

Reading Group Guide for *Will Starling* by Ian Weir

- 1.) The author has chosen to tell the story primarily in the voice of Will Starling, who admits from the start that he has pre-judged Dionysus Atherton. Is Will a reliable narrator? How would the novel have differed had it been narrated in the third person?
- 2.) Over the course of the novel Will passes severe judgment on himself. To what extent is his judgment fair? Does he judge himself more harshly than the reader does? If so, why might this be the case?
- 3.) How is your opinion of Will affected by the letter that Janet Friendly writes to Mr Comrie? How is it affected by the perspective of Comrie himself?
- 4.) What function is served by the newspaper and broadsheet reports that are inserted into the novel? Are these more or less reliable than the first-person narration of Will himself, and why?
- 5.) Are there ways in which the nineteenth century broadsheets can be likened to modern newspapers? To social media?
- 6.) The newspapers – and several important characters in the novel – appear to believe that the “Boggle-Eyed Bob” phenomenon could be genuine. Given the state of medical knowledge at the time, do you believe that a surgeon such as Dionysus Atherton could reanimate a man who was actually dead? How might a Regency surgeon’s understanding of death differ from our own?
- 7.) Will clearly wants to believe that Flitty Deakins’s tale may be true, even though he repeatedly discounts her reliability. How reliable *is* Flitty Deakins as a witness to events she claims to have seen in Dionysus Atherton’s house? Why do you feel she gravitates toward Meg Nancarrow, and does this make her testimony seem more or less trustworthy?

- 8.) Will is haunted by the possibility that he may be going mad. Do you believe his obsession with Atherton may indeed be considered a form of madness? And what do the scenes at Dr Paxton's private asylum suggest to you about Regency attitudes towards mental illness and its possible treatment?
- 9.) Will is clearly searching for a father figure. To what extent does he find this in his relationship with Mr Comrie? And how much do you think he gains – or loses – in his deeply conflicted relationship with Atherton?
- 10.) Alec Comrie takes the view that a surgical patient has no right to decide whether or not to proceed with an operation. To what extent is this view justified by the surgical realities of the early nineteenth century? Would you consent to a surgical procedure in 1816? And based on the evidence of the novel, what personal characteristics could be considered essential in a surgeon of that era?
- 11.) Edmund Kean was considered by his contemporaries to be a great realistic actor. Based on descriptions of his performances in the novel, how realistic might Kean's acting seem to a modern audience? Why might this be so?
- 12.) Dionysus Atherton insists that his research is justified, and that he is serving the greater good of humankind. Is there any extent to which you agree with him? Did your opinion change over the course of the novel? What other motives may be driving him, beyond simple self-aggrandizement?
- 13.) Dionysus Atherton's research into the mechanism of death takes place in the context of an ongoing debate between the so-called Hunterians (who believed in the existence of a Life-Force) and the Materialists (who rejected this utterly). In what ways might this be seen to prefigure the Mind/Brain debate in our own era? In what ways do you think it differs?