

BREWS + BOOKS

Discussion Questions for Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell
by Susanna Clarke

Two magicians shall appear in England...

The first shall fear me; the second shall long to behold me;

The first shall be governed by thieves and murderers; the second shall
conspire at his own destruction;

The first shall bury his heart in a dark wood beneath the snow, yet
still feel its ache;

The second shall see his dearest possession in his enemy's hand...

Much like the 19th century books it's emulating, "Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell" has a lot to say about English society, particularly English society in the 19th century. What do you think that the book was trying to say about English society?

Both Strange and Norrell, along with the York magicians, and even the gentleman with the thistle-down hair, are described as gentlemen in the book, while other important and even heroic characters, such as Stephen Black, Childermass, and Vinculus are not. What defines a gentleman in the novel? By showing that not all gentlemen are good people, what is Susanna Clarke saying about race and class? What does she have to say about gender with characters such as Lady Pole and Arabella Strange?



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“Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” uses footnotes - including some that are very extensive. What purpose do the footnotes play in telling the story? Did you like the footnotes, or did they distract you from the story?

Many real figures from 19th century England make appearances in “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell,” including King George III, the Duke of Wellington, and Lord Byron. In addition, Susanna Clarke combines new characters like The Raven King with well-known English mythology, like fairies and Arthurian legends. What is the effect of mixing fact with fiction like this?

People have compared “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” to the Harry Potter books, going as far as calling it “Harry Potter for adults.” Do you think that’s a fair comparison? Are there other books that “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” reminded you of?

Norrell and Strange break with each other over Strange’s publication disagreeing with Norrell on the importance of the Raven King, but their relationship was strained for a while. What really caused the strain between Norrell and Strange? Did you agree with one of the magicians or the other? Are you a Norrellite or a Strangite?

After nearly 800 pages, the ending of “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” isn’t exactly tidy. Why do you think that Susanna Clarke decided to leave the book with so many threads hanging? Would you want a sequel to the book, or are you happy with the way it ended? Do you think the world of the novel has seen the last of the Raven King?

READ-ALIKES

Did you enjoy this book and want to
explore similar items?

- “The Mermaid & Mrs. Hancock” by Imogen Hermes Gower - Readers who enjoyed the complexity, magic, and essential Britishness of “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” may like this story about a merchant whose vessel returns home with the body of a mermaid.
- “The Prestige” by Christopher Priest - The British historical setting and bitter rivalry between two stage magicians may pique the interest of readers who enjoyed the contentious relationship between Strange and Norrell.
- “Shades of Milk & Honey” by Mary Robinette Kowal - Readers who liked the way that “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” weaves magic into a historical setting, but crave something simpler may enjoy this Jane Austen-esque tale of a woman with a great talent for glamour magic.
- “The Golem and the Jinni” by Helene Wecker - This layered historical fantasy novel tells the interwoven story of a golem from a Polish shtetl and a jinni from Syrian deserts. Readers looking for another imaginative deep dive into history and magic may like this intricately plotted, diverse story.
- “Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” BBC America Miniseries - TV fans might enjoy comparing and contrasting the BBC America miniseries, starring Bertie Carvel and Eddie Marsan, with the book.

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