

LONGWOOD GARDENS

Semiosis by Sue Burke Discussion Guide

The Longwood Gardens Community Read is a program designed to encourage reading for pleasure and start a conversation. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we feature an exceptional book annually (paired with similarly-themed middle school and younger readers' books) through a variety of programs, discussions, and lectures across all community partner organizations. For more information about the Community Read, go to www.longwoodgardens.org/community-read.



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

Octavo – Year One – Generation One Pages 9–41

Synopsis

A group from Earth decides to travel to a distant planet to begin a new life after global warming is destroying Earth and life on it. This group draws up a constitution for their new settlement, Pax, before they embark on their 158–year journey.

On Pax things are definitely different. There is more gravity, the days are shorter and the years are longer. But, most surprising is that the plants appear to be extremely intelligent. In fact, the West Snow Vine has created poisonous fruit to kill three of the new residents. Octavo and the settlers need to understand how to get along with this enormous plant.

Discussion Questions

- The Pacifists abandoned Earth and traveled to another planet because of deteriorating conditions on Earth. What would cause you to leave Earth for another home?
- On page 29, Octavo says, “Our new civilization would be based on the best of Earth. We would respect the dignity of all life, practice justice and compassion, and seek joy and beauty.” Is this type of society just a fantasy or could it really be obtained? What would need to happen for this society to succeed? What would cause it to fail?
- Octavo says on page 36, “We will work for it (the snow vine), not the other way around. It will help us only because it is helping itself.” What are some examples of this principle working with plants here on Earth?



Sylvia – Year 34 – Generation Two Pages 42–83

Synopsis

In the aftermath of a hurricane, Sylvia finds rainbow striped twigs and a glass ball. This must be evidence of other intelligent beings on Pax. Sylvia and Julian go off in search of the glass makers. They find a deserted village of beautiful colors and glass.

Upon their return Sylvia and Julian are met with strong opposition from the older Pacifists. It turns out that the elders had found the village years before but are afraid of the power of the bamboo plant there. So determined to stop talk of returning to the city, Julian is killed and Sylvia is attacked.

More determined than ever, Sylvia becomes the new moderator and moves the group, with the exception of the four remaining Earthlings, to the city.

Discussion Questions

- The group from Earth came to Pax to, "... do it right this time, without the unfairness that made some people rich and some people poor." (p.58) Is it possible to eliminate the gap between rich and poor? How would that solve the problems the Earthlings escaped?
- Octavo says that if they move to the city, "You will be slaves in a pretty cage." (p.76) What does he mean by this?
- Analysis of the bones of the Glassmaker reveals they are not from Pax. (p.79) What bearing might this information have on those who want to move to the city? How could this information help the argument of those who don't want to move?



Higgins and the Bamboo – Year 63 – Generation Three Pages 84–131

Synopsis

The Pacifists begin to understand the Bamboo plant. It warns the humans of approaching adversaries, Eagles. Because of the plant's warning, no Pacifists are killed.

The Bamboo is pleased that the Pacifists are willing to communicate as it needs them to survive. The Pacifists see possibilities of working with the Bamboo. Perhaps it can manufacture medicines they don't have on Pax.

Discussion Questions

- On page 96 the Bamboo plant asserts, "Animals never grow smarter, but I do." What does he mean by this?
- The Bamboo produces lots of opposites on pages 118 and 119 – white and black flowers, thistles pointing up and pointing down, acidic and alkaline nectar. It is trying to get the Pacifists to understand "Dualism". (p.120) How will dualism work for plants? How will it work for humans?



Tatiana – Year 106 – Generation Four

Pages 132–190

Synopsis

The Commissioner of the Public Peace, Tatiana, is investigating the first known murder of a Pax citizen. While investigating, Tatiana comes across two more murder victims. The murderer turns out to be a mentally ill woman. She is hospitalized and will eventually be euthanized.

Meanwhile, Glassmaker tracks are seen and a discussion begins on whether to / how to find and meet them.

Stevland declares himself a citizen of Pax and gets himself elected as co-moderator.

Discussion Questions

- Stevland is growing more stems throughout the city and its outposts. He has eyes to observe and has developed the ability to hear conversations. How will this benefit or hinder the Pacifists?
- The Pax Constitution specifies that citizens must be sentient. How does this apply to Stevland?
- The committee decides that "... the best way to control him (Stevland) is to give him some of what he wants, limited power..." (p.184) Why do the Pacifists feel they need to control Stevland, and how will making him a leader accomplish that?
- Stevland asserts, "I have learned to trust Pacifists, and I have learned that leadership is not violence. Force is violence. Mutualism involves trust." (p.186) How did Stevland arrive at those beliefs? How will they serve him and the citizens of Pax? What have been the implications of world leaders who have followed those ideas and those who have not?



Nye – Year 106 – Generation Six

Pages 191–222

Synopsis

A group of Pacifists set out in search of the Glassmakers. They come upon a destroyed Glassmaker village and then find traps set. Ready to leave, they see fresh tracks and follow them. When they find a group of Glassmakers they are surprised that they are nothing like the murals showed, and their behavior is not what the Pacifists hoped for.

After a frightening and disappointing meeting, the Pacifists return home with one less member and a very different view of the Glassmakers.

Discussion Questions

- Marie and Cedar discuss Stevland on page 192. Marie believes that Stevland “cares about us ... He gives us everything he can, from painkillers to fluoride.” Cedar argues that, “He needs tight limits ... hold him accountable.” How do we use plants for “what we need” and keep “tight limits” on them at the same time? Which is more important to us?
- In this section we finally meet the Glassmakers. How do they compare to the Pacifists, both physically and in their way of life?
- On page 221, Marie concludes, “They’re nomads.” If this is true, how can you explain the complexity of Rainbow City?



Lucille and Stevland – Year 107 – Generation Seven Pages 223–308

Synopsis

With the election of a new co-moderator, the council is deciding how to best prepare for the possibility of an attack by the Glassmakers. Before they agree on a strategy, Glassmakers are sighted coming toward the city. What at first appears a friendly gift, turns out to be an act of aggression. A battle ensues.

Stevland organizes all the plants to produce anesthetics so that the Glassmakers can be subdued. The goal of the Pacifists is to domesticate the Glassmakers and integrate them into their society. Things don't go as planned and many Pacifists and most Glassmakers are killed. Stevland feels responsible since he could not communicate the imminent danger to the Pacifists in time for them to act.

Discussion Questions

- The Pacifists have a goal of domesticating and integrating the Glassmakers into their society. Stevland says, "Offering rewards for good behavior will be a major step toward domestication." How has this approach been used in human history? How effective was it? Is it used with plants? How?
- Stevland ultimately wants to travel to another planet. He says, "The combined efforts of humans and Glassmakers would make it arrive sooner." (p.244) How does this goal drive his plan to deal with the Glassmakers?
- Stevland claims, "I had already domesticated the humans." (p.253) How can plants domesticate humans? Is that a symbiotic relationship?
- On page 274 Stevland observes, "I have observed that intelligent creatures are easier to control because they can foresee the results of their actions further ahead." Do you agree with this statement?



Bartholomew – Year 107 – Generation Five

Pages 309–333

Synopsis

After the battle is over, Cedar and some of her followers are angry with Stevland. They blame him for the deaths and destruction caused by the Glassmakers. At the Committee meeting Cedar calls for Stevland’s removal from office and wants his citizenship revoked.

Cedar, with the help of Bartholomew, is able to come to terms with what happened. She even acknowledges her role in it. All agree they need to work together for a brighter future – Stevland included.

Discussion Questions

- Cedar declares on page 316 that “mutualism is a lie”. Describe mutualism between plants and humans. Is it, or can it be, a perfect balance?
- Bartholomew mentions expectations for the Pax Constitution; “aspirations to joy, love, beauty, and community.” He asks, “They thought they had to leave Earth to achieve them. Were they right?” (p. 330) Can these ideals be achieved on Earth? How?
- On page 330 Bartholomew says, “Our future would be another discovery – or, if we understood how we arrived at where we were, it could be a choice.” He is suggesting a link between the past and the future. What is that link, and how can we use that information to change the course of climate change here on Earth?

