

Discussion questions for The Great Conjunction, a novel

Note: *This list provides numerous questions to facilitate a lively reader discussion. The group leader needs to select only those that are likely to be most relevant to the audience.*

On Bunny

1. Bunny does not keep imperfect things — except the glass birds. What does this single exception tell us about her? Are there other places in the novel where her rules break down, and what do those moments reveal?
2. Bunny is science-minded and skeptical of the intangible — yet she has spent a lifetime in an intimate relationship with objects she cannot fully explain. Is she more like Fiona than she would ever admit?
3. Her adopted son's indifference to her collection is a profound wound. Why do you think his rejection hurts more than the cancer diagnosis? What does his attitude represent to her?
4. Do you see Bunny's lifelong collecting as an unconscious attempt to fill an absence? What is absent in her life?
5. How does Bunny's illness change your reading of her attachment to her possessions? Is she trying to achieve a kind of immortality through objects?

On Fiona

1. Fiona has had several brushes with a legal system that has treated her unfairly. How does her experience of the world differ structurally — not just circumstantially — from Bunny's? Does the novel suggest the difference is primarily about class, luck, or something else?
2. Fiona is an astrologer — a profession that requires finding pattern and meaning in apparent chaos. Given what we know of her origins, why might this calling make psychological sense for her?
3. Fiona names her daughter Astra. What does this name suggest about how Fiona understands her own life and her hopes for her daughter's?
4. Fiona survives the pandemic homeless, with a child to protect. How does the novel treat her resilience — as heroic, as tragic, as simply human? Does it avoid sentimentalizing her situation?

On the relationship between Bunny and Fiona

1. The novel withholds the nature of Bunny and Fiona's connection for roughly the first third. When the revelation comes, how did it recontextualize what you had already read? Were there moments you felt you should have known sooner?
2. Bunny is wealthy; Fiona is destitute. The same city, the same pandemic, radically different experiences. How does the novel use this contrast — as social commentary, as dramatic irony, as something else?
3. When they finally meet on the night of the Great Conjunction, what does each woman want from the other? Are those wants compatible?
4. The novel positions science and astrology as competing frameworks for meaning. By the end, does it favor one over the other — or does it suggest something more complicated?

On the magical realism

1. The glass birds are described as damaged — each sitting alone where a mate once was. By the novel's end, do you read the birds as symbols, as genuinely sentient objects, or as something that resists either category?
2. Magical realism often places the supernatural in the service of psychological or emotional truth. What truth are the glass birds telling that the characters cannot tell themselves?
3. Bunny's world is grounded in the tangible and provable. How does she — and how do you as a reader — reconcile her skepticism with the birds' apparent agency?

On broader themes

1. The Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in December 2020 — visible to anyone who looked up, during one of the most isolating periods in living memory. How does the novel use the pandemic not just as backdrop but as meaning?
2. Three generations of women — Bunny, Fiona, Astra — each shaped by a wound they didn't choose. Does the novel suggest that such wounds can be healed, or only acknowledged?
3. The novel is deeply concerned with what we leave behind — objects, secrets, children, silences. What do you think Bunny ultimately leaves behind? Is it what she intended?
4. If the glass birds could speak directly — not through action but through words — what do you think they would say?

More questions to choose from for discussion:

Did you see any similarities in the character of Bunny and Fiona? Which of their character traits were tools for survival?

Why did Bunny stop buying beautiful vases in 1979?

Did Bunny's and Fiona's trips to Ireland achieve any useful purpose? If you agree, What was it for each of them?

What did you make of the multiple Finn characters? Were they similar or different from Hannah Ruakh?

Were the curios sentient?

What does the hierarchy of the curio world represent?

Which was your favorite curio! Why?

What role did the Bull on top of the curio play? Why wasn't it inside the curio?

Was Astra more like her mother or grandmother?

Do you or does anyone in your family have a treasured collection (figurines, masks, ornaments, jewelry, records, comics, books, etc.) and has its fate ever been discussed. Why or why not?

A Final Question

The novel's title refers to an astronomical event — measurable, predictable, real. It also refers to a meeting that feels fated, magical, long overdue. Which reading of the title felt most true to you by the end?