

You may belong to a reading group, teach a class or want to discuss the stories in *Silent Girl* with a good friend. Whatever your motivation, you'll find a discussion guide for each of the stories and one for the collection as a whole. I've provided two sets of questions for the individual stories: *If you're into Shakespeare* and *If you're not*. I hope the questions will stimulate discussion and provide a deeper understanding of *Silent Girl*.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE COLLECTION AS A WHOLE

1. In what ways are some of the protagonists in the collection "silent?" Are they silenced by others or do they silence themselves? Why and how?
2. How do patriarchal structures and values affect some or all the protagonists?
3. In what stories do women collaborate in the oppression of other women? How and why?
4. To what extent is the drive for freedom a theme in the collection?
5. With which character do you identify most and why?
6. How do gender expectations impact Kyal in *Kesh Kumay* and Trudy in *Passing Through*?
7. In *The Snow People: AGM 30-46*, Selanna says, "Anyone can see tomorrow if they don't lie to themselves about today." Compare Selanna's success at living according to this principle with that of the narrator in *Nobody; I Myself*.
8. How do the stories challenge your views: of domestic abuse? Of sexuality? Of racism? Of gender politics?

## STORY ONE *Not Meant to Know*

In *The Tempest*, we learn that the sorcerer Prospero was the Duke of Milan until his brother usurped his position. Prospero was able to escape with his daughter, Miranda, and the books that are the source of his magical power. They arrived on a largely uninhabited island where they have been for twelve years when the play opens. *Not Meant to Know* begins with the death of “Crazy” Haggerty, an eccentric magician in a small community, and the subsequent discovery that he’d kept his teenaged daughter hidden in his house, along with a child of unknown parentage.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you’re into Shakespeare*

1. In what ways are all three girls in *Not Meant to Know* “marooned” as Miranda and Prospero were marooned in *The Tempest*?
2. How do the play and story share undercurrents of incestuous desire?

*If you’re not*

1. *Not Meant to Know* is ultimately about Linda’s loss of innocence and acceptance of a new reality. How does her discovery of Crazy Haggerty’s daughter and her friendship with Tereza influence this change?
2. What details place us in the 1950s? How does that era support the story’s theme?
3. Through Crazy Haggerty’s obituary, we learn that his daughter has been motherless for twelve years. To what extent are Linda’s and Tereza’s mothers emotionally available to them?
4. What are the power relationships between wives and husbands in the story? Between daughters and fathers?
5. What do punks, or cattails, represent to Linda?
6. What does the story have to say about responsibility for others?
7. Why does Linda’s relationship with Tereza deteriorate? What does Linda think Tereza has cost her in the end?

## STORY TWO *Silent Girl*

The title story of the collection was inspired by the improbable plot of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. In *Pericles*, the hero's wife, presumed dead, is buried at sea yet turns up later, alive and untouched by another man, having hidden herself in a temple to the goddess Diana. His daughter, Marina, is kidnapped by pirates and sold to a brothel yet retains her virginity. In *Silent Girl*, Matsi, a girl from Vancouver, is vacationing in Thailand in 2004 when she loses her mother in the tsunami. Her father sends her back home with people he thinks are trustworthy, but they sell her to human traffickers.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare:*

1. According to scholars, Marina's function is symbolic: to represent continuity of life and kingship and the virtues of innocence, purity, and kindness. She experiences no internal conflict. How would you describe Matsi's character?
2. Marina is fifteen when she's kidnapped by pirates and sold to a brothel. Matsi is seven when the Wongs deliver her into the hands of traffickers. How does the age difference affect your reading of *Silent Girl* compared to *Pericles*?
3. Marina saves herself from brothel customers through her eloquence. What does Matsi's silence do for her?
4. Virtue is rewarded and vice punished in *Pericles*. What does *Silent Girl* have to say about virtue and vice?
5. Storms create chaos in the lives of Marina and her parents. What do the tsunami and later hurricane accomplish in *Silent Girl*?
6. What is the role of the italicized sections in *Silent Girl*? How is it similar or different than that of Gower's monologues in *Pericles*?
7. Marina leaves the brothel openly in keeping with the virtue she symbolizes. How does Matsi leave her brothel? What does her exit say about her character?

*If you're not:*

1. *Silent Girl* is set in a variety of locations. What clues help the reader figure out where Matsi is, even when she doesn't know?

2. What does Matsi's silence do for her? What other writing techniques add complexity to her characterization?
3. What is the role of the italicized sections in *Silent Girl*? What is the role of the story of Ma-tsu, Empress of Heaven?
4. How are virtue and vice rewarded or punished in *Silent Girl*?
5. Is the story's portrayal of reality for children sold into sexual slavery more or less horrifying than you believe it to be? Why?
6. What do the tsunami and later hurricane accomplish in *Silent Girl*?
7. What does Matsi's decision at the end say about her character? How do the brown girls influence her actions?
8. To what degree is Maw-Maw a collaborator in the oppression of females, a victim of it, or both?

## STORY THREE *Kesh Kumay*

*The Taming of the Shrew* is set in Padua, Italy, where three men want to marry Bianca. But her wealthy father, Baptista, says no one may court her until her older sister, Kate, is married. Soldier of fortune Petruchio arrives on the scene looking for a rich wife and agrees to marry Kate sight unseen. Kate has a reputation for being bad-tempered and the rest of the play depicts Petruchio's attempts to turn Kate into an obedient wife by mirroring her outrageous behaviour. *Kesh Kumay* is set in the nomadic lands of modern-day Kyrgyzstan, where Emil wants to marry Aigul but her father, Usen, says Aigul's older sister, Kyal, must find a husband first. Emil can't marry, either, until his older brother, Jyrgal, does, so Usen decides to arrange a match between Kyal and Jyrgal.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare*

1. How is marriage as a financial contract depicted in both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Kesh Kumay*?
2. How do the two sets of sisters—Kate and Bianca, Kyal and Aigul—react to the expectations of them as women?
3. Are the women in both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Kesh Kumay* oppressed, or do they have power equal to men's?
4. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate is often referred to as a wild animal that must be domesticated or “tamed.” In *Kesh Kumay*, how is this motif echoed, countered, or both?
5. In what scene does *Kesh Kumay* allude to Petruchio's and Kate's famous sun/moon speeches?
6. What effect do the differences between Petruchio and Jyrgal have on your reading of the play and the story? What is it about Petruchio that attracts Kate enough to marry him? What is it about Jyrgal that attracts Kyal enough to agree to stay with him for a while?
7. What inner conflicts do Kate and Kyal experience? Are they similar or different?
8. Both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Kesh Kumay* explore how courtship affects not only the prospective bride and groom, but also their family and friends. According to some scholars, the moral of the play is that society flourishes only if everyone plays his or her prescribed role. To what extent is this the message in *Kesh Kumay*?

9. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate seems to have no choice but to adapt to her social role as wife. Is Kyal's situation the same?

*If you're not*

1. How is marriage as a financial contract depicted in *Kesh Kumay*?
2. How do Kyal and Aigul react to the expectations of them as women?
3. Are the women in *Kesh Kumay* oppressed or do they do they have power equal to men's?
4. What do the scenes with horses tell us about Kyal?
5. What are Kyal's options after she's kidnapped? What are the pros and cons of each?
6. Is Jyrgal a "good man," as Dimira says he is? What is it about him that attracts Kyal enough to agree to stay with him for a while?
7. What inner conflict does Kyal experience?
8. How is the theme of freedom woven throughout?
9. What does this line near the end of the story imply about Kyal's decision?  
*She feels the ground throb beneath her, feels part of an eternal flow of events.*
10. The ancient custom of bride kidnapping has experienced resurgence since Kyrgyzstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Why do you think some women, as depicted in *Kesh Kumay*, help keep this custom alive?

## STORY FOUR *Deep Dark Waves*

In *The Winter's Tale*, King Leontes of Sicilia unjustly accuses his wife, Hermione, of infidelity and throws her in prison where she gives birth to Perdita. Leontes orders the baby taken away and abandoned. He goes into mourning after his son, Mamillius, dies of heartbreak, Hermione is reported dead, and an oracle tells him Hermione was innocent. Sixteen years later Perdita is found and a statue of Hermione comes to life. The family—minus one son—reunites. *Deep Dark Waves* begins sixteen years after Sona's husband Brian took their newborn daughter, Nicole, and disappeared. Through narrative and Sona's own testimony at a fundraiser for women's shelters, we learn of the years that led up to that event and the life that Sona has constructed for herself since.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare*

1. *The Winter's Tale* ends by giving its characters the promise of forgiveness and a fresh start. To what extent is that the case with *Deep Dark Waves*?
2. Hermione's innocence is never in doubt. What about Sona's?
3. Is the statue of Hermione real or an illusion? Is the image Sona presents to the women at the fundraising breakfast real or an illusion? Why or why not?
4. Why might Hermione want to reconcile with Leontes? Why might Sona consider reconciling with Brian?

*If you're not*

1. How does your impression of Brian change as the story progresses? Why do you think he took Nicole?
2. Sona tells much of the story in her own words to an audience. How well do we get to know her? How well does she know herself? Characterize the tone of her talk: is it strategic or open and engaging?
3. What is the role of the woman in the black pantsuit at the breakfast?
4. Why do you suppose Sona has difficulty remembering her son's name?
5. By the end of the story, to what extent do you have sympathy for Sona and Brian or view them as villains?
6. What does the hourglass symbolize in *Deep Dark Waves*? Why did receiving it make Sona feel both honoured and violated?
7. Why might Sona consider reconciling with Brian?
8. How does *Deep Dark Waves* challenge your view of domestic abuse?

## STORY FIVE: *Nobody; I Myself*

*Othello, the Moor of Venice*, begins on a street in Venice, in the midst of an argument between Roderigo and Iago. Roderigo has been paying Iago to help him win Desdemona. But Desdemona has married Othello, a general who passed Iago over for the position of lieutenant in favour of the inexperienced soldier Cassio. Much of the play revolves around Iago's plot to help Roderigo gain Desdemona while exacting his own revenge against Othello, including suggesting to Othello that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. Persuaded of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, Othello smothers her to death. In *Nobody; I Myself*, the narrator pleads with an unknown reader to have compassion for her husband, Joe, whose nightmares from the Vietnam War cause him to try to strangle her in the night. The setting is New Jersey in 1966.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare*

1. How does social isolation influence events in both *Othello* and *Nobody; I Myself*?
2. What role does race play in *Othello* and *Nobody; I Myself*?
3. The military provides Othello a way to gain acceptance in Venetian society. What does the narrator in *Nobody; I Myself* believe will gain Joe acceptance in white society?
4. Othello woos Desdemona with tales of his military travels and battles. What attracts the narrator to Joe in *Nobody; I Myself*?
5. To what extent does Brother D echo Iago?
6. To what extent are Desdemona and the narrator in *Nobody; I Myself* passive victims?
7. How does Desdemona's line in *Othello*—"Nobody; I myself"—resonate in the story?
8. What's the significance of Desdemona dying by smothering and the possibility that the narrator in *Nobody; I Myself* will die from strangulation?

*If you're not*

1. How does social isolation influence events in the story?
2. What does the narrator sacrifice to be with Joe?
3. What role does race play in the story?

4. What does the narrator believe will gain Joe acceptance in white society?
5. What attracts the narrator to Joe?
6. The narrator confesses her naiveté about what Joe experienced in Vietnam. Is such naiveté possible today? Why or why not?
7. Is the narrator a passive victim? Why or why not?
8. What is the significance of our not learning the narrator's name?
9. How is the narrator's struggle with her ideals informed by her upbringing and the historical times? How might her deep feeling of responsibility for Joe reflect a belief in "the white man's burden"?
10. Is the narrator's willingness to die for Joe true love or a way out of depression? How rational is her proposed solution to getting help for Joe?

## STORY SIX *Passing Through*

In *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Queen Gertrude marries her dead husband's brother, Claudius, too quickly after the funeral for her son's liking. The dead king appears as a ghost and tells his son, Prince Hamlet, that Claudius murdered him. The ghost orders Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife. In *Passing Through*, after Trudy's husband, Dave, dies she drifts into a relationship with Dave's brother, Jack, who agrees to help her try to hang on to her financially strapped ranch. But Trudy's son, Spencer, has his own plans for the ranch.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare*

1. *Hamlet* includes many suggestions of incest, including hidden desire between Hamlet and Gertrude. Discuss any such suggestions in Trudy and Spencer's relationship.
2. To what extent does Jack play the role of antagonist in *Passing Through* as Claudius does in *Hamlet*?
3. What similarities, if any, do you find between Prince Hamlet and Spencer?
4. Gertrude seems to rely on men for status and comfort. What about Trudy?
5. Shakespeare portrays Gertrude as shallow, insensitive to Hamlet, lacking good judgment, and unwilling to face the truth. To what extent, if at all, does Trudy resemble Gertrude?

*If you're not*

1. What is the significance of Spencer wearing his father's long black overcoat at the funeral?
2. How are death and rebirth explored through setting and plot?
3. How does this line—*Why hadn't she tried it elsewhere?*—serve as a clue to Trudy's character at the beginning of the story?
4. What is the effect of Dave "hanging around" in Spencer's dreams and the thoughts of Trudy and Jack?
5. What does the cabin represent to Trudy? To Spencer? What's the significance of Trudy's acknowledging she never wanted it?
6. What does Trudy see in Jack? How does she compare him to Dave? What can you infer about her marriage to Dave?
7. Why does Trudy want to hold onto the ranch? What else does she want?
8. Trudy's life has involved gender power struggles. To what extent does she take back her power?

9. What do the last two lines imply about Trudy's life going forward? *She still hadn't heard from him when the first calf arrived—hip-locked and dead. They needed the tractor to pull it out of the mother.*

## STORY SEVEN: *Cocktails with Charles*

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola is shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria. Believing her twin brother has died in the shipwreck, she poses as a young male page named Cesario and goes to work for Duke Orsino. Orsino is in love with Lady Olivia and decides to use "Cesario" as an intermediary. Olivia, believing Viola to be a man, falls in love with him/her. Viola, in turn, falls in love with the Duke, who also believes Viola is a man and uses him/her as his confidant. In *Cocktails with Charles*, Mira has lost her twin brother to a fish bone and her parents to an embarrassing rowboat accident. Angel promises to be an antidote to Mira's loneliness, but Angel is contemplating marrying Charles for financial support.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare*

1. How do both *Twelfth Night* and *Cocktails with Charles* show that love can cause pain?
2. *Twelfth Night* is a romantic comedy with romantic love the play's main focus. How is the main focus in *Cocktails with Charles* the same or different?
3. What in *Twelfth Night* and *Cocktails with Charles* point to the theme of gender ambiguity?
4. What are the similarities between Rhonda in *Cocktails with Charles* and Feste, the clown, in *Twelfth Night*? Any similarities between Malvolio and Charles?
5. How does the allusion to *Cyrano* in *Cocktails with Charles* also allude to *Twelfth Night*?
6. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste says, "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." How is this idea echoed in *Cocktails with Charles*?

*If you're not*

1. How does your impression of Charles change from the beginning to the end of the story? What role does he play in Mira's journey? In Angel's?
2. What indications are there that Mira struggles with sexual feelings for Angel? Can her sexuality be labelled?
3. Rhonda claims people live multiple, simultaneous lives according to scripts they write for themselves. What drama are Angel, Mira, and Charles

- performing together? What fears or needs connect them? In what ways, if at all, do Angel, Mira, and Charles attempt to rewrite their scripts?
4. What do you think accounts for Mira's switch from being sceptical about Rhonda's ideas at the beginning to apparently accepting at the end?
  5. If it's true, as Rhonda says, that everything happens simultaneously, can *Cocktails with Charles* have a beginning or an end? What are possible developments after the story's last line? Which is most likely, in your opinion?

## STORY EIGHT *The Snow People*: 30-46 AGM

*Coriolanus* is set in ancient Rome where, following a famine, the common people, or plebeians, demand the right to set their own price for the city's grain supply. In response to their protests, the ruling aristocracy, or patricians, grant the plebeians five representatives, or tribunes—a decision that angers a patrician soldier who has nothing but contempt for the lower classes. *The Snow People* 30-46 AGM is set in the future where environmental degradation has spawned fear and oppression. The Snow People are kept from full participation in society by a paternalistic Rainbow government.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*If you're into Shakespeare*

1. In *Coriolanus*, people are accorded power and respect according to their class. What is the basis for power and respect in *The Snow People*?
2. *Coriolanus* portrays a man's world where the two chief arenas in which one can gain power—politics and war—exclude women and where gender roles constrict both men and women. What are the gender politics in *The Snow People*?
3. The strong-willed Volumnia has impact in her male-dominated society by living through her son and keeping him dependent on her. To what extent does Selanna live through Akintunde? To what degree is he dependent on her?
4. In *Coriolanus*, the tribunes and plebeians challenge the idea that privileges should accompany class and that nobles are inherently more able to govern and make wise decisions. What Rainbow beliefs do Selanna, Gruzumi, and other Snows challenge?
5. In *Coriolanus*, the patricians support the ways of the past and the people want progress in their institutions. What tug of war is going on between Selanna and Gruzumi and some of their elders?
6. Is Selanna more like Coriolanus, the man, or Volumnia, his mother? How?
7. How does Shakespeare portray the crowds of plebeians? How would you characterize the collective nature of the Snow People?

*If you're not*

1. In *The Snow People*: AGM 30-46, what are the allegorical meanings of the characters and the setting? What do Chloe and the Mountain People represent to the Snows?

2. How do Selanna, Gruzumi, and Ada represent different reactions to oppression?
3. What are the gender politics in *The Snow People*?
4. What enables Selanna to leave her mother and begin to chart her own course?
5. How did you experience the change in voice from part 1 to part 2?
6. Was it beneficial or detrimental for the Snows to be left behind after the evacuation? Why?
7. Akin feels that he has disappointed Selanna by not turning out to be another Gruzumi. Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. What qualities has Akintunde inherited from his mother?
9. What role does myth play in the story?
10. Akin dreams about a woman he doesn't know, but *he recognizes her, all the same, from a place deep inside him*. What do you think he recognizes in her?
11. What does the story say about individual struggle for meaning and purpose?
12. How surprising were the key events in the story? How else could the story have ended?