply about Katya? What’s your superpower?
- Katya “sometimes thinks she feels about the Press Box the way a real Jew would feel about *shul*. The place where you’re most yourself, the place where you go to be with your tribe.” Katya also seems to think that the Press Box is not a healthy place for her to spend a lot of time, so what does this mean? Where do you feel most yourself?

Dream Boards

- Why is this chapter presented as a play, and a play where the characters are working on an art project? The first exercise is to “find images that represent your ideal life and future and make them into a collage.” What images would you pick to represent your ideal life, and what to represent your real life?
- Lily says to Philip, “I want you to put one thing on that dream board that has nothing to do with climate change, world hunger, or war and torture.” Why does she say that? Do you agree with her, or is it a sign of her dementia? Is Philip too obsessed with “political” issues, or is he right to focus on them?
- How does this chapter’s focus on the grandparents change the reader’s perspective on the main characters?

Shoreside

- Arielle refers to “breakfast theater at Shoreside.” The novel often draws attention to the theatrical aspects of ordinary (and extraordinary) events in everyday life, the contrast between “theater” and “sincerity.” Is sincerity just another form of theater, or is it cynical to think so?
- What does Jack mean when he says, “Adulthood looks worse from the outside”? What does he mean by “adulthood,” and do you agree with him?
- Arielle thinks, “Gina can be a little toxic. But, as Grandma Lily would say, aren’t they all fiery and remarkable beings of the human realm?” Gina often seems more than a little toxic. The theme of what’s toxic often comes up. To what extent should human beings simply avoid what’s toxic, especially toxic people, and to what extent do “toxic people,” too, have something to offer and teach?

Shoreside (continued)

- Gina sees ghosts, like Billy, who hung himself. How is this an impression of what she is going through?
- As Arielle looks out the car going home at the end of the chapter, she thinks, "How wickedly beautiful it is. ... It is all made out of itself. It all means something. Unless that's the drugs." Why is everything wickedly beautiful to her? Is it the drugs? What does it mean that "it is all made out of itself"?

Six Hells

- This chapter seems to be the novel's deepest descent into hell. Why is it presented in mythological terms, and as a play? How would it be different if it were done as realistic narrative? What do you like or dislike about this way of presentation?
- Can you imagine this performed on stage, or is it a "literary" play, i.e., one that needs to be read on the page? If it were actually on stage, how would it be done? For example, what would the leopard, lion, and she-wolf look like?
- It's Julia who resists the animals and Eva who finally leads the two sisters into the forest and ultimately to the killer. Is there something about the way Julia thinks about the world and the family that keeps her away from danger? Or is there something about Eva that pulls her toward danger?
- Julia drinks from the waters of memory while Eva drinks from the waters of Lethe (forgetfulness). As a result, Julia is more in control than Eva for much of this scene. In what ways is this the opposite of their actual lives? In what ways is this similar?
- Was it inevitable that Eva would make choices that would cause her to remain in the underworld and Julia would do the opposite?
- When Julia asks, "Who else would we be?" the question harkens back to her thinking that she lacks a personality. After her trials in the underworld, does she learn that she does in fact have personality?
- Do you think it's possible to find empathy neurologically, as Eva believes? Eva contrasts her belief in science with Julia's in art. "You want people to go to a play and see the light, you want to make art that stops people from being crazy. I'm not sure that's how it works. Look at Mom. Her life's been all about art." Is it wishful thinking to believe that art makes people more empathetic?
- Ereshkigal says to Eva and Julia, "Part of your task, in getting out, will be to remember what matters" From the book's perspective, what does matter?

Train Ride

- Sonja sees warehouses outside the train full of “whatever non-actors use to set up the stage sets of their houses, before they forget they’re playing a long-term role and start thinking of this performance as their life.” Part of the book’s impact seems to be to cause non-actors to realize that their lives, too, are performances. Do you think this is true? If so, how does it make you feel?
- Simon explains theater to the children, Robert and Eva, like this: “You change what happens on stage and you can uncover the causes. You can stop being a machine, stop reacting according to your habits. We play games with power and status so we learn to recognize them and how they work.” Who does he mean by “we” —actors, others in theater? Is the purpose of art more to transform the artist than the audience? Do you think theater does have this effect? Does this novel help you learn to recognize power and status games?
- What do you think of Simon Magus? Is he wise, or on a power trip? When he has the group act out Robert’s tragic story of his grandparents at Treblinka, he says, “There’s always something one could have done.” Is that true?
- Simon Magus’s idea that “If you can work the situation through to the end, you will be released from it” catches the young Robert’s attention. In what ways does Robert continue to work situations through to the end in his adult life? Does that work out well for him, or was Simon’s idea destructive?

The Unforgivable Stories

- What is the tone of the Scheherazade Institute? Does it seem like a place where Julia, Robert, and their troupe can grow and produce?
- When Robert tells Julia and Alyx they’ll all be staying the same cabin, Julia wonders about his motives. “This power play was some part of his master plan. Did he really want to break up with her? Did he want her to get back together with me? Did he have some more complex idea going on?” What was Robert trying to gain by having all three of them in the same place?
- Is Julia too hard on herself in feeling guilty for what happened to Eva, or is she simply honest with herself about it?
- Much of the novel reflects on different approaches to art: Robert and Julia’s vision of theater, the Shakespearian group, the naked group, etc. Most of the artists in the novel want to raise people’s consciousness about events going on in the world, hunger, Abu Ghraib, etc. Is that what the novel itself wants?
- Julia also contrasts her vision of theater with the vision of “Prospero,”

The Unforgivable Stories (continued)

and says, “We’re not so interested in being loved. Or liked for that matter. For us, it’s about making something that never existed and, in the process giving people what—if they only knew it—they sometimes need worse than food or medicine.” What is it that people need worse than food or medicine?

- Alyx says to Julia about the artists’ community, “Wouldn’t you think we’d all be nicer to each other? I mean, given that our whole lives are about revealing the structures of cruelty and deception?” “I don’t think it necessarily follows,” Julia responds. Again this raises the issue of art and empathy. *Does it follow?*
- What are all the meanings of hunger that are relevant to the novel? As the group prepares for its “hunger performance,” Julia says, “All summer, we’d keep coming back to the question of hunger, or hungers... .”
- When Katya talks about going to AA meetings, Julia thinks, “Nobody in our family had ever had anything to do with programmed approaches to getting help—we all preferred to fight dramatic battles by ourselves, which, it occurred to me now, had always meant losing them. But on our own terms.” Does fighting a battle by yourself always mean losing it? How do you feel about “programmed approaches”?
- What about Julia’s visions? After she wakes up and sees someone in her room pointing a gun at her, she tells Alyx it was “A dream. I think.” But then she says, “I didn’t believe it was a dream.” She has several visions or dreams or hallucinations. What do you think they are? Is it possible they are real?
- What do you think of Julia’s criticism of Robert’s view of theater: “I’ve just understood how much you’ve given up on theater. We wanted to transform people’s imaginations. Now we’re trying to horrify them into waking up.” Robert responds, stressing the urgency of the situation: “Maybe it’s already too late. We have to turn a ship a hundred times the size of the Titanic.” Does art need to horrify people in order to wake them up? Can it wake them up?
- Who is the woman with braids in the audience at the end? Or who does she remind Julia of, and why does Julia say, “she was more real than we were”?
- Finally, what does it mean that artistic creation is ultimately not for either the artist or the audience, but is “carrying a letter from a god to a god”?