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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Liar's Dictionary by Eley Williams

Summary

Mountweazel n. the phenomenon of false entries within dictionaries and works of reference. Often used as a safeguard against copyright infringement.

In the final year of the nineteenth century, Peter Winceworth is toiling away at the letter S for Swansby's multivolume Encyclopaedic Dictionary. But his disaffection with his colleagues compels him to assert some individual purpose and artistic freedom, and he begins inserting unauthorized, fictitious entries. In the present day, Mallory, the publisher's young intern, starts to uncover these mountweazels in the process of digitization and through them senses their creator's motivations, hopes, and desires. More pressingly, she's also been contending with a threatening, anonymous caller who wants Swansby's staff to "burn in hell." As these two narratives coalesce, Winceworth and Mallory, separated by one hundred years, must discover how to negotiate the complexities of life's often untrustworthy, hoax-strewn, and undefinable path. An exhilarating, laugh-out-loud debut, *The Liar's Dictionary* celebrates the rigidity, fragility, absurdity, and joy of language while peering into questions of identity and finding one's place in the world.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever browsed through a dictionary the way that's described in the preface? If so, what unique words did you find?
2. At the beginning of the novel, Winceworth muses that "there should really be a specific word associated with the side effects of drinking an excess of alcohol." Is there a feeling or sensation you feel there should be a specific word for?
3. When David tells her about mountweazels, or made up words, Mallory points out that "all words are made up." How do you think made up words become "real words"? Can you think of any recent examples?
4. Why do you think Mallory has stayed at Swansby's for so many years?

5. The Liar's Dictionary has two protagonists, one from the past (Winceworth) and one from the present (Mallory). What do you make of the relationship between these two characters? What traits do they share?
6. The book contains many lesser-known definitions for familiar words. Was there one definition that particularly surprised you?
7. What do you think is the strongest factor in Winceworth's decision to include "mountweazels" in the dictionary?
8. What was your favorite mountweazel?
9. Mallory reflects on some more nontraditional "dictionaries" she owns, such as The Language of Flowers. Do you think of books like this as "dictionaries"? Why or why not? What do you think are the most important characteristics of a dictionary?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the Publisher