



READING GROUP GUIDE FOR *DEATH HAS COME UP INTO OUR WINDOWS*

The following questions are offered as discussion-starters either for individual readers reflecting back on the novel, or for reading groups or classes. **Read this guide *after* reading the novel; there may be spoilers.** The author, Stant Litore, is always open to discussing his work with reading groups (you can reach him at zombiebible@gmail.com), but he believes strongly that once a novel is published, the story belongs to the readers far more than it belongs to the writer.

This reading guide is organized in chapters, so that you can choose which sections are most useful to you or to your reading group, English class, church group, or theology study group. Watch out! Some chapters have much simpler questions; others will require some real digging in the brain and in the heart.

– First Questions –

1. What was most surprising to you in the story?

2. What moment affected you most deeply?

– The Hungry Dead & History –

1. How is *Death Has Come Up into Our Windows* different from other zombie stories you have encountered (in books, films, or comic books)?

2. How is it similar to other zombie stories?

3. In the “Historian’s Note” at the beginning of the novel, Litore writes:

The crisis created by an outbreak of the walking dead offers a telling diagnostic of those flaws in the human condition that resurface, century upon century: our tendency to let problems fester untended until they become crises, our frequent inability to work together for a common good, our quickness to forget the lessons our grandparents learned at the cost of much sweat and blood, and the extent to which our privileged classes ignore and deny responsibility for the plight of the impoverished and the disinherited. Our ancestors often described the attacks of the hungry dead as acts of either divine retribution or divine abandonment in utter grief at human evil, and in at least one respect they may have been correct: the rapid rise of an outbreak is nearly always a consequence of our own failings.

How does this idea play out over the course of the story?

4. If our history really were defined by a series of repeated outbreaks of the hungry dead, what might that explain about our history, our beliefs, about how we got here?

5. One of the things *The Zombie Bible* appears concerned with is the nature of atrocity. What does *Death Has Come Up into Our Windows* suggest about atrocities—either about how they come about or how they might be dealt with?

– A Feminine God –

1. Yirmiyahu conceives of God as female. What effect did this have you on as a reader?

2. How does the gender of God affect Yirmihayu's relationship to her?

3. In the final pages of the novel, you find this passage:

It was possible that in an hour, a day, or a week, if he still breathed, the guards might still pull him out, shivering like a child from the womb. Perhaps God would speak then; perhaps she would gift him with new words, words that would cup him as a woman's warm hands might cup an infant, holding him, words of such promise and hope that they could replenish both his heart and this drying and dying city. Or perhaps, though no words should come, were he to be pulled into the brightness of the day above and into the fierce light of God's presence, he might yet emerge from the well with a primal scream, a raw shriek capable of conveying the horror and loss of every severing of bond and covenant that men or women had suffered since the first birth. This was possible. The silence in the well might be the silence of utter bereavement or the silence before birth. In the fertility of her heart, God's capacity for giving birth and loving rebirth might still be greater than any death—if she hadn't left the city entirely.

How is the way that Yirmiyahu understands God different from the ways that many religious people today look at God?

4. What drives Yirmiyahu in his relationship with his God? In the modern world, we talk a lot about "faith." Is it faith that drives Yirmiyahu? What does he have faith in? Is it love? Is it duty? Is it empathy? What makes Yirmiyahu fight?

5. On his website, Stant Litore discusses the vulnerability of Yirmiyahu's God:

The Old Testament sources of the story emphasize both the wrath of God and the grief of God. Modern readers have a hard time tapping into the wrath-of-God passages; we're desensitized to it. But we rarely ever talk about the profound grief of God.

Lamentations in the Bible tries to express the inutterable grief of both the prophet and his God for a city that's dying. Those passages move me. In *Jeremiah*, we find God imagined as a spurned lover, watching the city destroy itself while it rejects the passionate, anguished advances of its deity.

Why was writing a feminine God important? Because we can't tap into the story fully if we are fixated on our own, idolatrous image of a white-bearded God visiting wrath on a disobedient city. We miss out on all the weeping that's in the story, all the desperate hope and profound despair. We miss out on the poignancy of a story that is about a prophet and his God crying together as the prophet fights to save the city.

And most of all, in our indignation at the idea of an elderly male God punishing us, we'd miss out on the demands this story makes on our minds and hearts: what are our responsibilities to God and to each other?

The story of Jeremiah is *not* a story about crime and punishment; it never was. It's a story about broken relationships.

Portraying the sorrow and vulnerability of God made this story possible.

Source: <http://stantlitore.com/2013/07/17/stant-litore-on-the-bible-3-why-god-is-a-woman-in-death-has-come-up-into-our-windows/>

Do you agree with Litore's take on the source texts of *Jeremiah* and *Lamentations*? How much of Litore's zombie-infected/zombie-inflected storytelling is poetic license and how much of it is exegesis? What effect do *you* think the gender of God in *Death Has Come Up into Our Windows* has on the Old Testament story?

6. Did Yirmiyahu's attitude toward monotheism surprise you? How is it different from (or related to) modern religious attitudes?

7. How do the different deities in the story differ from each other?

8. What did Yirmiyahu learn at the Hill of Tophet, besides the literal details of what was being done with the sacrificial children?

9. Do you think Yirmiyahu's God exists in the world of *The Zombie Bible*, or only in his mind?

10. If Yirmiyahu's God exists, has she left the city? Do you think she's coming back?

– Stepping into the Characters' World –

1. How do you think Yirmiyahu would define justice? How do the priests in the story define justice, and how is it different?
2. What gets in the way of justice?
3. How do you think Yirmiyahu would define love?
4. How do you think *Miriam* would define love?
5. What actions in the story appeared heroic to you, and why?
6. What actions in the story appeared loving to you, and why?
7. What did you think of each of the supporting characters? What did you think of Baruch? What did you think of Zedekiah?

– The *Navi*, or the Prophet –

In the Old Testament, a prophet is not primarily a seer of the future, though that can certainly be one of the prophet's gifts or duties. But the primary duty of a *navi* or “prophet” is to hold the People accountable for social injustice or for failing to live up to their covenants to God and to each other, while simultaneously expressing a vision of how things could be different. It is in this spirit, for example, that Micah condemns the ancient Hebrews for their violence toward and neglect of widows, orphans, and immigrants, and then paints a powerful picture of a future nation that might “turn swords into ploughshares.”

Take a moment to consider Yirmiyahu's identity as a “prophet” in the story:

1. What is a *navi*, in the world of *Death Has Come Up into Our Windows*? What does Yirmiyahu's prophecy consist of?

2. Why do the priests reject Yirmiyahu? What does that suggest about the relationship between religious institutions and prophets?

3. Sitting at the fireside with Miriam in the second chapter, Yirmiyahu remembers the prophets of the past who did mighty and miraculous works. Miriam tells him that his own gift is that of his voice. Later, Yirmiyahu and Baruch argue over the probable longevity of the prophet's vision and his words. Yirmiyahu insists that the words will last long after he and Baruch and the city itself are dust, that they might retain transformative power to change the hearts of a people, far into the future. Baruch retorts that the papyrus scrolls on which the words are written are “as mortal as men.” They can be burned; they can be destroyed by moisture; they can be banned or forbidden.

Which of them is right?

4. Yirmiyahu often sees or hears things that others cannot. He foresees the destruction of the city. He hears God weeping behind her veil in the Temple. He envisions the moment of Miriam's death. If you had “a *navi*'s seeing,” like Yirmiyahu, how would that change *you*? What burdens would it place on you? How might your own life be different? Your own experience of time? Your own relationships?

– The Unusual Structure of the Story –

Death Has Come Up into Our Windows is set within the narrow, claustrophobic confines of a dry well, with only flashbacks and memories to transport you out of that space. As in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, scenes and characters have to be brought on stage *around* the main character, who remains imprisoned and motionless. It's an unusual way to tell a story. Some questions to ponder:

1. Does this way of telling the story “work,” in your view? Why or why not?
2. What is the effect of the story's non-linear narrative, its shifting perspective backward and forward in time?
3. Is Yirmiyahu as inactive as he is immobile, or does he seem to you a vital, active character? How does the author dramatize his predicament and his internal struggle?
4. Does this novel have a “plot,” and if so, how is it structured and how does it work?
5. What did you think of the “dream sequence” in the fourth chapter, in which Yirmiyahu both returns to his childhood home and encounters Miriam? What did it resolve for the story? What new possibilities did it open up?
6. When the ending left you “waiting in the silence,” did you find this frustrating? Hopeful? Despairing? In what *kind* of silence did the ending leave you?
7. It might also be useful to ask: How important is *closure* to you as a reader? What do you expect most from the ending of the story, and did this story frustrate or fulfill those expectations? Why or why not?

– Closing Questions (with, or without, closure) –

1. If you were to describe *Death Has Come Up into Our Windows* to someone who hadn't read it, what would you say?

2. What is the one thing you, the reader, are “taking away” from this story?

– For more study guides, or to learn more
about the other novels in *The Zombie Bible*, visit: –

stantlitore.com