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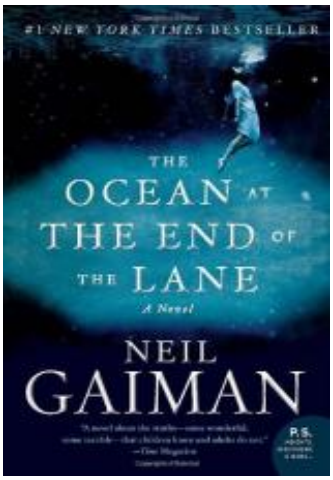
The Ocean at the End of the Lane

by Neil Gaiman



About the Book

Sussex, England. A middle-aged man returns to his childhood home to attend a funeral. Although the house he lived in is long gone, he is drawn to the farm at the end of the road, where, when he was seven, he encountered a most remarkable girl, Lettie Hempstock, and her mother and grandmother. He hasn't thought of Lettie in decades, and yet as he sits by the pond (a pond that she'd claimed was an ocean) behind the ramshackle old farmhouse, the unremembered past comes flooding back. And it is a past too strange, too frightening, too dangerous to have happened to anyone, let alone a small boy.

Forty years earlier, a man committed suicide in a stolen car at this farm at the end of the road. Like a fuse on a firework, his death lit a touchpaper and resonated in unimaginable ways. The darkness was unleashed, something scary and thoroughly incomprehensible to a little boy. And Lettie --- magical, comforting, wise beyond her years --- promised to protect him, no matter what.

A groundbreaking work from a master, THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE is told with a rare understanding of all that makes us human, and shows the power of stories to reveal and shelter us from the darkness inside and out. It is a stirring, terrifying and elegiac fable as delicate as a butterfly's wing and as menacing as a knife in the dark.

Discussion Guide

1. It would be easy to think of the Hempstocks as the "triple goddess" (the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone) of popular mythology. In what ways do they conform to those roles? In what ways are they different?

2. The narrator has returned to his hometown for a funeral (we never learn whose). Do you think that framing his childhood story with a funeral gives this story a pessimistic outlook, rather than an optimistic one?

3. Because the narrator is male and most of the other characters are female, this story has the potential to become a stereotypical narrative where a male character saves the day. How does the story avoid that pitfall?

4. The story juxtaposes the memories of childhood with the present of adulthood. In what ways do children perceive things differently than adults? Do you think there are situations in which a child's perspective can be more "truthful" than an adult's?

5. One of Ursula Monkton's main attributes is that she always tries to give people what they want. Why is this not always a good thing? What does Ursula want? How does Ursula use people's desires against them to get what she wants?

6. Water has many roles in this story --- it can give and take life, reveal and hide. How does it play these different roles?

7. One of the many motivators for the characters in this story is loneliness. What characters seem to suffer from loneliness? How do adults and children respond to loneliness in different ways? In the same ways?

8. On page 18, the narrator tells us that his father often burnt their toast and always ate it with apparent relish. He also tells us that later in life, his father admitted that he had never actually liked burnt toast, but ate it to avoid waste, and that his father's confession made the narrator's entire childhood feel like a lie: "it was as if one of the pillars of belief that my world had been built upon had crumbled into dry sand." What other "pillars of belief" from childhood does he discover to be false? How do these discoveries affect him? Are there any beliefs from your own childhood that you discovered to be false?

9. When the narrative returns to the present, Old Mrs. Hempstock tells our narrator, "You stand two of you lot next to each other, and you could be continents away for all it means anything" (p. 173). What does she mean by this? Why is it "easier" for people, our narrator especially, to forget certain things that are difficult to reconcile?

10. Though the narrator has a sister, he doesn't seem to be particularly close to her. Why do you think it is that he has trouble relating to other children? Why do you think his sister is not an ally for him?

Author Bio

Neil Gaiman is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling A VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS, THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE, THE GRAVEYARD BOOK, CORALINE, NEVERWHERE and the *Sandman* series of graphic novels, among other works. His fiction has received Newbery, Carnegie, Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy and Will Eisner Awards. His novel AMERICAN GODS will be a TV series airing in 2017. Originally from England, he lives in the United States, where he is a professor at Bard College.

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