

Book Club Reader Guide

Music from a Strange Planet: Stories, by Barbara Black

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Use this guide to generate responses to the book and invite conversation. There is also an author interview following the questions to add some helpful biographical background.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Strangely Luminescent in the Dusk:

In this story two people receive a transbiogenetic transfer of moth DNA, a speculative idea. If this could really be possible, what kind of biogenetic transfer would you suggest and how would it benefit the receiver? It can be serious or fanciful.

Be My Beloved:

What do you think of sologamy? Is it a legitimate choice over traditional marriage? What do you think were Margo's motives for choosing it?

In what sense might Margo's kidnapping and isolation in a trunk be a metaphor for her life?

The Mist-Covered Mountains:

Do you believe in previous life memories? Do you think Pippa really has experienced it?

The Watcher and the Watched:

Describe your insights about the ending of this story. What happens during the art presentation and afterwards? What do you envision about Tracy following her exit from the room?

Knedliky:

What are your own reasons for traveling? Iris never bothers to properly learn a new language. If you could speak any language fluently what would it be and why?

Were you surprised at the end of the story that Iris ended up with a man who fulfilled none of her criteria for her "ideal man"?

Our Invisible Friend:

The author has experienced being told she is both an extrovert and an introvert, that she is a performer and a person of solitude. How do you think your friends or others view you? Are their views accurate, in your opinion? Are you a different person for one set of friends than another?

End of the Line:

What hints does the author give about the Kurt character, in terms of his actions, the setting, word choices and other details? How do these play into the story's ending?

Sheen of Ice on Snow:

What, for you, is the role of the old woman contributing to the story?

What is significant about Julia seeing the fox out the window at the beginning of the story? Also, discuss what function the ice-fishing plays in creating subtext.

GENERAL QUESTION:

The author pays particular attention to creating the settings of many of these stories. Which setting impacted you the most and why? What feeling did it impart or what role did it play in the story?

GENERAL QUESTION:

What themes do you notice running through the collection? How do art and music play a role?

GENERAL QUESTION:

If you could be, or if you identify with, one character in this collection, who would it be and why?

GENERAL QUESTION:

Which story, in your opinion, could be expanded into a film or longer story?

GENERAL QUESTION:

As you may have noticed, the author has an interest in insects. What's your most formative memory or experience with an insect or insects, good or bad? (Or substitute animals...)

JUST FOR FUN:

Strangely Luminescent in the Dusk has a puzzle layer embedded. There are references to one of Black's favourite authors, (as well as a famous artwork). See if you can figure out who it is. Do this quiz as a group, but keep your answers to yourself until the end. *See answers at the end of the Reader Guide.

Hints:

1. The mystery author is the man with white knee socks described as “strangely luminescent in the dusk.” He is “a balding man who...sketches butterfly genitalia.” The balding man (Dr. Aba) carries a long-handled net.
2. The character's full name, Aba Movlinkiov, is an anagram of this famous author.
3. The dark-haired man and young, petulant girl in the diner trapped in “an inappropriate romance” are based on what novel by this author? The diner flashes “Ice Cold Drinks.”
4. The café in this story references a well-known artwork by an American artist, painted in the 1940s. Who and what artwork?
5. This phrase contains the title of one of the mystery author's novels: “Adela still remembers the daylight of her childhood: not a pale fire like these times but a dazzling orange mirror turned on your face...”
6. Blavdak's diner is a reference to this author's character Blavdak Vinomori from which of this author's novels? (The character name is also an anagram of the author's name!).

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Mandy Eve Barnett

AUTHOR: Barbara Black

1. How important are the arts and your creativity to you?

Life is nothing without the arts. Think of what we do to relax: listen to music, watch movies, read books, go dancing. And yet, when it comes down to a budget crisis, these seem to be the things that are cut because they're considered somehow "non-essential." I beg to differ. They're life-affirming and allow us to share the human experience through the eyes and imagination of others. You can't put a price on that. As for my own creativity, it's present in almost everything I do.

2. How did you come up with the idea of the title, *Music from a Strange Planet*?

The book title for my short story collection is from one of my stories. In that story, "Music from a Strange Planet," a talented and precocious girl wins an award for her composition called "Music from a Strange Planet," a contemporary orchestral piece based on the convergence of cricket choruses. I, too, was a little girl who loved insects and nature (still do). There's an undercurrent of insect references in the collection and small references to music throughout, so I thought giving the book this title would convey a sense of wonder and suggest to readers that they'll be entering the particular, idiosyncratic worlds of a variety of characters in a particular moment in their lives. The "strangeness," to me, is not so much weirdness, but points to a sense of mystery.

3. What drew you to write short stories rather than longer narratives?

In writing, in both poetry and fiction, I've always been a minimalist. I like writing and reading works that are succinct, compressed and convey a distinct mood in a few words or pages. I do read novels, but because I'm so attuned to concision, I find them wordy, even if they aren't! I'm a writer whose problem is not wordiness but a tendency toward spareness. That, however, is why I love to write and read short stories. They're a leap into a crucial point in a character's life. We usually meet the character at a turning point and sometimes at the end there's a sense of closure or development and sometime there isn't. Some readers dislike short stories for that reason. That's why I love them.

4. Where do you find your inspiration?

In many art forms! When writing's going slowly, or when I'm not writing, I turn to the writing, music, art, dance of others. Or I slip into the garden and merge with the plants. I read critical works or essays about writing, I pore through literary journals. I subscribe to art and décor magazines, and garden design magazines, so I get a dose of creative ideas and people from all angles. A lot of my friends are also musicians, poets and visual artists so they inspire me with their own creations.

5. What exactly is a short story?

First of all, I wish we had a different term for the short story. These two words sound a bit dismissive to me. Not that long ago, the short story was denigrated as the shorter, lesser cousin of the novel. But rather than saying what it isn't, here's my take on what a short story is. It's compact, it implies, it suggests. It contains subtext that requires the reader to work a little harder to unlock its meaning. Every detail in the story works hard to point the reader to the underlying context: setting, back story, character history, tone, imagery. It's brief and intense and often does not give the reader closure. A novel is expansive, its narrative, plot and cast ever-widening. A short story goes in the opposite direction: inward and compressed. It doesn't explain. It allows the reader to experience an intense event in a character's life which often ends in a moment of awareness.

6. Your stories and poems deal with deep inner perspectives and emotions – what draws you to these topics/themes?

It's characters themselves who draw me toward their stories and so unknowingly to certain themes or emotions that are operating in my subconscious.

7. Does your music influence your writing or vice a versa (or is it a symbolic relationship)?

Yes, it does! I've written several flash and poetry pieces that were inspired by musical recordings. And I'm a musician (voice and piano).

With regard to poetry, music does subtly influence my writing. Lots of people have remarked that my poetry is "very musical," but by that they don't mean it's "rhymey." I simply have an inherent and ingrained sense of melody, rhythm, pacing, and it shows up when I write. In prose, for example, I'm very particular about how a sentence reads and sounds, how it unfolds, whether it needs to race ahead or proceed slowly, how it reflects the character's voice or emotions. Every sentence, in that respect, is like a tiny musical score that can influence the reader.

8. You designed the cover of your book. How did this come about?

A few years ago a social media whiz friend of mine told me that as a writer I should be on Instagram. Since I don't have a cute dog or a photogenic cat, I wondered what I could post about. Because Instagram's mostly a visual medium, I came up with the idea of collaging my writing. Except that I didn't know how to collage! So the self-imposed crash course began, and I really started to enjoy dealing with visuals for a change. It was fascinating to choose a very short excerpt from a poem, flash or short story and illustrate it in paper. I continue to challenge myself to try different approaches and now have a small following, which is both surprising and pretty delightful. When my Caitlin Press publisher learned about my collages, she asked me if I would be interested in collaging my own book cover! I said yes, and after

five or six trials, arrived at the illustration of a woman transforming into a caribou, which seems to intrigue people. It's also based on a character in one of my stories.

9. Where do you write?

I often go for a coffee, taking my teeny-tiny Moleskine writing journal with me and find inspiration among the hubbub of chatter and clatter. I always write first drafts by hand and never, ever, at a desk. I prefer to slump on my small sofa in the living room or go out to my back garden studio and write from a low-slung chair while the birds twitter outside.

10. Just how tiny is your writing journal and why?

There's a story to this! A few years ago I attended the Disquiet International Literary Program in Lisbon. On the first day, we each got a gift bag from the organizers which contained, among other things, a very compact writing journal. At the time I always wrote in a lined 8 X 11-inch coiled workbook. I scoffed that I would *never* use such a tiny journal. Off I went that afternoon to a café to write, except that I had forgotten my usual workbook. I wrote in that tiny, unlined book. I loved it. I have now filled over 40 of the compact Moleskine journals. In fact, all the short stories in *Music from a Strange Planet* were composed in them!

11. Where can readers find you on social media?

Facebook: @barbarablackwriter

Instagram: @bblackwrites

Website: www.barbarablack.ca

12. What message would you like to send your readers?

A writer's not a writer without readers. Thank you, readers, for making my book come to life in your own imagination. And many thanks for the interview, Mandy.

***ANSWERS TO STORY CLUES IN *Strangely Luminescent in the Dusk*:**

1.-2. Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov was an amateur yet highly skilled and respected Lepidopterist. His typical butterfly collecting outfit was shorts with white knee socks and a long-handled net.

3. *Lolita*.

4. *Nighthawks*, 1942, by Edward Hopper

5. *Pale Fire*.

6. *King, Queen, Knave*.