

Discussion Questions for *Oryx & Crake* (2003)

WEEK ONE, Chap. 1-7 (pp. 3-169)

1. *Oryx and Crake* includes many details that seem futuristic but are in fact already apparent in our world. What parallels were you able to draw between the items in the world of the novel and those in the world outside its pages?
2. Margaret Atwood says that *Oryx and Crake* is not science fiction. What are the elements of science fiction, and do you think that this novel *does* fit into that category of writing?
3. In what ways does the dystopia of *Oryx and Crake* compare to those depicted in any other dystopian novels you may have read? How does it compare to the dystopia in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*? What is the difference between speculative fiction—which Atwood claims to write—and science fiction proper?
4. The game *Extinctathon* emerges as a key component in the novel. Jimmy and Crake also play *Barbarian Stomp* and *Blood and Roses*. How does Atwood use these games to critique real-world events and histories? To what extent do you think these games shaped the adult characters and viewpoints of Jimmy and Crake?
5. If you were creating the game *Blood and Roses*, what other "Blood" items would you add? What other "Rose" items? What comparable video games do you know of? What is your opinion of arcades that feature virtual violence? What are the advantages and dangers of virtual reality? Is the novel form itself a sort of virtual reality?
6. Margaret Atwood coined many words and brand names while writing the novel. What role does language play in constructing our world? In what way has technology changed our vocabulary over the past five years?
7. The pre-catastrophic society in *Oryx and Crake* is fixated on physical perfection and longevity, much as our own society is. What are the irony of these quests, both within the novel and in our own society?
8. Four corporate compounds - OrganInc, HelthWyzer, AnooYoo and RejoovenEsence - provide backdrops for the action in *Oryx and Crake*. What services does each corporation offer? Are they evil, or do their services simply fall short of their intended goals? Can we compare them to any real-world corporations?
9. In the world of *Oryx and Crake*, almost everything is for sale, and a great deal of power is not only in the hands of large corporations but also their private security forces. There are already more private police in North America than there are public ones. What are the advantages of such a system? What are the dangers?
10. At academies such as Watson-Crick and Martha Graham, "number" people get separated from "word" people. How does focusing on one intellectual aspect or the other affect how Crake and Jimmy's personalities develop after high school? What kind of critique do you think Atwood is making here?

WEEK TWO, Chap. 8-15 (pp. 173-374)

1. Crake has destroyed humankind but created a species that is superior to man in many ways. Is he a hero or a villain? Consider his motivations, attitudes, and specific world-views? Crake's plan to kill humanity could not have succeeded without assistance from Oryx and Jimmy. Could either of them have acted differently to prevent the catastrophe? What signs in Crake's behavior ought to have led Oryx or Jimmy to pursue a different course of action?
2. How might the novel change if narrated by Oryx? Do any similarities exist between her early life and Snowman's? Do you always believe what she says?
3. As the only known human survivor in the aftermath of the plague, Jimmy has grown accustomed to life without clothes or shoes. Is his nakedness a symbol of Jimmy's return to innocence, or does it represent a regression to savage life? Does Jimmy view himself as a victim or survivor?
4. Why does Snowman feel compelled to protect the benign Crakers, who can't understand him and can never be his close friends? Do you believe that the Crakers would be capable of survival in our own society?
5. Paradise, the bioengineering project, is clearly an allusion to Paradise, the first home of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. The name MaddAddam also refers to the Biblical Adam. However, Genesis tells the story of the creation of mankind, whereas Oryx and Crake is the story of mankind's demise. To which Biblical character is Crake most analogous—Adam, God or the serpent? What role does Oryx play?
6. Snowman soon discovers that despite himself he's invented a new creation myth, simply by trying to think up comforting answers to the "why" questions of the Children of Crake. In Part Seven—the chapter entitled "Purring"—Crake claims that "God is a cluster of neurons," though he's had trouble eradicating religious experiences without producing zombies. Do you agree with Crake? Do Snowman's origin stories negate or enhance your views on spirituality and how it evolves among various cultures?
7. If you had the chance to fabricate an "improved" human being, would you do it? If so, what features would you choose to incorporate? Why would these be better than what we've got? Your model must of course be biologically viable.
8. Utopian fiction typically presents a futuristic society that has been modified to ease pain and unhappiness. Are the Crakers living in a true utopia, or are they liable to face future hardships? What dangers or threats remain in their "brave new world"?
9. The book has two epigraphs, one from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and one from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Having read the novel, why do you think these were chosen? How do they allude to major themes in the text?
10. The ending of the novel is open, allowing for further speculation. How do you envision Snowman's future? What about the future of humanity—both within the novel, and within our own world?