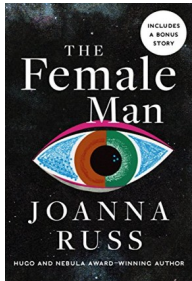




Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



The Female Man
By Joanna Russ
Discussed September 1999

Discussion Questions

1. In a sentence or two, give your visceral reaction to this book.
2. How would you articulate the theme of this book?
3. Did the book's form work for you? What worked/didn't work about it? How did you read the different "J" characters? (Which one was The Young One, The Weak One, The Strong One?) The narrator who appeared silently in some scenes?
4. Russ takes some familiar literary conventions and turns them upside down, including romance, science fiction and other form conventions. What are some examples of this?
5. Did any of the metaphors Russ uses strike you as unusual or particularly based in female experience? (i.e. "Bulkier than three pregnancies," p. 166)
6. What about the diagonal-travel theory? Does it work?
7. Why do you think Russ included the whole alternate-person theme? What was she trying to say?
8. Do you think this book works as science fiction? Is Whileaway a believable world? How about the Earth of Alice-Jael? Of Jeannine? What function does each of these worlds play in the novel? (What are they metaphors for?)
9. How does Russ treat Militarism/violence? What about the killing of Elena Twason Zdubakov? Why was that incident included? Does it make sense w/in the societal construct of Whileaway as Russ has described it? What did you think about Alice/Jael's killing of the Manlander? Why did Russ include that incident?
10. In addition to literary conventions, Russ used a lot of scenes related to social conventions. How did you react to Russ's description of these incidents? (ie, Party behavior, the Media, "Be a good girl", Being grabbed by a man, Hello-yes, park benches, Sex toys, The Good Liberal)
11. Gender conventions were also a major target for Russ. Again, how did you react? In general, did Russ's description of interactions between women and (straight white) men ring true to you? Did her descriptions offend you? If you're a gay man, did you identify with any of these incidents?

12. Did you read the epigraph from R.D. Laing? What did you think of it? Did it affect your perception of the novel?
13. What did you think of the way Russ dealt with the transgender characters in the Manlander section? What about the statement "They are riddled with duality and the fear of duality"?
14. What did you think about Russ's use and exploration of taboos like homosexuality, inter-generational sex, and enslaving/lobotomizing human beings?
15. What do you think Russ meant by the statement "Real homosexuality would blow Manland to pieces"? Do you agree with the statement?
16. Does the book succeed as science fiction? As polemic? As personal narrative?