

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

Eighteen Below by Stefan Ahnhem, translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles

1. While investigating the apartment of murdered Peter Brise, Inspector Fabian Risk notes: “The place where you were at the greatest risk of being attacked was, ironically enough, the very place you felt safest — your own home. Home was where a person was most vulnerable and alone, and pretty much anything could happen without anyone noticing” (pp. 66-67). Is home a safe place elsewhere in the novel? Do you feel safe at home? What measures, if any, do you take to feel protected?
2. Who do you think was moving the planchette during Matilda’s Ouija sessions with Esmaralda? Was it ghostly Greta or Matilda’s subconscious fears that provided answers about Sonja’s infidelity and the danger faced by the family?
3. Although the happy slapping subplot is not obviously integral to solving the mystery of the frozen millionaires, the parallel storylines play off each other in compelling thematic ways. Compare and contrast the perpetrators, their crimes, and their victims. Which set of criminals did you find most abhorrent? Why?
4. When Theo Risk asks how many people Henrik and his happy slapping gang have killed, the ringleader replies, “Not a single one” (p. 363). He continues: “I’d say [the homeless are] more like cockroaches or rats. And even though no one would admit it out loud, I can promise you that most people agree with me and think it’s great that someone finally came along to clean things up” (p. 364). Do you agree with Henrik’s claim that society dehumanizes the homeless? If so, do you see happy slapping as an extreme symptom of a greater cultural disease?
5. The Meyer twins are described as “outside the laws of human nature” and “almost supernatural” (p. 482). In a photograph Didrik is described as “the chameleon with a thousand faces, naked and unmasked, a second frozen in time” (p. 337). Despite the novel eventually revealing the twin’s horrific childhood, by the end of the story the cold-eyed, fork-tongued murderers Nova and Didrik largely remain a mystery. Would you have preferred to have known them better, or was it that very unknowability that made them so terrifying as villains?
6. When Molander was asked how he could maintain his professional veneer even in the most stressful of situations, the forensic investigator laughingly replied: “Oh, you just have to disengage from the fact that you’re dealing with people . . . Our job is really just an exciting game. A brain teaser in the newspaper with a problem that appears to be unsolvable but must be solved at any cost. It’s as simple as that” (p. 314). Do you think that Molander’s detachment is symptomatic of a psychological disorder and criminal nature, or simply a pragmatic tactic that anyone would need to succeed and persist in such a demanding line of work?

7. Images of curtains abound in *Eighteen Below*. Fabian, lamenting his failing marriage to Sonja, muses: “So that’s what was left of their vow. A *lie*. A thin curtain separating their failed attempt to keep things cozy and loving from the pitch-black abyss on the other side” (p. 377). Can you think of other examples in the text? What is the significance of such imagery?

8. For the slim-hipped and purposefully hairless Meyer twins, androgyny helps them impersonate others for profit and evade the Helsingborg crime squad that’s hot on their trail. How do other characters in the novel play up, subvert, or completely do away with traditional gender expectations?