

Reading Group Guide

The Nature of Monsters

By Clare Clark

Introduction

Clare Clark's acclaimed debut novel established her as a master storyteller. Now, with *The Nature of Monsters*, she transports us to another intriguing chapter in history, deftly weaving a fast-paced plot with fascinating details about life in eighteenth-century London.

Sixteen-year-old Eliza Tally arrives in England's teeming metropolis while it is emerging from the ashes of the Great Fire. She is awestruck by a tumultuous city that bears no resemblance to the rural home she has known all her life. She has been sent away to serve as a maid to an apothecary named Grayson Black, a position hastily arranged in order to avoid a scandal: She is carrying the unborn child of a Newcastle gentleman. But Eliza will soon learn that her time with the Black family will extend well beyond the baby's birth, and that her role is not merely to provide domestic help. Mr. Black, born disfigured after his mother barely escaped the flames of 1666, intends to make Eliza an unwitting participant in one of his spurious experiments.

With a brilliant cast of characters and a dazzling heroine who has daring tricks up her sleeve, Clare Clark has created a haunting novel of redemption. We hope the following questions and topics will enrich your experience of *The Nature of Monsters*.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. How were you affected by the novel's prologue? How did your understanding of it change as you read the scenes featuring Grayson Black?
2. Did Ma Tally ever love Eliza, or did she see her only as a means to economic security? Discuss the cultural disadvantages experienced by women in eighteenth-century England. With limited literacy and few means for financial independence, how would you have fared?
3. What are the major differences Eliza notices between the country and the city? Which locale is ultimately more dangerous for her? What aspects of her upbringing outside Newcastle will she never shed?
4. What (or who) perpetuated the double standards for men and women described in the book? Why would a female herbalist such as Ma Tally run the risk of being accused of witchcraft, while a male apothecary would be less likely to face such scrutiny? Why were women more likely to be seen as lascivious than as victims of sexual exploitation?
5. At what point does Eliza start thinking of her child as a creature other than a worm? What has prevented her from feeling tender emotions in general? What was Grayson's ultimate plan for her baby, and for Mary?

6. Despite his attempts to create a physical monster, Grayson himself became one psychologically. What is the true nature of monsters? What factors create them?
7. How would you characterize Eliza's storytelling voice? How did her narration, and her view of the world, shift over the course of the novel?
8. What did you discover about the history of medical science in these chapters? Though the contemporary world no longer puts faith in concepts such as the humors, have we separated the concepts of blame and emotion from physical health? What current medical practices might future generations regard as strange or unethical?
9. Is Mrs. Black's behavior excusable? Did she deserve to be penniless in the end?
10. What were the reasons for Monsieur Honfleur's affection toward Eliza? What was the root of the tension between him and Annette? How did eighteenth-century notions of marriage differ from ours?
11. How did your impressions of Mr. Jewkes change throughout the novel? Would you have trusted him in the closing scenes?
12. What does the triumph of Petey and Eliza say about those who survive in the world? Where are the cleverest members of society found?
13. In her author's note, Clare Clark elaborates on the history that informed her novel, in particular the controversial Sir Christopher Wren and the construction of St. Paul's Cathedral. How did these conflicts between public works and taxpayers affect Eliza economically? What are the contemporary equivalents of these conflicts, particularly in communities that are rising from the ashes in some way?
14. Discuss the concept of "resurgam" that becomes Eliza's mantra at one point. What decision would you have made in the choice between Mary and Monsieur Honfleur (which was essentially a choice between selfless love and self-preservation)? What kind of future do you imagine for Eliza and Henry?
15. In what ways does this novel complement *The Great Stink*? What makes Clark's approach to historical fiction unique?

About the Author

Clare Clark's first novel, *The Great Stink*, was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year, and the winner of the Quality Paperback Book Club New Voices Award. She lives in London.

Copyright © 2007 Harcourt
Discussion questions written by Amy Root