

The Ninth Life of Louis Drax

By Liz Jensen

The discussion questions that follow are designed to enhance your group's conversation about Liz Jensen's *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, a richly imaginative novel about the life of the mind, the instinct to hurt and heal, and the dangerous spell that love casts in one very mysterious French family.

About this book

Young Louis Drax is clinging to his ninth life, after surviving electrocution, food poisoning, horrid diseases, and other so-called accidents. His delicately beautiful mother, Natalie, hovers at his bedside at the Clinique de l'Horizon in Provence, waiting to see if Louis will emerge from his coma to tell the tale of tumbling down a cliff at his birthday picnic, drowning, and coming back to life. Louis's father is missing and under suspicion of attempted murder.

Louis's physician, Pascal Dannachet, succumbs to an alluring combination of pity and love for Natalie. Louis senses the illicit connection between Dr. Dannachet and his mother, and he communicates his displeasure by scribbling threatening letters through the doctor's sleepwalking body. Louis remains deep in his coma, with only a mysterious, bandage-wrapped presence named Gustave to keep him company. When the body of Louis's father turns up, Dr. Dannachet struggles to put his feelings for Natalie aside to investigate the disquieting truth behind the Drax family "accidents."

For discussion

1. Discuss the quote from Paul Broks's *Into the Silent Land* with which Jensen opens the novel. How is the brain made up of both "meat" and "fiction?" How does this epigraph sum up the experiences of Louis and Dr. Dannachet?
2. "I'm not most kids," Louis Drax announces, under the heading "WARNING" (1). Is this statement truly a warning, or possibly also a boast, or a lament? To whom does Louis want to prove his uniqueness as a kid, and as a narrator?
3. Papa calls Louis's life story "*The Strange Mystery of Louis Drax, the Amazing Accident-Prone Boy*" (3). If this book had the title that Papa suggests, how would the tone be different? Would Papa's title attract a different readership?
4. Discuss the significance of pets in the novel, from Mohammed the hamster to Pascal Dannachet's beloved bonsai trees. In what way does Dr. Dannachet treat his coma patients like pets? Why are Louis and Dr. Dannachet so fascinated by strange animals and sea creatures?
5. How does the setting of the story help create the mood of the novel? Liz Jensen lives in London, yet this novel is set in France. How would the story differ if it were set in Jensen's native England?
6. Consider the brash yet youthful voice of narrator Louis Drax. Is this an authentic nine-year-old voice? When combined with Louis's favorite subjects, like "vampire bats and death stuff and the swastika" (9), what is the overall impression of Louis's character?

7. Why was the clinic's original name, "l'Hopital des Incurables," changed to "Clinique de l'Horizon?" Are the patients in the clinic curable or incurable? What role does hope play within the clinic?
8. When Dr. Dannachet looks Natalie in the eyes, "I felt a huge flood of pity. Or was it love? I couldn't tell, and it didn't matter" (138). Why can't Dr. Dannachet distinguish between pity and love for Natalie? What is his "saviour complex" (76), and how does it affect his feelings toward Natalie?
9. Discuss Jensen's use of foreshadowing through Louis's "secret rule of pet-keeping... *Right of Disposal*" (5), as well as his "Death Game" (83) with stuffed animals. How do these rules and games come across when Louis first describes them? How do they quietly reveal the truth of his relationship with his mother?
10. *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* has two narrators, Louis and Pascal Dannachet. If the story were to be told from three perspectives, who would be the most interesting additional narrator? How would this third narrator change the telling and possibly even the events of the novel?
11. Discuss the portrayal of women in the novel, especially Natalie Drax and Sophie Dannachet. Are women depicted positively or negatively, in a realistic or exaggerated manner? How is motherhood portrayed?
12. Compare Dr. Dannachet to Gustave, the voice living in Louis's head. How does the reader's impression of Dr. Dannachet and Gustave evolve over the course of the novel? Who seems more menacing, yet who has Louis's best interests in mind? How is each character a father figure to Louis?
13. "'I got you wrong'" (218), Dr. Dannachet admits to Detective Stephanie Charvillefort. Why has Dr. Dannachet misjudged the detective? What was his initial impression of her, and how does that differ from the reality of her character? Whom else has Dr. Dannachet misjudged?
14. The novel vividly depicts the life of the comatose mind, populated by unsettling spirits and dark caves. Is this a credible representation? What other features might the world of the coma have?
15. At the end of the novel, Louis is still in a coma, but says, "I know that one day, if I want to, I can do it. I can take one step forward. And then another" (227). Why does the novel end on an ambiguous note? Is Louis more likely to wake, or to remain the coma? Why?
16. On her website, Jensen reveals that the inspiration for *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* came from the unsolved mystery of her grandmother's death in Switzerland in the 1930's (http://www.lizjensen.com/ld_contents.asp?m=2&id=269). Does this information impact the reader's impression of the story? Is it important for readers to know authors' inspiration for their works? Does it add to or detract from the imaginative process of reading?

17. Reviewer Jay Jennings comments, “*The Ninth Life* is first-rate for those who like their mysteries more than by-the-numbers” (*Time Out New York* January 13-19 2005, p. 65). Is this book primarily a mystery? What other genres are at work, and how does Jensen cross genre boundaries in her storytelling?

18. Anthony Minghella (*Cold Mountain*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *The English Patient*) plans to direct a film adaptation of *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*. What aspects might be even more vivid onscreen than on the page? What details or tone of the book might be lost in the film adaptation?

Suggested reading

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*; Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; Mary Roach, *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*; Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi*; Russell Banks, *Rule of the Bone*; Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*; Brady Udall, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*; Alex Garland, *The Coma*; Dave King, *The Ha-Ha*; Ali Smith, *Hotel World*; Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle*; Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha*.

Liz Jensen is the acclaimed author of *The Paper Eater*, *Egg Dancing*, *Ark Baby* (shortlisted for The Guardian Fiction Prize) and most recently *War Crimes for the Home*. She lives in London with her two children.