PRETEND I’M DEAD

Jen Beagin

Mona is twenty-three, emotionally adrift and cleaning houses to get by.

While handing out clean needles to drug addicts, she falls for a man she calls Mr Disgusting, who proceeds to break her heart in unimaginable ways.

In search of healing, she decamps to New Mexico for a fresh start, but always lurking just beneath the surface are the ghosts of her past, and the crushing legacy of a chaotic, destructive childhood. It seems that running further away from her problems could just leave more inventive ways for them to find her. Pretend I’m Dead is as poignant as it is witty, confronting readers with important questions about love, resilience and childhood. The questions below are intended to guide your discussion of Pretend I’m Dead and to help you explore its themes, style and message in more detail.

Questions for Discussion

1. Mona allows Betty to call her Maura for much of the book, and doesn’t share Mr Disgusting’s real name until long after their relationship ends. What is the significance of names, real, assumed or given, in Pretend I’m Dead?

2. Pretend I’m Dead is the name of a game Mona and her father played in the pool when she was young. As an adult, she starts photographing herself playing dead in Henry’s home while she cleans. What do you feel is significant about the title of the book and the idea of playing dead throughout it?

3. Discuss the theme of parenthood in the novel, in particular the relationship between Henry and Zoe. Do you think Mona is capable of interpreting other people’s relationships with their parents objectively, or is she inevitably influenced by her own childhood trauma?

4. Where do you see Mona going next? Do you feel she has managed to deal with her past traumas effectively enough to build a life for herself in New Mexico?

5. What do you make of Mona’s behaviour as she cleans houses: is it voyeuristic? Creepy? Sinister? Funny?
6. *Pretend I’m Dead* was described by one Goodreads reviewer as ‘*Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine on acid.*’ Do you think this is a good description? Do you see any parallels between the two protagonists in their outlook and the way they relate to others?

7. On p. 5, Mona claims that she only volunteers at the needle exchange because ‘She lived alone, sans television. Her only friend was attending college in another state.’ Having got to know her a little better over the course of the novel, do you think she does indeed volunteer just to have something to do?

8. Discuss the theme of loneliness in *Pretend I’m Dead*.

9. Do you see Mona as a character who seeks out instability and thrives on chaos, or as someone who has encountered instability through no fault of their own?

10. Mona feels an affinity with the addicts she meets at the needle exchange because they are both invisible to the majority of society. Does Mona exploit this invisibility, or attempt to make herself seen?