

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

Our Endless Numbered Days by Claire Fuller

1. The book opens in 1985 London as Peggy, safely within her mother Ute's house, finds a photograph of her father and cuts out his face. What does Peggy do with this photo over the course of novel, and how do her actions reflect her changing view of her father?
2. The title of the novel comes from a line in a song called "Passing Afternoon," a tribute to lazy summer afternoons written by the band Iron and Wine. What does it mean to say that days are both "endless" and "numbered?" How does this potentially paradoxical idea of time find expression in the novel? How does Fuller repurpose the phrase for something much darker?
3. Who are the North London Retreaters and why do they plan to "retreat?" What do they think will cause the "bloody Armageddon" that they fear (p. 10)? What is the difference between a "retreater" and a "survivalist," and how does this distinction come to be important in the story?
4. Early in the novel, when Peggy and her father are playing in the cemetery, they create voices and characters together, engaging in acts of playfulness and imagination. They pretend to see an American tourist in a Hawaiian shirt and act out the voice of his wife (p. 22). What do these acts of shared invention reveal about the relationship between Peggy and her father at that point in time? How do they foreshadow what is to come?
5. A song by Franz Liszt, "La Campanella" ("The Little Bell") is so central to the story it almost becomes a character itself. How does the song help to forge or remake relationships between members of the family?
6. The act of list making occurs repeatedly throughout the novel. The first list, made by Peggy's father, is of supplies to buy for the fall-out shelter. Near the end of the novel, when Peggy is in London, she makes a list called "Things I Have Missed" and includes items like "toothpaste" and "getting to know my brother" (p. 246). What other lists do characters make in the novel? What can we learn about the family by comparing the sequence of different lists that appear over the course of the story?

7. When Peggy is following her father through the bush on the way to die Hütte, she looks into the dense forest. Her doll, Phyllis, talks to her from her backpack: “We could get lost in there forever” (p. 51). Over the course of the novel, which of Peggy’s feelings find expression through the doll? In what other ways does Peggy create mental barriers between herself and her direct experience?
8. What drives Peggy to tell the headmaster that her mother has died? Peggy feels she has spoken the words, “without a plan,” but what subconscious impulses and instincts might have been at work when she dispenses this untrue information about her past? In what ways does her lie resonate throughout subsequent events? What effects does it have on other characters?
9. The narrative follows events occurring at two different points in time: 1985 and a period eight years earlier (a storyline that moves along toward 1985). Why might the author choose to move back and forth between two alternating time periods in her narrative? How does this structure enable the author to create questions in her readers’ minds? At what points do the two timelines merge so that we can begin to answer questions about them?
10. Early in the novel, Peggy wishes she could “fall asleep, cradled in the middle of this vegetation, and not wake for a hundred years” (p. 30), an image reminiscent of Sleeping Beauty. What other fairytale elements does the author employ in the novel? In what ways might the novel as a whole be seen as a kind of fairytale? Why might the author have chosen to mobilize and warp these well-known fairytale symbols and conventions?
11. At die Hütte, Peggy’s father cuts up the tent to make a kite. Why does this action upset Peggy? Why, when it’s her turn to fly the kite, does she let go? How does she feel when she does?
12. Before and during her journey in the forest, Peggy often thinks of *The Railway Children*, a classic English children’s story that her family has on a record. When she is back in London, she sees the record, but decides not to play it. Why? Do you think she has outgrown the story, outgrown the idea that this kind of story can provide meaning or comfort, or both?
13. Shortly after Peggy arrives at die Hütte, she finds a name written on the cabin wall: Reuben (p. 98). Who do you think carved this word and when? At what point in the novel did you begin to suspect that Reuben might not exist in the way Peggy remembers him? Once the truth becomes clear, what specific events take on new meaning in hindsight?

14. At the end of the novel, Ute tells the detective in the hospital she used to think Peggy would “make a fine pianist one day” (p. 277). Why does Ute say this when she never let her children touch the piano? Why might Ute have chosen to re-narrate the past? How does Ute respond when she finally hears Peggy play “La Campanella” (p. 290)?