The City & the City by China Mieville

Inspector Tyador Borlu must travel to Ul Qoma to search for answers in the murder of a woman found in the city of Beszel.


About the Author: China Miéville is the author of King Rat; Perdido Street Station, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the British Fantasy Award; The Scar, winner of the Locus Award and the British Fantasy Award; Iron Council, winner of the Locus Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award; Looking for Jake, a collection of short stories; and Un Lun Dun, his New York Times bestselling book for younger readers. He lives and works in London.

Questions for discussion

1. Mieville provides no overall exposition in this book, leaving it up to readers to piece together the strange co-existence of Beszel and Ul Qoma. Do you appreciate the way in which the story gradually unfolds? Or, finding it confusing, would you have preferred an explanation early on?

2. Many critics and readers—but not all—have talked about Mieville's imagined world, a world constructed so thoroughly that readers were easily absorbed in the two cities. Was that your experience as you read the book...or were you unable to suspend your belief, finding the whole foundation too preposterous?

3. What does it mean to "unsee" in this novel...and what are the symbolic implications of unseeing? In other words, do we "unsee" one another in our own lives? Who unsees whom?

4. Talk about the absurdities that result from the two cities ignoring one another's existence—for instance, the rules put in place for picking up street trash.

5. What theory was the murdered graduate student investigating and what makes Borlu begin to think the theory is more than just theory—that it might be closer to truth?

6. Do you feel Mieville's characters are well developed in this work...or under-developed? Defend your answer...to the death. What about the book's dialogue? Does it sound realistic—the way individuals actually converse? Or do you find it stilted, tiresome...or perhaps overly ambitious? Does it matter?

7. Point out some of the strange word-usage Mieville incorporates in The City and the City: words/phrases
like... crosshatching, grosstopically, the alter, and so on.

8. What is the "Breach" and why it's required to maintain control over the two populations? What does the Breach suggest about authoritarianism in general—its origins, purpose, enforcement, corruption...?

9. Was the crime/mystery solved to your satisfaction by the end of the book? Was the crime the book's central focus...or tangential? If the latter, what was the real focus?

10. Have you read other works by Mieville? If so, how does this compare? If not, are you inspired to read more of his books?

(Questions by LitLovers)