

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR READING-GROUPS

Note: Before your group begins discussing *Among the Wonderful*, invite each member to take one minute to present his or her general impression of the book, without interruption or comments from the other members. This preamble to group discussion provides an opportunity for everyone to voice their opinion, and does not hinder the discussion that follows.

1. In many ways, Ana Swift and Emile Guillaudeu are very different characters. But what are some preoccupations or themes that they share?
2. How would you describe Ana Swift at the beginning of the novel? What does she hope will be different for her now that she works at Barnum's Museum? As she settles into a routine there, does her outlook change? How?
3. Over the course of the book, what changes in Guillaudeu's character surprised you?
4. Guillaudeu goes on a journey into the still undeveloped regions of upper Manhattan. Discuss this journey's importance to the plot overall. How successfully did the author portray this landscape?
5. There are many texts within the book, related to both Emile Guillaudeu and Ana Swift's stories. How do the works of Georges Cuvier and Linnaeus, as well as Ana's True Life History and Quincy Kipp's Epistemonicon, help to build the world of the book? What does each text reveal about the time period of the novel?
6. *Among the Wonderful* explores a particular place and time through the lens of Barnum's museum – the book is full of displays, spectacles, and the blurred line between fact and fancy. What similarities do you see between the world of Barnum's museum and the present day?
7. How would you describe PT Barnum's character in the book? Is he a villain? A prophet? Just a businessman?
8. How do Barnum's Representatives of the Wonderful treat one another? Are they as isolated as they think they are? Do they form a real community?
9. Why do none of the residents of the fifth floor intervene when the relationship between the conjoined twins, Matthew and Jacob, becomes violent?
10. Contrast Ana Swift's relationships with Mr. Ramsay and Beebe. What can you distill about her longing for love in her life?

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11. Why does Ana despise other giants? How do her feelings change as she gets to know Tai Shan?
12. Barnum's business practices are still taught in business schools today. How would you describe his showmanship, and why do you think his strategies persist?
13. How would you describe the Australian tribesman? What role does he, as well as the American Indians, play in the book? How does the depiction of indigenous culture function in the book?
14. Metamorphosis, or transformation, is a central theme of the book. Which characters undergo transformations? What about the museum itself?
15. *Among the Wonderful* is set in antebellum New York City. How would you describe the language of the book? Does it draw you into the time period, or keep you at a distance?
16. Which historical details in the book surprised you? What cultural aspects of Barnum's world do you find familiar in our culture today?
17. What narrative techniques does the author employ to tell the story of Ana Swift's life?
18. How do Guillaudeu and Ana Swift's stories intertwine at the book's conclusion, and how does this cast each of their lives in a different, new light?
19. What is Barnum trying to prove with his Grand Ethnological Congress of Nations? How is Ana's perception of the event different from Barnum's? Guillaudeu's? How would such a congress be met today?
20. Consider the intersecting and meandering themes of class, gender, and minority that wend their way through the book. How does the mid-nineteenth century social and cultural environment surrounding these issues contrast with today's milieu? Which characters or events could easily happen in today's America without raising eyebrows?