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The Speed of Dark

by Elizabeth Moon



About the Book

Thoughtful, poignant, and unforgettable, **The Speed of Dark** is a gripping exploration into the world of Lou Arrendale, an autistic man who is offered a chance to try a brand-new experimental "cure" for his condition. Now Lou must decide if he should submit to a surgery that might completely change the way he views the world . . . and the very essence of who he is.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Elizabeth Moon titled her novel **The Speed of Dark**?

2. Is **The Speed of Dark** a typical science fiction novel? Is it a science fiction novel at all? Why or why not?

3. Lou Arrendale is the novel's main character, and most of its events are related in his voice, through his eyes. Yet sometimes Moon depicts events through the eyes of other characters, such as Tom and Pete Aldrin. Discuss why the author might have decided to write this story from more than one point of view. Do you think it was the right decision?

4. In the accompanying interview, Elizabeth Moon states that she wanted to avoid demonizing autism in her presentation of Lou and his fellow autists. Does she succeed? Does she go too far in the opposite direction and romanticize it?

5. What is it about damaged characters like Lou that makes them so fascinating to read about? What other novels can you think of that feature main characters or narrators who are damaged or in some way "non-normal"?

6. Compare the author's portrayal of characters like Mr. Crenshaw and Don to that of Lou. Are their portraits drawn with equal depth and believability? Why do you suppose the author might have chosen to depict some characters more realistically than others? What effect, if any, did this have on your enjoyment of the novel?

7. In what ways is Lou's autism a disadvantage in his daily life? Does it confer any advantages?

8. What does it mean to the various characters in the book to be normal? How do Lou's ideas of normalcy compare to those of Crenshaw? Of Don? Of Tom and Lucia?

9. How did reading **The Speed of Dark** change your own concept of what it means to be normal?

10. What reason does Lou's company give for wanting him and his fellow autists to undergo the experimental treatment? Are they being truthful, or is there some other reason?

11. Does Lou decide to try the experimental treatment because he believes what the company has told him, or for reasons of his own? If the latter, what are those reasons, and do you find them believable? Do you think he makes the right decision? Discuss in terms of the reading from the book of John that Lou hears at church, about the man lying by the healing pool in Siloam.

12. Do you agree or disagree with Crenshaw's contention that Lou and the other autists are a drain on the company and that their "perks" are unfair to "normal" employees? In your opinion, are special needs employees, whether autists or those with other mental or physical disabilities, given too many workplace advantages under current law?

13. What do you think accounts for the personal hostility toward Lou displayed by characters like Crenshaw and Don? At any point in your reading, did you find yourself taking their side? Why?

14. Why, despite his sensitivity to patterns, does Lou have such difficulty accepting the possibility that Don may be the one behind the vandalism of his car? Once Don is arrested, why does Lou have misgivings about filing a complaint against him?

15. Given what is revealed of Marjory's personality and history, do you think she is genuinely attracted to Lou?

16. One of Lou's biggest difficulties is interpreting the motivations of other people. Yet this is something almost every reader can relate to. Similarly, many readers can identify with other aspects of Lou's character and behavior: his appreciation of music or his sensitivity to patterns, for example. Were there any facets of his character that you found totally alien to your own experience of living in and perceiving the world?

17. One reviewer called the ending of **The Speed of Dark** "chilling." Another termed it a "cop-out." What's your verdict? Has Lou achieved his dream of becoming an astronaut, as it seems? What price has he paid? Is he still the same person he was before the treatment? If not, how has he changed? What has been gained? What has been lost?

18. The treatment offered to Lou features a combination of genetic engineering and nanotechnology, two of the hottest areas of scientific research today. Some diseases and conditions are already being treated with gene therapies, and scientists expect that more will soon follow. The prospect of cures for such scourges as cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and

autism is exciting. But what about genetic therapies to raise IQ or program developing fetuses for certain physical, mental, and emotional traits? Are we moving too fast into this brave new world? Have we taken sufficient account of the dangers and ethical considerations? Do human beings have a right to tamper with nature in this way? Where would you draw the line?

19. If you were offered an experimental drug to improve your IQ or some area of your mental or physical functioning, but with a possibility that you would no longer be the same person, would you try it? What if it were offered by your employer and tied to a higher salary or better benefits package?

20. Imagine that you and the members of your reading group are highfunctioning autists like Lou and the others. Now go back and discuss one of the previous questions from this new perspective, based on behaviors and ways of thinking presented in the novel.

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"A POWERFUL PORTRAIT . . . AN ENGAGING JOURNEY INTO THE DARK EDGES THAT DEFINE THE SELF.""

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