

# Southfield Public Library

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## *The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman*

*Discussion questions used at SPL March 10 & 11, 2015*

1. Is this a Myth or a Fairytale? What are the differences?
2. The narrator suggests that myths are better suited for adults because the stories "just are". Adults think they out-grow fairy tales. Do you think this is true?
3. We say fairy tales are for children; but really, there's a lot going on beneath the surface. Do you think this story hints at a deeper meaning? Or is it a simple modern day fairy tale?
4. We only get one hint at the narrator's name, Handsome George (pg 135), but considering the circumstances, we don't even know how accurate it is. We don't know the names of any of his family members. Why do you think that is?
5. Why are Ursula Monkton and The younger Hempstocks the only characters with full names? What significance does it have?
6. Whenever the Hempstocks take care of the narrator, one of the first things they do is feed him. What kind of role does food play in the novel?
7. What is the significance of water in this story? Old Mrs. Hempstock states on page 164 "...the ocean will give her back" when talking about Lettie not being dead. Also, the narrator describes breathing under water without drowning when he was in the ocean. Ginnie Hempstock says "...the ocean has taken her...I don't I don't know if it will give her back" page 166.
8. The narrator asks if Lettie was really Ginnie's daughter p. 167. Who do you think the Hempstocks are? Are they from this "this world"? Do you think their relationship is like any grandmother, mother, daughter relationship you know? Talk about the triple goddesses from mythology and Wiccan culture.
9. How do the Hempstocks compare to the Fates from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Weird Sisters* novel? Do you see similarities?
10. The Hempstocks appear to have "powers" or certain gifts that allow them to travel through time, read minds, place & remove thoughts. Does the narrator not remember this event in his childhood because Ginnie Hempstock removed it from his memory? Is it because children protect themselves from things that are painful, so he purposely forgets about Lettie because of his guilt? Page 168 when Ginnie drops the narrator off at home he believes there was party and Lettie will be going away to Australia.
11. The Hempstocks say they're from the "old world;" and, in the introduction, Old Mrs. Hempstock says "the really old country had blown up." What do you think this means? Does this have anything to do with the plot of the story?
12. What is this story about? Some themes might include sacrifice, memory, good vs evil, love of family, protection, etc.
13. Why does the narrator keep going back to the ocean? Is he only going back because Lettie wants to check in on him?
14. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* won the 2013 National Book Award in England and was a New York Time's Best Seller in America. Do you think it's worthy of its acclaim?

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## *General discussion questions*

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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*Title- The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

*Discussion questions taken from LitLovers, a well-read online community*

*website address: <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/9259-ocean-at-end-of-lane-gaiman?start=3>*

1. It would be easy to think of the Hempstocks as the "triple goddess" (the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone) of popular mythology. In what ways do they conform to those roles? In what ways are they different?
  2. The narrator has returned to his hometown for a funeral (we never learn whose). Do you think that framing his childhood story with a funeral gives this story a pessimistic outlook, rather than an optimistic one?
  3. Because the narrator is male and most of the other characters are female, this story has the potential to become a stereotypical narrative where a male character saves the day. How does the story avoid that pitfall?
  4. The story juxtaposes the memories of childhood with the present of adulthood. In what ways do children perceive things differently than adults? Do you think there are situations in which a child's perspective can be more "truthful" than an adult's?
  5. One of Ursula Monkton's main attributes is that she always tries to give people what they want. Why is this not always a good thing? What does Ursula want? How does Ursula use people's desires against them to get what she wants?
  6. Water has many roles in this story—it can give and take life, reveal and hide. How does it play these different roles?
  7. One of the many motivators for the characters in this story is loneliness. What characters seem to suffer from loneliness? How do adults and children respond to loneliness in different ways? In the same ways?
  8. On page 18, the narrator tells us that his father often burnt their toast and always ate it with apparent relish. He also tells us that later in life, his father admitted that he had never actually liked burnt toast, but ate it to avoid waste, and that his father's confession made the narrator's entire childhood feel like a lie: "it was as if one of the pillars of belief that my world had been built upon had crumbled into dry sand." What other "pillars of belief" from childhood does he discover to be false? How do these discoveries affect him? Are there any beliefs from your own childhood that you discovered to be false?
  9. When the narrative returns to the present, Old Mrs. Hempstock tells our narrator, "You stand two of you lot next to each other, and you could be continents away for all it means anything" (p. 173). What does she mean by this? Why is it "easier" for people, our narrator especially, to forget certain things that are difficult to reconcile?
  10. Though the narrator has a sister, he doesn't seem to be particularly close to her. Why do you think it is that he has trouble relating to other children? Why do you think his sister is not an ally for him?
- (Questions issued by the publisher)*

