

Discussion questions abridged or amended from NEA website:

<https://www.arts.gov/national-initiatives/nea-big-read/pretty-monsters>

Please complete and return to Dan Hess (hessd@mendocinocounty.org)

by Thursday night performance, October 25th.

1. As the narrator tells us in “The Wrong Grave,” the poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti buried some of his unpublished poetry with his dead wife, Elizabeth Siddal. Later, he dug up her grave so that he could get the poems (his only copies) back. Is there anything that you can imagine digging up a grave to retrieve? How does this story make you feel about poetry or poets?! Do you like the humor in the story?
2. The characters in “The Faery Handbag” like to frequent thrift stores. They have a theory that “things had life cycles, the way that people do.” Do you ever wonder what stories surround your previously-owned possessions? The faery handbag, in fact, is a family heirloom over 200 years old. Do you have any mysterious family heirlooms? Does your family tell stories of your ancestors that don't quite seem to add up?
3. There is an alien invasion at the end of “The Surfer.” There's also a pandemic. In post-apocalyptic stories, these are two of the most common ways in which the world ends. But does the end of the story feel like an apocalypse? Dorn's father loves science fiction. He hopes that the aliens are there to save mankind. Does the ending feel hopeful to you? It's a challenge to write interesting (or funny!) apocalyptic literature. Was Kelly Link successful?
4. If you have read any “Fractured Fairy Tales” or feminist re-tellings of famous fairy tales, how do they compare with Link's stories, “The Cinderella Game?” Is this story itself a fairytale?
5. Does Kelly Link show any special instincts as writer for teens' relationships with their parents or the adults in their lives? Can you imagine the characters in these stories as adults? Would they be very different? Do you think that people stay the same as they grow up, or do they become almost entirely different people?

6. Link has been commended by critics for, among other things, her humor. Did you find some of these stories—or parts of the stories—funny? Why? How would you describe her particular type of humor?
7. Question from Librarian, Dan Hess. The final story in the collection feels homophobic to me. (This is a personal objection to the dialogue in a story, not a blanket rejection of the book or a dismissal of the author! Others may not have homophobia on their radar.) I am concerned that readers may encounter this book for the first time in this Big Read program, some of them young people who will see *a book that gives homophobic comments a pass*. Some readers will be oblivious to this section and may use such talk on others they know. This is how prejudice is passed along.

The problem is in the characters and dialogue of the last story, "**Pretty Monsters.**" Clementine is 12 and trying to be attractive to an older guy named Cabell (p. 351):

[Clementine suggests that Cabell kiss her. Cabell replies.] Don't think I don't appreciate the offer, Clementine," Cabell said, "but hell, no."
 "Oh shit," Clementine said. "You're gay?" [She is projecting a common stereotype that a lack of interest in girls implies a guy is gay.]
 "No!" Cabell said. "And stop taking off your clothes, okay? I'm not gay, I'm just not interested. Not to be an a**hole, but you're not my type."
 [He tells her she's underage for him and that's the reason he wouldn't kiss her. Cabell leaves, then Clementine cuts her feet on glass on the beach, requiring stitches. The reader thinks the homophobic exchange was a one-off, but then Clementine keeps up the homophobic needling in a chat with Cabell on page 356.]
 DARLINGSEA: you saved my life 2X now. u didn't take advantage. u know, even tho I was drunk and obnoxious and sed that u were gay. ;)
 TRUEBALOO: clementine, its ok. really don't mention it. ok?
 DARLINGSEA: your not, right? i mean your not gay r u? even if your not im sorry about the tux. did the blood come out?
 TRUEBALOO: not last time i checked
 TRUEBALOO: dont worry about the tux

As I said, I don't identify Kelly Link, the author, with Clementine, the drunk, precocious 12-year old. But this exchange upholds a stereotype that boys are one of two things: straight and interested in girls or gay and could care less. Cabell is forced to answer her three times on the subject. The last time he says "not last time I checked." How do you check if you're gay? It's not anatomical. DARLINGSEA implies that it was a shaming thing to a man to be called gay. "even tho I was drunk and obnoxious and sed that u were gay." The author doesn't include a real gay character in any stories in this book, so the offhand remarks by her characters stand alone. Imagine if all the characters in a book are white and a character only mentions another race once as a "cut-down." How would we view the author?

8. If you could ask the author one question about these stories, or about writing them, what would you ask her?