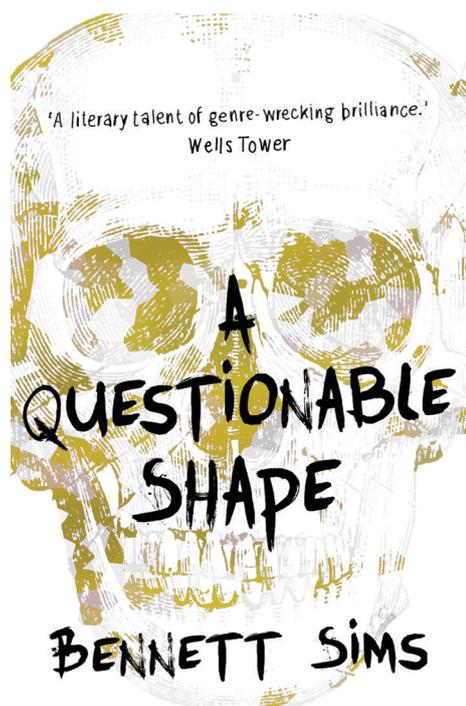




Oneworld Readers' Guide



A Questionable Shape

Bennett Sims

In the wake of an infection that has left Baton Rouge unsettled and roiling with the 'undead', three young friends – Mazoch, Vermaelen and Rachel – band together to search for Mazoch's missing father. Their mission is to visit all the places he once lingered: his favourite fast food restaurants, the movie theatre he frequented with his son and the city park.

As hurricane season looms, uncertainty and suspicion of each other's motives threatens to pull the group apart, but still, the friends' search continues. Over the course of a week, day after day, they haunt the places Mazoch's father once haunted, confronting the same persistent hope that faces all who grieve: that whomever, whatever they have lost, will return to them, in one shape or another.

About the Author

Bennett Sims was born in Baton Rouge. He graduated from Pomona College in 2008 and from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 2012, where he held a Truman Capote Fellowship and a John C. Schupes Fellowship in Fiction. He is currently a Provost Postgraduate Visiting Writer at the University of Iowa. His stories have appeared in *A Public Space*, *Zoetrope*, *Orion*, *Subtropics*, *Tin House* and *Electric Literature*. *A Questionable Shape* is his first novel.

Discussion Points

1. 'A Questionable Shape' is a quote from the first act of Hamlet when Hamlet confronts his father's ghost 'Thou comest in such a questionable shape'. How is fatherhood portrayed in the novel?
2. 'By opening up a subjacent space on the page, the footnote digs a grave in the text, an underworld in the text.' To what extent did you feel that the footnotes added to the novel?
3. Sims presents the philosophical conundrum of undeath to the reader by creating a setting where the undead are as much a part of Baton Rouge's society as the living. They have legal rights and aren't allowed to be killed. What affect does this have on the reading experience, and can you think of other works of literature where the author asks you to suspend your disbelief in a similar way?



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4. Memory plays an important role in the novel. Are there any differences in how memory affects the actions of the living and the undead?
5. Michael starts off as a sidekick-investigator helping his friend find his undead father. However, by the end of the novel he is completely immersed in the specifics of what it means to be undead and even contemplates whether he would prefer to be undead. In what way does Michael become more like the undead as the novel progresses?
6. Michael is always calculating the worst possible outcome, while Rachel would much prefer to 'cross that bridge' if and when it arises. Whose line of thought did you most empathise with?
7. Michael becomes fed up with Matt's obsession of finding his father, yet he continues to accompany him on his numerous trips to his 'dilapidated house' with its 'waterlogged sofa'. How does the image of home as a welcoming environment become unsettled by Matt's frequent trips?
8. Despite the novel's overarching themes of fatherhood and mortality, Sims' often focuses on the minutiae on things, for example the oxidization rates in apples or simple pleasure of sunlight. In drawing attention to the seemingly banal, does he promote their importance and worth? How do these details relate to the novel's larger themes?
9. Could *A Questionable Shape* be described as an existential novel?
10. How has the novel altered, if at all, your preconceptions of the 'zombie genre'?
11. Can you think of any modern-day behaviours that are similar to the behaviours of the undead? Maybe start by considering the impact modern technology has had on our lives.