

*Behind the Moon*

By Madison Smartt Bell

Published by City Lights

Discussion Guide

1. How does the structure of the novel (repetition and reframing of certain scenes, sudden shifts in perspective, intermingling of dream sequences with the “real” plot) affect your understanding of the story and the experience of reading it? Do you have an idea of why the author might have used this technique?
2. Who would you say is the protagonist, or central character in the book? As a reader, do you feel more drawn to Julie’s perspective, or Marissa’s account? Was there a particular character you identified with, and why?
3. How would you characterize the mood/tone of *Behind the Moon*? Does it change depending on whose experience seems to be drive a given chapter?
4. *Behind the Moon* incorporates references to prehistoric humans’ symbolism and imagery, along with indications of early human notions of spiritual life. The novel also references more modern spiritual beliefs and rituals. How do these seem to be linked, or are they? What about the relationship between animals and humans; humans and their environment; mind and spirit?
5. What do you make of the relationship between Julie and Jamal, and Marissa and Jamal? Is it love, lust, or a more nuanced in-between state? How do you explain the momentary embrace between Marissa and Jamal?
6. Especially during scenes from Julie’s coma (out-of-body experiences), the novel emphasizes the tension and connection between the animal and the human. Is *Behind the Moon* making a statement about interactions between animals and humans, and what does it mean to meld with or embody an animal form?
7. Based on what we know about Julie, Jamal, Marissa, Ultimo, and other characters’ pasts and how these facts are presented to the reader in sometimes clear, sometimes indirect ways, what is the novel saying about the nature of personal history, narrative, and memory?
8. In the small town where *Behind the Moon* takes place, Jamal’s family stands out for their status as “other,” people whose native language, cuisine, and heritage are all distinct from the majority population. Ultimo is also considered a “cultural other,” though his ancestors and culture occupied that place for a longer history than those who consider him to be “different.” Jamal is a sympathetic character with a complicated past, and Ultimo, who is alternately menacing and kind remains fairly opaque in terms of his personal history. What do you make of these cultural juxtapositions?

9. How did you interpret the final chapter of the novel, in which Julie envisions herself in a cave and sees a pair of hands reaching towards her own. Is she crossing some kind of boundary, returning to the reality that her mother, Jamal, and the other characters occupy? Or is something else entirely happening in this scene? Who do you think might be the “voices calling her name, which belonged to the ones she had loved, or was going to”?