

Books by the Stack



Pretend I'm Dead by Jen Beagin

Miranda July meets Mary Karr in this novel about a cleaning lady on a quest for self-acceptance after her relationship with a lovable junkie goes awry.

Why you'll like it: *Moving. Complex but likable characters. Witty, incisive writing.*

About the Author: Jen Beagin holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine, and is a recipient of a 2017 Whiting Award in fiction. She is the author of *Pretend I'm Dead* and *Vacuum in the Dark*. A former cleaning lady, she lives in Hudson, New York.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Beagin is a former cleaning lady, and draws on some her own experiences cleaning houses to color the material. Does knowing that affect the way you view Mona?
2. “Names are powerful,” Betty tells Mona on page 218. Is it significant that Mona constantly names and renames people and things in her life? What does it mean for Mona to finally share Mr. Disgusting’s real name? Or for her to finally correct Betty, who had been calling her Maura?
3. Why do you think Mona chose to follow Mr. Disgusting’s suggestion and move to Taos, New Mexico?
4. “Pretend I’m Dead” is the name of a game Mona and her father played in the pool when she was young. She also resumes photographing herself playing dead in Henry’s home, something she starts again in order to “move on” from her past. Discuss how this action, playing dead, underpins the novel as a whole, and what its significance is thematically?
5. Before leaving Lowell for Taos, Mona smashed her favorite vintage vacuum cleaner, and in the final scene, she and Jesus destroy one of the dolls with a hammer. Discuss what each of these acts signifies. What do you think is the next step in Mona’s journey?
6. The book is divided into four sections. The final three are named after characters who leave an impression on Mona – Nigel and Shiori (or “Yoko and Yoko”); her neighbors, her client Henry and his daughter Zoe; and her client Betty, the maybe-psychic. Why do you think the first section is titled “Hole”? What does it indicate about her relationship with Mr. Disgusting?
7. Mona is able to turn her “dirt radar” (p. 16) on and off as needed. Do you think she does something similar with people? Herself?
8. What do you make of Mona’s interpretation of Henry and Zoe’s relationship? Do you think she is projecting her past trauma, or witnessing the accessories to sexual abuse?
9. *Pretend I’m Dead* could be described as a voyeuristic novel, both because of how closely Mona observes the people she interacts with and also because of how intimately we as readers get to know her, and thus the author herself. Discuss voyeurism in fiction, and what it was like to encounter it in this book.

10. After rereading her childhood diaries, Mona speculates (p. 140) that “perhaps she didn’t have daddy issues...but rather Tommy issues.” What do you make of this? Do you think Mona is able to reconcile the trauma of her childhood?

11. *Pretend I’m Dead* is a relatively short novel, yet it deals with difficult topics, such as sexual abuse and addiction. Did the length of the novel make it easier or harder to read about these subjects?

(Questions provided by the publisher)



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