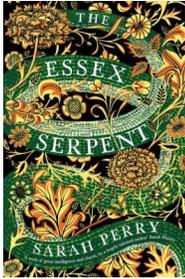


Books by the Stack



Essex Serpent by Sarah Perry

Freed from an unhappy marriage by her husband's death, Victorian widow Cora Seaborne settles in Colchester, where she pursues her interest in natural history by searching the Blackwater estuary for evidence of the Essex Serpent, a winged serpent dismissed as superstition but greatly feared by the locals.

Why you'll like it: *Historical fiction. Character-driven. Leisurely paced. Atmospheric. Lyrical.*

About the Author: Sarah Perry was born in Essex in 1979, and was raised as a Strict Baptist. Having studied English at Anglia Ruskin University she worked as a civil servant before studying for an MA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Creative Writing and the Gothic at Royal Holloway, University of London. In 2004 she won the Spectator's Shiva Naipaul Award for travel writing.

Questions for Discussion

1. Many comparisons have been drawn between Sarah Perry's writing and the Victorian novelists who were writing at the time the book was set, including Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. Do you think this book feels Victorian, or contemporary?
2. "I'll fill your wounds with gold," Michael says. He means both literally that he will make sure Cora is financially comfortable during their marriage in exchange for the pleasure of hurting her, but also that he will remake her as something more beautiful and interesting than she was before. Cora survived her horrible marriage, but was definitely damaged by it. What do you think the seams of fold are in Cora's character?
3. Many of the characters have unequal relationships: Cora and Martha, Spencer and Luke. Do you think that viewing someone as a means to an end necessarily precludes loving them?
4. Cora's son, Francis, might today be diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. Despite his challenges, he gets a lot of pleasure from learning about the natural world. Eccentricity seems to have been more acceptable in the Victorian era, at least for men of a certain class. Do you think Francis would be happier in his time or in our own?
5. Will is at odds with the superstitious villagers, who insist the serpent is real, whereas he sees their conviction as a sign of their lack of faith. However, he is also wrangling with Cora, who is more interested in science than religious belief. And while Will is a minister of the established Church, he secretly reads Darwin. Do you think he believes faith is fundamentally rooted in the words of the Bible or a more personal encounter with the world?
6. When Francis asks Will what sin is, he describes it as falling short. When Will and Cora finally have their encounter in the woods, Will's wife is still alive. How do you think Will would judge this incident by his own definition of sin?
7. Cora's physical size and mannish habits of dress are frequently commented upon by other characters in the novel. She rejects a lot of society's expectations of her as a woman, whereas Stella Ransome is the

living embodiment of the perfect housewife. Despite their differences, they are friends. What do you think Perry is trying to tell us by having Cora save her rival instead of quietly letting her drown?

8. Cora sends her angry letter to Luke at a terrible time – it arrives as all his other hopes are being dashed. If this unfortunate coincidence hadn't taken place, would we still read the letter as cruel? Should she have expressed her thoughts more kindly or was she right to be angry?

9. One of the subplots of the novel is the disappearance of Naomi Banks. She and Joanna Ransome argued and Naomi ran away. By the end of the novel, she has returned and Joanna is trying to cope with the imminent death of her mother. Do you think they will become close friends again, for good, or are the differences between them simply too great?

10. The novel sets up Cora to choose between two men and in the end she chooses neither. Do you think this is comment on traditional literary plots? Do you think the novel sees friendship as more valuable and enduring than romantic love?

(Questions provided by the publisher)



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