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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Where the Forest Meets the Stars by Glendy Vanderah

Summary

After the loss of her mother and her own battle with breast cancer, Joanna Teale returns to her graduate research on nesting birds in rural Illinois, determined to prove that her recent hardships have not broken her. She throws herself into her work from dusk to dawn, until her solitary routine is disrupted by the appearance of a mysterious child who shows up at her cabin barefoot and covered in bruises.

The girl calls herself Ursa, and she claims to have been sent from the stars to witness five miracles. With concerns about the child's home situation, Jo reluctantly agrees to let her stay—just until she learns more about Ursa's past.

Jo enlists the help of her reclusive neighbor, Gabriel Nash, to solve the mystery of the charming child. But the more time they spend together, the more questions they have. How does a young girl not only read but understand Shakespeare? Why do good things keep happening in her presence? And why aren't Jo and Gabe checking the missing children's website anymore?

Though the three have formed an incredible bond, they know difficult choices must be made. As the summer nears an end and Ursa gets closer to her fifth miracle, her dangerous past closes in. When it finally catches up to them, all of their painful secrets will be forced into the open, and their fates will be left to the stars.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the word 'changeling' in the first sentence affect how you thought about the girl and the coming story? Why do you think the author used this particular word?
2. After her mother's death and her own battle with breast cancer, Jo isolates herself. Have you ever gone through something that you thought no one else could understand? How did you handle it?
3. How did Jo's reaction to the girl's unusual story conflict or agree with how you would have responded if a child told you this story? Why do you think Jo reacted as she did?

4. What was your initial impression of Gabe? Have you ever had a first impression of a person and later discovered you had misjudged them? Now that you know his story, why do you think he abruptly drove away after he met Jo and Ursa on the Kinney property?
5. Were Jo and Gabe's decisions steered by Ursa's clever manipulation or by their unconscious or conscious willingness to be manipulated? If they were aware of it, why did they let it happen?
6. How might Jo's pre- and post-surgery images of herself help her relate to Ursa's insistence that she's an alien in a human body? Do you think Gabe had dual ways of seeing himself as well? Discuss how physical and emotional trauma changes people's views of themselves.
7. Is Jo's mother, in a way, still parenting her? Do you believe the lessons children learn from their parents, both good and bad, influence them all their lives? There are obvious differences between the parents of Jo, Ursa, and Gabe, but are there also similarities?
8. Why do you think Tabby and Jo got along so well? Do you think Tabby merited being Ursa's third miracle?
9. How is the word and idea of 'nest' used in different ways throughout the book? What themes in the story might nests represent? How do you think Gabe's renaming of the Pinwheel Galaxy to 'The Infinite Nest' relates to those themes?
10. Have you seen bitter sibling relationships like the one between Gabe and Lacey? Was Lacey's change at the end of the story realistic?
11. Depression can take many forms from mild to severe, and can be caused by hereditary, environmental, or both factors. Discuss how Gabe's history with his mother, father, sister, and George could have contributed to his social anxiety and breakdown in college. Do you think Jo's understanding of Gabe's depression and Gabe's own view of how severe it was were the same?
12. Do you think Jo's ways of helping Gabe were overbearing or sensible?
13. Discuss the different ways the word 'fate' is used throughout the book. Did you believe the events in this story were mostly caused by accidental twists of fate? How do you think Jo, Gabe, and Ursa would each answer that question?
14. Did the inclusion of Shakespearean characters help you see the story in new ways? What is the significance of Gabe telling Ursa she positively influenced the fates of the kittens Juliet and Hamlet?
15. How did you feel when the story suddenly shifted from the forest to the hospital? Discuss how this abrupt change of setting was important to the story.

16. Did you agree with Jo when she said the purpose of Ursa's five miracles was to give her time to find a new home?
17. Do you think Jo should have been arrested for child endangerment? Why did Lenora Rhodes reverse her decision at the end of the story?
18. How did your view of Ursa change as you read the story? Discuss why the author chose to leave the reader questioning who Ursa is at the end of the story.

Summary and Discussion Questions from the Author