

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell
By Susanna Clarke
Reading Group Guide

1. Clarke chooses to set her novel during a pivotal moment in English history: The king is mad; the government is weak, disorganized, and lacking leadership. All of Europe is at war, and in England there is widespread fear of a French invasion. It is the eve of the Industrial Revolution – the moment in history when the world turned away from the old ways and embraced a new era of science. In *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, instead of turning to engineering marvels to solve the problems of a new age, England seeks a magical renaissance. Does this preclude an Industrial Revolution, or do science and magic coexist in Clarke’s universe? Do they develop on separate tracks, or is magic perhaps just another branch of science, like physics and chemistry? Would the story have been as plausible if it had been set under the reign of a stronger ruler, such as Queen Victoria?
2. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* superimposes characters, storylines, and an invented universe of legend and lore – the Raven King, the feats of the *Aureate* magicians – on figures, events, and mythology (well-known tales of trickster fairies, Arthurian legends) drawn from real English history. As such, is it a historical novel? How is it different from other historical novels, such as Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*? At what point does historical fiction cross into the realm of outright fantasy, as exemplified by the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, or J. K. Rowling?

3. The narrative is heavily footnoted with references to books, tales, and historical documents both real and imagined. These extensive notes – many of them transfixing short stories in their own right – hint at a much broader historical canvas against which the events in the novel take place. Is this construction successful? Does it create contextual richness for the main story? Does it add credibility to the fictional universe Clarke has created? Does it detract from the main narrative in any way?
4. The narrator of the novel is never named yet relates events with a great deal of intimacy and detailed knowledge. Who do you believe the narrator is? Is it one of the characters in the story or an objective outside observer? Is it a man or a woman? Is it a contemporary of the characters and events depicted, or is it someone who lived later? Is it possibly two people – one a firsthand witness, recounting the deeds of Strange & Norrell; and a second, perhaps a historian or magician, who has later added scholarly annotations to the main story line?
5. Questions of sanity figure greatly in Clarke’s novel, which ties madness closely to magic. Why can Gilbert Norrell summon a fairy servant (who will come to be known as the “gentleman with the thistle-down hair”) with ease in the earliest part of the novel (pp. 82-87), while Jonathan Strange – a much more talented and intuitive magician – struggles for hundreds of pages to accomplish the same feat? Is it merely because Norrell has access to powerful books that Strange does not?
6. Ultimately Strange realizes that he must become mad to perceive fairies and the land of Faerie. Does Norrell’s earlier success in this area imply something about

- his own sanity? Does his rather sober personality and impassioned yet reasonable belief that magic must not be practiced by amateurs belie a madman's quest to control the destiny of English magic? What opinion of Norrell's and Strange's characters are we left with at the novel's end?
7. What is the significance of the friendship between Jonathan Strange and the historical figure of Lord Byron? Byron, forced into exile in his own day, was reviled by "respectable society" and was considered by some to be mad for radically rebelling against traditional morality and public opinion. How is Clarke's outcast Byron character different from other outcasts in the novel, such as Strange himself (later in the novel), King George, or Mrs. Delgado, the half-Jewish resident of the Venice ghetto who longs to become a cat?
 8. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* clearly belongs to the literary genre of epic fantasy, but it also has much to say about English society, the folly of war, the fickleness of public opinion, and historical inequalities of class, race, and gender. Clarke lampoons a number of classic stereotypes, including pompous government ministers, self-entitled aristocrats, amoral dandies, quack doctors, pedantic clergymen, and no-nonsense, can-do military generals. Is this novel also in some respects a comedy of manners and English social commentary in the tradition of Jane Austen? What kind of portrait does it paint of Regency England?
 9. What does the novel have to say about relationships between men and women in general – and about marriage specifically? Is it shocking when the possibility of marriage is raised between Stephen Black, the son of an African slave, and Mrs.

Brandy, the widowed London merchant (Chapter 17)? Do you find it plausible that such a marriage could happen at this moment in English history? Why does Norrell take such a dim view of Strange's marriage to Arabella? What of the arranged marriage between Sir Walter Pole and Miss Wintertowne, or the fate of Mrs. Bullworth (Chapter 36), who has been exiled from society due to her adulterous relationship with Lascelles?

10. According to the narrator, Jonathan Strange is a gentleman; Gilbert Norrell is a gentleman; The York magicians are gentlemen; Lascelles and Lord Byron are gentleman; Stephen Black and John Childermass are not. Even the murderous, mercurial fairy king who drives much of the plot is known as the "gentleman with the thistle-down hair." What defines a gentleman in this novel? Is it the same definition accorded by the social codes of the time, or is it somehow different? Is it a birthright, a quality of character, or a sign of a man's social significance? By showing that not all gentlemen are good people, what is Clarke saying about race and class in her novel?
11. The events of the novel take place almost entirely in the households and in the society of English upper classes. Yet servants, the working classes, farmers, and merchants also play important – even heroic – roles. Who is the ultimate hero of the novel? How did your opinion of characters like John Childermass, Stephen Black, and the street magician Vinculus change over the course of the story?
12. Almost every scene of the novel takes place in winter, yet the final chapter is set in spring. Is this merely a coincidence, or does it say something about the birth of

a new social order – one in which magic is available to all, a black man can become a king, women are entitled to a voice, and sneering libertines like Lascelles and Drawlight are no longer relevant?

13. Can you envision a sequel to *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*? Have we seen the last of the Raven King? What is his mysterious agenda for English magic? For the world?

14. While most of the plot concerns the actions of men, Susanna Clarke populates her novel with robust female characters as well, including the history-obsessed, magically-resurrected Ms. Wintertowne (who eventually becomes Lady Pole) and her arch-conservative mother who would rather see her stricken daughter die than allow a doctor to attend her, and Arabella Strange who seems the definition of a strong and sacrificing wife—to everyone but her own husband. And though this story is about magic, witches are considered evil. Indeed, the women of the novel serve as foils for a great deal of its plot, yet are given short shrift, or are seen as one-dimensional, by the male characters at every turn. What is Clarke saying about the role of women in her novel's society, and what does this say about the role of men?

For Further Reading:

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen; *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks; *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michel Faber, *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman; *The Chess Garden* by Brooks Hanson; *The EarthSea Trilogy* by Ursula K. LeGuin; *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis; *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville; *The*

Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling; *Quicksilver* by Neal Stephenson; *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien