



Lighthouse Island

By Paulette Jiles
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Questions for Discussion

1. The opening paragraph of the novel states "the city covered the entire earth if people think of the earth as 'where I live.'" Is the narrator comparing this to the unreal world where nobody lives—television or even the world of the imagination in books? How does it tie into the themes of the novel?
2. What makes Lighthouse Island so important to Nadia? Why is she so determined to find it, even as many warn her that it is not the paradise she imagines it to be?
3. Over the course of the novel, Nadia adopts or attempts to adopt numerous different names, from her birth name of Raisa to Nadia to Sylvia Plath to Sendra Bentley. Discuss the significance of disguises and name changes in the novel; does she find her true self?
4. Nadia is blind for several years early in her life. James is a paraplegic. Both are uniquely driven to escape the world in which they find themselves. Using examples from the novel draw the connection between having a handicap and each character's ability (or inability) to see the earth as 'where I live'.
5. The Continuity Man tells Nadia "human beings can't live without correlation and links and parallels and coincidences." (pages 240-241) Why is continuity so important for humanity—or do you disagree that it is as crucial as the Continuity Man claims? Why do you think the Agencies seek to disrupt continuity? Jiles has said she based much of this society's arrangements on those of the old Soviet Union. Can you find examples?
6. On page 68, Nadia reads about a time when "every place had a name." Why have the Agencies eliminated the names of cities, rivers, and other places? Why haven't the Agencies eliminated the names of apartment buildings, residences, and, sometimes, streets? How does this relate to the prominence of maps and James's role as cartographer?
7. Television is a ubiquitous presence for the people of the Western Cessions. Describe the role that television plays and how the Agencies use it. Why is some of their programming critical of themselves?
8. Why do the Agencies choose to air public executions on television? Recent news from China revealed that the Chinese government had decided to air public executions but was met with such outrage that they canceled it. Compare how this affects the people of the Western Cessions with how it is expected to. Is it plausible that a government or television network would air public executions? Why or why not?
9. Before the Agencies attempt to arrest James, he is repeatedly demoted, his privileges revoked. Why are people routinely demoted before they are arrested? What is the benefit to the Agencies in functioning this way?
10. When Nadia is asked by her fellow prisoners on page 317 to recite a poem, she chooses Anna Akhmatova's "The souls of those I love are on high stars." What significance do you think this poem has for Nadia, given her situation?
11. Nadia inadvertently has a woman sent to prison in order to achieve her own freedom. James kills two guards who try to arrest them. Do the characters feel these sacrifices are worthwhile in order to achieve their goals? Do you agree or disagree, and why? What do you feel is allowable, and what is not, in the name of escaping an oppressive government?
12. The protagonists of this novel have a particular love of books and listen frequently to Big Radio's recitation of great works of literature. Discuss the importance of books in this novel. How do they influence Nadia's quest? What is the significance of Lighthouse Island being the source of Big Radio?
13. When James asks Chan how he came to be Facilitator, Chan tells him, "I looked good. They wanted somebody that looked Eastern and wise. I just read off a teleprompter." (page 584) What does this tell you about authority and authority figures in the world of this novel?
14. Coincidence appears to play a major role in the novel. Nadia learns that her parents really were intended to go to Lighthouse Island, and that James knew them. She finds Thin Sam at Barking Sound. Weather returns, and the Agencies collapse, at the same time Nadia and James seek to escape the city. Is this, in fact, coincidence? Is it fate? What role do such ideas play in a world so defined by bureaucratic rule?
15. What do you think the author is trying to say by ultimately having Nadia and James join with the Five Companions to form the Lincolnshire Poachers, complete with a founding charter and a flag? Should we be hopeful about a new government and society, or are they repeating the mistakes of the society that has just collapsed? Use examples from the novel to support your opinion.