

Reading Group Questions for *The Perfect Man*

1. Why do you think this novel is titled *The Perfect Man*?
2. Much of the novel focuses on the relationship between men and women. What do you take from the novel in this regard?
3. Why are the men of this town so often shown together - almost as if they were one organism? What is the effect of this, and what do their discussions and stories reveal about them and in particular about their relationships to women?
4. The author claims this book is ultimately optimistic. Do you agree?
5. The following is a quote from the author for consideration and discussion:

“For children, adults, particularly parents, stand between them and the world before they were born as well as the world beyond childhood. The more secretive and mysterious that adult is, the more imaginative that child is forced to be about what once existed and what lies ahead. In general, mystery, silence, is what provokes imagination, and that is not always a bad thing. Is it not even the first kind of spiritual life we experience?”
6. Since this novel involves children growing up, it is inevitably going to be described as a coming-of-age novel. Is that accurate? What does it mean for each of these children (for anybody) to come-of-age? Can many of the adults in this novel be said to have come-of-age? If you argue that some of these children do come-of-age what makes it possible for them to do so?
7. Two of these children die. Can death be a coming-of-age?
8. The following is a quote from the author for consideration and discussion.

“We live in a culture that does not value adulthood. I would argue that this is why poetry and literary fiction is on the wane. People don’t want adult stories. They don’t want to think in adult ways. We want either fantasy (which explains why millions of adults - even without children - read *Harry Potter*) or we want the so-called “literal” truth (memoir, biography, history). We equate “adulthood” with unimaginativeness, as if childhood is the only realm of the imagination. This is why we find ourselves at the moment in a world polarized between fantasy and fundamentalism.”
9. Compare Lewis’s “living faith,” which is sometimes meaningful, organized, at other times pathological, with Reverend Hewitt’s “Christianity”? Think about the qualities of those characters and the qualities of their beliefs.

Here is a related quote from the author which may add to this discussion:

“When a writer looks back at his work, he or she always finds unexpected connections. One thing that struck me is that Lewis’s “belief system” resulted in his own death, while Reverend Hewitt’s (to some extent) results in the death of another (his son). It again made me realize why all true fiction writers are more obsessed with character than any number of ideas. No matter how great an idea - religious, political, or otherwise - it is condemned to live and find its ultimate expression through individuals, character.
10. The boogerman is described as black, even when he is clearly white. He is also described as having the head of an old man and the body of a child. What do you think is the significance of this?

11. Can Lewis, Alvin, and the boogerman be described as innocent sacrifices? For what? Is anything achieved in their sacrifice/murder/self-destruction?
12. How do you understand Ruth's Romance novel sections working in the book?
13. One of the main questions of the book - perhaps of all fiction - is the question of transformation. Oliver in his letter says that "transformation is just a fantasy, like Ruth's Romances . . ." Does this book agree or disagree with this notion?
14. Isn't all fiction about transformation - either achieved or failed? Isn't such a belief the basis for all religions? All spiritual endeavor? Is this book, then, about faith?
15. In what way does the last section of the book - in Raj's perspective - work with what has come before? Why is this the last chapter?
16. We never directly enter the perspective of Raj until this final chapter. Why would the author choose not to enter the perspective of the character that may in some ways be described as the central character of the novel?

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