

DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE PECULIAR

BY STEFAN BACHMANN



About the Book

As changelings disappear from Bath, young Bartholomew Kettle witnesses a sinister lady whisking one of his friends away in a magical ring of feathers. Meanwhile, in London, Arthur Jelliby finds himself caught in government intrigue that will bring him directly into Bartholomew's path—and put both of them in great danger. Working together, they realize they have the clues to solve a mystery that has put the country in peril. All of England (and especially London) may be destroyed—unless they act quickly to disrupt a dark, pitiless plan.

Questions for Discussion

1. *Xenophobia* means an unreasonable fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners. Discuss the various ways that xenophobia manifests itself in the novel. What is the relationship between stereotypes and xenophobia?
2. Friendships can be difficult to form, even under relatively normal circumstances. Discuss how the main characters in the novel overcome their fears and suspicions to form a bond of trust that lets them work together for their common good.
3. Compare and contrast Bartholomew's relationship with his sister, Hettie, to Jack Box's relationship with his fiancée, Melusine. How would you describe each relationship? And what qualities does the relationship bring out in each character?
4. This novel ends abruptly with a *cliffhanger*, which means that the action is literally left in a very precarious place. The reader is left in suspense, needing and wanting to read more to learn what happens. Predict how Bachmann may resolve this story in the second volume.

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Questions for Discussion

5. This book seems at first like a stand-alone story, but it is the first of two, which comes as a bit of a surprise. How did that affect your expectations—and enjoyment—of the book?
6. One of the strengths of this novel is its setting, which is a mixture of the author's imagination, myth and legend, and very real places in England. Analyze various elements of the setting to determine which elements can be traced to which source.
7. Genre is a convenient tool that helps readers identify the kind of books they like to read. *The Peculiar* is a hard book to label because it has elements of several genres (and even subgenres): alternative history, gothic horror, murder mystery, steampunk, and folklore. Discuss the ways in which the book could fit into each of these genres.
8. The names of some of the characters—for instance, Jelliby, Lickerish, and Zerubbabel—are particularly Dickensian. They have a musicality when spoken, but at the same time they hint at the qualities of the characters themselves. Discuss how this is so. Does Bachmann's writing remind you of the work of other notable writers, either fantasy authors or others?
9. On pages 298–99, Bartholomew and the greenwitch debate her culpability in the killing of the changelings. Reread this conversation and discuss the merits of each point of view. Do the ethics of this situation remind you of any modern or historical events?
10. Over the course of this novel, Bartholomew transforms from a very timid, naive boy into a hero full of conviction and determination. What are the important milestones in Bartholomew's coming-of-age journey?
11. Bachmann keeps readers guessing about the identity and significance of Child Number Ten. How does he foreshadow the eventual revelation of the answer? What red herrings does he use to throw readers off the track?
12. Changelings are fairly common in fantasy literature, particularly fantasies that derive from traditional sources, such as myth, legend, and folklore. Bachmann's changelings are characterized by their oddness and peculiarity. Discuss how this relates to the themes of the novel. Why is *The Peculiar* an apt title?

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Extension Activities

- 1. Guide to Faeryland.** List the various types of faery creatures found in the book, including their particular characteristics and attributes. Then create a guide by drawing pictures and creating definitions for each of them.
- 2. More Faery Lore.** There is a rich body of literature about faeries, both traditional sources and modern reworkings of myths and legends (such as Kate Thompson's recent trilogy: *The New Policeman*, *The Last of the High Kings*, and *The White Horse Trick*). Investigate some of these and compare and contrast them with *The Peculiar*.
- 3. Mapping England.** Make a list of all the place names in England (and especially in London) mentioned in *The Peculiar*. Then pinpoint their locations on a map. (Google Earth is an especially effective tool for this activity.)
- 4. Character Charades.** Write the names of the major and secondary characters on pieces of paper, then fold them, and place them in a bowl. As players draw a name, they must act out the character in a nonverbal manner until others can guess who it is.
- 5. Fantasy Soundtrack.** Pretend that *The Peculiar* has been made into a movie and that you are in charge of selecting the music for the film, both individual songs and a musical score (i.e., the instrumental music that plays in the background). Remember that the music you select should evoke the mood and atmosphere of the film. Be prepared to defend your choices.



Photo by Teresa Gfiedler

About the Author

Stefan Bachmann is a classical musician currently studying at the Zurich Conservatory. He started writing *The Peculiar* when he was sixteen years old.

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Questions and activities prepared by Jonathan Hunt, a school librarian in Modesto, California, city schools; reviewer for *The Horn Book Magazine*; and blogger for *School Library Journal*.