



Reading Group Guide

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe in astrology? Do you attribute any part of your personality to your star sign? To what extent do you think the characters in *The Luminaries* are bound to their astrological signs?
2. In a similar vein, Eleanor Catton has given each of the twelve men the personality stereotypical to an astrological sign. Does this mean all their actions are pre-determined? And when taking into account the fact that this is a story filled with coincidences, unpredictabilities, and mistaken assumptions, what do you think Catton is saying about fate vs. coincidence? Does she give more clout to one concept than to the other?
3. Following the Zodiac as a guiding structure, *The Luminaries* is a stunning feat of construction. Some have argued that, in novels especially, high structural complexity can come at the expense of plot. In what ways does *The Luminaries* defy this theory?

4. Throughout the book, people are either hurting Anna or helping her. What is it about her that makes her a litmus test for other characters' morality?
5. This book is filled with stories within stories. The reader is often told multiple versions of events. For example, at the beginning of the book, do the twelve men at the secret meeting tell Walter Moody the whole truth? If not, what are their reasons for being less than truthful? Are there other times when you found yourself doubting the validity of a character's assertions?
6. Do you feel that the narrator was completely trustworthy? Like her Victorian predecessors, Catton doesn't hesitate to intersperse the narrative with moral judgments of her characters—frequently, her characters judge one another. Sometimes, the narrator “breaks the fourth wall” by addressing the audience directly. Do these techniques make the narrator more reliable than one who “feigns” neutrality? Is there ever such thing as a narrator who is completely objective?
7. Some have interpreted *The Luminaries* as a philosophical meditation on time, pointing to the conflation of present and past throughout the story. Do you agree? What do you think *The Luminaries* is saying about time?
8. *The Luminaries* is set in a New Zealand that is rapidly changing as a result of the gold rush. Banking has become all-important, and the outside world is exerting its growing influence, resulting in the confluence of “the savage and civil, the old world and the new.” Do any of the concerns of the people in this place and time still resonate today? Are there ways in which this story could be universal?
9. Eleanor Catton was born in Canada, lives in New Zealand, studied in the United States, and travels regularly. How do you think that her experiences as an international citizen have shaped her prose? Are there certain limitations or freedoms that Catton's nationality have on her legacy as a writer?
10. Some media outlets have asserted that *The Luminaries* is dominated by male characters and brings to life a male-dominated world with this story. Do you agree? If Catton were a man, do you think this issue would have surfaced? Should female writers have to take their own gender into account when writing?

A CONVERSATION WITH ELEANOR CATTON

This interview was conducted by Joan Fleming for the website *The Lumiere Reader*, lumiere.net.nz.

Since the Booker Prize announcement, you've given hundreds of interviews. What, if anything, are you getting exhausted of talking about?

My age, and the book's length. One interviewer asked me if becoming the youngest winner of the Booker Prize had been intentional. I looked at her funny, and she rushed on to amend her question: well, had writing the longest book ever to win the prize been intentional? I'm not sure how to answer questions like that, and there have been a lot of them. They seem to confuse writing with headline-making. I didn't set out to break a record.

*That is so uncomfortable. As if your writing practice is just a scheme to make yourself attractively blurbable. I know I'm not the only one to have been disheartened by some critics' focus on your youth, your looks, and your gender—as if that's the most interesting thing about the novel—instead of on the book's experimental and intellectual achievements. I guess that's the way of sound-bite media. I remember you saying once that there was more of you in *The Luminaries* than in your first novel *The Rehearsal*. What did you mean?*

I pushed myself much more in writing *The Luminaries*. The risks were greater, and risk is always revealing: I had to confront my own cowardices, and the limits of my ability, before I could learn how to be brave. In a way my presence in the novel—as I feel it—is tied up with the book's omniscient third-person narration, and with the fact that it's peopled so overwhelmingly with men: because I couldn't be anywhere, I had to be everywhere, if that makes sense. On the surface, it might seem as though I have more in common with the characters of *The Rehearsal*, but as a thinking, feeling person I feel much more revealed in *The Luminaries*: the book believes what I believe, and wants what I want, and mistakes what I mistake, and loves what I love.

I want to ask it: what do you love?

I love unguarded expressions of love: enthusiasm, passion, worship. Emery Staines, who is first the Sun and later the Moon of *The Luminaries*, is for me the book's loving heart. He's terribly naïve. But his naivety is a kind hopeful projection, a wilful delight in the curious and the good. I love people like him: people who would

prefer to be enchanted and wrong than to be cynical and correct. I've always favoured Buzz Lightyear above Woody for that reason. Buzz is quixotic. He wants to believe. Woody's tragedy is rejection; but Buzz's tragedy is the loss of the illusion that sustained him. In a way *The Luminaries* asks its reader to be quixotic. Astrology, like all meaning-making systems, can be wonderfully sustaining. But in order to countenance it, you have to let yourself be a little bit naïve.

Who might make up your dream cast of actors for the film version of the book? I imagine Christina Hendricks (Joan from Mad Men) as the cunning fortune-telling seductress Lydia Wells, and I reckon Timothy Spall would do a splendid Mannering.

Those are excellent choices. My top picks are James McAvoy for Moody, Dominic West for Carver, Brendan Gleeson for Mannering, Richard E. Grant for Pritchard, Vincent Cassel for Gascoigne, Mark Williams for Balfour. These names are coming quickly to me because I have a deeply tragic folder on my desktop containing downloaded images of all the actors I'd like to see in a dream-cast TV version. Occasionally when I was stuck writing I would click through the photos really quickly, and pretend it was a film.

I am curious about how completely the psychology of the characters is informed by astrological theory. Is the banker Charlie Frost's total subjectivity—his inability to put himself in others' shoes, or to be attentive to other's behaviour—a particularly Taurean quality, for example? Or is that just Charlie? When I read the passage on Harald Nilssen's proclamation of the health benefits of his regular lunch ("dark gravy, pastry, and ale"), and the description of how he makes a habit of "recommendation" for the profit of "other, less visionary men," I remembered that when some friends visited from America, you insisted they eat hokey-pokey ice cream and chocolate fish (or whatever—the New Zealand favourites!). Also Nilssen's love of "preposterous, hypothetical" argument; I thought, that's Ellie. Am I reading too much into the Libra-Libra connection?

Astrology is gendered: the same principle will manifest quite differently in a male personality and a female personality, simply because men and women get treated very differently in our culture, with some personality traits being rewarded, and others discouraged, depending on the gender of the person in question. There is something of me in Nilssen, but only in a refracted kind of way: as a male Libra, he shares a gender with his sign (Libra is an air sign, which is masculine) and is therefore understood to "embody" the Libran principle. As a female Libra—a woman born under a masculine sign—I "enact" that same principle. A male Taurus might well recognise himself in Frost—subjectivity is key to the Taurean sensibility, enacted in men, embodied in women—but of course people only recognise themselves when they are willing to do so. I love the difference between embodiment and enactment: it seems to share something with Jung's concepts of introversion and extraversion,

in that it suggests a difference of direction, of movement. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce are a good case study, as they were both Aquarians—she the enactment, he the embodiment, of the same essential principle. I found out the other day that I share a birthday with F. Scott Fitzgerald, and I rather like the idea that I might enact in the world what he embodied in his person. But I also found out that David Cameron shares a birthday with PJ Harvey, so go figure.

Speaking of gendered differences in reaction and action—you've talked of a certain "bullying reception" to your book here in New Zealand by a certain set of older male critics. The omniscient narrator, the idea that you "had to be everywhere," seems to have affronted some male readers, as has the length of the book. Have you experienced this reaction in the UK, too, or in Canada? Has it been a peculiarly New Zealand response, perhaps because of the necessarily small pool of literary competition here?

This is a point that has been perhaps overstated. There's been a lot written about what I said, and in fact the way I think and feel about the reviewing culture we have in New Zealand has changed a lot through reading the responses and objections of others. Initially I used the word 'bullying' only to remark that, as we all learn at school, more often than not someone's objections are more to do with their own shortcomings or failures than with yours, and that's something that you have to remember when you're seeing your artistic efforts devalued or dismissed in print. I don't feel bullied when I receive a negative review, but I do think that some of the early reviewers refused to engage with the book on its own terms, and that refusal seemed to me to have a lot to do with my gender and my age. To even things out, I called attention to the gender and age of those reviewers, which at the time seemed only fair.

I feel that it's very important to say that sexism is a hegemonic problem, written in to all kinds of cultural attitudes that are held by men and women alike. As a culture we are much more comfortable with the idea of the male thinker than the female thinker, simply because there are so many more examples, throughout history, of male thinkers; as an image and as an idea, the male thinker is familiar to us, and acts in most cases as a default. Consequently female thinkers are often unacknowledged and discouraged, sometimes tacitly, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by men, and sometimes by women. I am lucky, following the Man Booker announcement, that my work is now being read very seriously indeed; but that is a privilege conferred for the most part by the status of the prize, and I know that I am the exception rather than the rule. I'd like to see a paradigm shift, and I'm confident that one is on the way, but the first thing that needs to happen is a collective acknowledgement that reviewing culture is gendered—that *everything* is gendered—and that until each of us makes a conscious effort to address inequality, we will each remain a part of the problem, rather than a part of the solution. Protesting the fact of inequality is like protesting global warming or evolution: it's a conservative blindness, born out of cowardice and hostility.

It's also important for me to say that all of the early endorsements for *The Luminaries* were from men; a great many of my most considered reviews have been from men; and I relied upon the intelligence, sensitivity, and insight of a great many men in writing the book. I have said all this in interviews, actually, but in nearly every case, it's been cut. People forget sometimes that an interview is a selective fragment of a conversation, not a transcript.

What do you reckon the perception of the world-at-large is to New Zealand literature? Is there a common reaction people have when they learn that New Zealand is your home?

People generally seem surprised that I live there, as though New Zealand is a place to be from rather than a place to be. They ask if I'm moving to New York or London soon. But there's rarely a sense of connecting my work to the work of other New Zealand writers, or placing me in the context of a tradition. I'm not sure if there is a very real sense, overseas, of what New Zealand literature comprises.

The setting of The Luminaries is vividly and historically New Zealand. Are there other ways you feel the novel is connected to "New Zealand writing" (whatever that might be)?

One of the curious things about the West Coast gold rush was how few of the prospectors stayed on: a strike was known as a 'homeward-bonder' because it allowed the digger in question to quit prospecting and return home. I think that there still is a sense, in New Zealand culture, that if there is a fortune to be made, it's a fortune best spent elsewhere—that a life in London or New York is somehow more of a life, somehow more alive and more interesting, than a life in Wellington or Christchurch. Te Rau Tauwhare and Charlie Frost are the two characters in the novel who were born in New Zealand, and as Aries and Taurus, respectively, they represent the objective and the subjective, the Adam and Eve of the zodiac's twelve-part story. I like to think of New Zealand's identity being a kind of fusion of the two of them: proud, like Tauwhare, but also embarrassed, like Frost. I haven't really answered your question, I know: I think it's because I find it much easier to spot attitudes than traditions in New Zealand literature. Perhaps that might be a kind of tradition in itself: emotional affiliations having shaped our literature more than, say, formal affiliations.

You've mentioned The Luminaries was a response to conceptual works that wrung all fun out (like Italo Calvino's The Castle of Crossed Destinies which I admit I haven't read). As well as being packed with intrigue and psychology and philosophy, The Luminaries is totally funny. The whole way through I found myself chortling out loud. Is there any tradition, international or otherwise, that does big cerebral philosophising with a grin, and which you feel you might belong to?

Absolutely: children's literature. Books for children are always ethically and morally concerned, they're nearly always extremely funny, and they're always, always mysteries. Systematised magic, in children's literature, is comparable to the perimeters of the philosophical thought experiment—I'm thinking of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Gillian Rubenstein's *GalaxArena*, Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*, Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*—but a book for children is hopeless if it isn't fun. I can't tell you how many times I collapsed laughing while reading the Harry Potter novels, but I also can't tell you how long I've spent meditating on the nature of love, and of sacrifice, and of courage, as explored in those books.

One commentator, in an ironic and deprecating article where he encourages the reader to pity you for winning such a big award at such a young age, quotes Beckett: "failure is bracing and healthy for the soul." If failure is healthy and useful in our growth as human beings, what function—healthy or otherwise—do you think fame and success can perform?

I think that success is dangerous because it can make a person feel too comfortable; it can lull them into thinking that they have achieved mastery and don't need to be curious any more. But failure can also do that: it can function as a kind of inverse achievement, where feel you've achieved the opposite of mastery, and you give up. Right now the successes of my life are much more visible than the failures; but that's not to say that there haven't been failures, that there aren't failures.

It's really important to me to remain in a dialogic state, both with myself and with the world. I'm not interested in mastery; I'm interested in curiosity and apprenticeship, in asking questions and contemplating mysteries and changing my mind. For me, a healthy life is one that can confront diversity with warmth and flexibility. I don't think the Booker Prize will get in the way of that belief.

"Kindness is a core value for any artist, but most especially for a fiction writer: a self-centred person can't see the world from another person's point of view."

The book's astrological structuring device engineers a dialogue between fate and coincidence, nature and nurture, circumstance and luck. From the perspective of astrology, you might say that each of the character's decisions is pre-ordained; their movements are pre-determined according to the position of the stars at the time of their birth. The plot is advanced through unlikely layers of "coincidence," and the characters are intricately interconnected and interdependent. These labyrinthine relationships are set against a rapidly changing gold-rush town in a volatile era, where a man or a woman's fortune could utterly transform overnight. To me, all of this suggests a multiplication of life's possibilities, rather than a reduction of them. Was this your intention? Do you believe in luck, or fate, or nature over nurture?

In using star charts to generate the pattern of the plot I was, to a certain extent, pre-determining the story's shape—but the idea of predestination doesn't really make sense when talking about the creation of a novel, which is shaped and crafted out of time, and with a purpose. I chose each star chart deliberately, with a view to how I could use it, and I relaxed my hold wherever I needed to. I painted myself into a corner a great many times, and was often stuck for weeks, frustrated, staring at the pattern, trying to figure out how I could use the fact that Scorpio (Pritchard) is ruled by Mars (Carver), or that Saturn (Shepard) shifted into Virgo (Queen) in March of 1866. The plot involves a great many coincidences, some much sillier than others. But can you have a plotted novel without coincidence? I'm not sure if that would be possible. Stories depend on connection.

I see luck, and fate, and nature versus nurture, as methods of interpretation; for me, their usefulness is dependent upon the meaning they create. I am suspicious of the ways in which all three concepts have been co-opted, over the past century, by the fiscally and socially conservative, but I think that all three can be useful at times when a person is reaching out for meaning. Sometimes feeling lucky, or fated, or natural, is hugely meaningful, and hugely necessary because of that. By the end of *The Luminaries* the reader discovers that Emery Staines' luck has been greatly exaggerated, as has Anna's lucklessness; in effect, the community has projected onto both characters the interpretation that makes the most sense of their own individual values, their own individual desires. I think most instances of luck are like that.

The prize is a huge game-changer—for you, for your writing career, and for your bank account. Do you feel any tensions between what you want to do with the money, and what you feel you ought to do? Are there any debts of gratitude you feel compelled to repay, either monetarily or psychically?

I think I'll probably do the sensible thing and buy my first home—an exciting prospect for somebody whose hobby is moving the furniture around (to the exasperation of my partner, and the joy of my cats). The debts of gratitude that I accrued along the way, in writing *The Luminaries*, can't really be repaid with money. I really want to keep teaching at MIT, and to maintain the friendships in my life that are vital to me, and to stay connected with my family.

That does sound smart. I am interested in your opinion about the myth of the tortured artist, and its usefulness for a society badly in need of healthy models of creativity. Most of the writers I know are struggling to make important art, but they are also struggling, equally hard, to live healthy, connected, value-creating daily lives. Do you think we are moving past praising the glamour of the non-functioning creative genius?

I hope that we are. I find the idea of unsupported genius deeply distasteful: it disrespects mothers, and fathers, and teachers, and lovers, and all the accidents and opportunities and coincidences that conspire, along the way, to help create and launch an artistic sensibility. We need a new model: one that doesn't depend on outmoded gender norms, destructive values, and the profoundly ugly idea that to be indebted is to be demeaned. Kindness is a core value for any artist, but most especially for a fiction writer: a self-centred person can't see the world from another person's point of view.

ELEANOR CATTON ON NEW ZEALAND, THE LAND OF THE LONG WHITE CLOUD

There is a playful antagonism between the inhabitants of New Zealand's two islands, North and South. If you're a North Islander: the South might have better views, but the North is superior because it has richer culture. If you're a South Islander: the North might have richer culture, but the South is superior because it has better views. It's a quarrel between substance and form, if you like, a question of emphasis – does a country's nature owe most to its history, or to its land? In both senses [New Zealand](#) is curiously compressed. The first Polynesian settlers landed less than 1,000 years ago, the first Europeans less than 300. Geographically, too, the land is compact: a five-hour drive over the spine of the Southern Alps will take you through a dozen entirely different landscapes – beach river valley marshland rainforest gorge foothill highland alps plains peninsula beach –and each with its own weather, its own skies, its own quality of light. (It is a strange thing how swiftly the forecast can change in the Pacific – dress for all weather, the backcountry guides advise you, and expect four seasons in a single day.)

The South is the more visually stunning, but the North is the more populous and cultivated: this is a contrast that recalls each island's proper name. The North Island is Te Ika A Maui, "the fish of Maui" (recounting the mythic tale of New Zealand's creation) where the South is Te Wai Pounamu, "the waters of greenstone" (describing the glassy stone, prized by Maori, that is found in the swift rivers and along the savage misted beaches of the lonely south). New Zealand national identity lies somewhere between these emphases, North and South: as a bicultural nation, it must identify both as "the place of this people" and as "the people of this place". In Maori the country's full name, Aotearoa, is a lovely kind of oxymoron: it translates as "the land of the long white cloud", as if clouds were properties of the earth, or served in some strange way to invoke it.

I grew up on the South Island of New Zealand, in a city chosen and beloved by my parents for its proximity to the mountains – Christchurch is two hours distant from the worn saddle of Arthur's Pass, the mountain village that was and is my father's spiritual touchstone, his chapel and cathedral in the wild. For many years while I was growing up my parents did not own a car. We rode around town on two tandem bicycles and one single (a source of considerable embarrassment to me at the time) and at weekends we would occasionally rent a car in order to drive into the alps, and go hiking.

My father is an expatriate American; he fell in love with New Zealand in his youth and never went home. As a child I didn't really comprehend my father's affection for the land, nor for the steep-sided alp to which he returns as to an altar: Avalanche Peak, a six-hour ascent above the cloud-filled valley of the pass. My sense of injustice about our family's "weirdness" in not owning a car was amplified by the fact that we did not own a television either – my parents were unapologetic about this, and told me very cheerfully that I would thank them for it when I was older, which was quite true. But at the time Dad's refrain "Nature looks more beautiful in the rain" was not met with good grace. Nor was his notion that a view was something gained through effort – scenery, for him, was something that ought to be deserved.

When we reached our summit, or whatever spot was deemed by my father to be of adequately punishing distance from the car to deserve lunch, Dad would invariably find he had forgotten his Swiss army knife (looking back, I begin to doubt he ever had one) and instead would cut cheese into slices with the edge of his credit card.

It is this kind of detail that I remember – the credit card, waxy and oiled along its edge – from our expeditions into the hills. I can recall the clean-smelling interiors of each rental car, always a different model and a slightly different shape; the empty glove box; the chipped toes of my boots; and how my hands became swollen and too weak to make a fist after a day of walking uphill. I remember, once, the rubber seal around the car door clipped into the shape of a postage stamp by alpine parrots looking for something to steal. But I don't remember the views – not as memories. In fact I am sure that I never experienced, as a child, any kind of encounter with the sublime, that catch in the throat, that tightness of the lungs, that sudden, roaring sense of one's extreme smallness in a huge, awful, beautiful world.

To experience sublime natural beauty is to confront the total inadequacy of language to describe what you see. Words cannot convey the scale of a view that is so stunning it is felt. In such moments natural beauty becomes a kind of devastation – it is pure encounter, too compressed in time and space to be properly contained. I do not feel the sublime when I look at a city, however impressive it might be in proportion and shadow, for the reason that a city is designed, in its substance it has been formally determined, and it has been named already by the fact of its creation. Words are adequate. I have never been moved to tears by a skyline, or a building, or a painted arch, but the sudden apparition of a peak from behind a sheet of mist is enough, now, to make me cry.

I think that a child does not feel the sublime because a child need not, perhaps cannot, confront the limitations of his or her language – language, for a child, is already miraculous, supple, generous in its association, tragic, hilarious, disproportionate and huge. Looking at a cloud-filled valley was less interesting to me (or at least, no more interesting to me) than looking at my father drag his thumb along the magnetic stripe of his credit card to wipe it clean.

When I was 14, my father took me on a tandem bicycle trip across the mountains. He had already taken my sister and then my brother, in his turn, and as the youngest, my trip came last. We were to cross the Lewis Pass, touch the Tasman Sea, and return over Arthur's in a loop. The trip would take four days. I remember with clarity the preparations for the journey – oiling the chain, strapping down our tent, fitting the road map into the laminated pocket on the front of the bike. But I remember, too, how hopeful I was that something out of the ordinary would happen; that we would discover something, or have to endure something, out of which might come a story.

My brother had described to me an event from his own trip several years prior. He had awoken early in the morning and witnessed firsthand the birth of a calf. He and my father had pitched their tent in the stolen corner of a farmer's lot, and so it was from inside the fence that my brother saw, not 10 feet away from him, the newborn calf slither on to the grass, unfurl its legs, and stand. The story had captivated me and stirred my jealousy to such a degree that I could recall the birth almost as a memory of my own – I wanted to return there, as to a favourite page in a favourite book.

It is curious to me how often we tend to describe the perfection and drama of the natural world, its sublime qualities, in metaphors of fakery or artificiality: "like a postcard", "like a painting", or latterly in New Zealand, "like a scene from *The Lord of the Rings*". The impulse, I think, comes from a wish to apologise for the limited capacity of the "real" world. To grow up is to confront the disappointments of language, in a way, and to suffer the divorce between what we experience and what we imagine to be real. I was preemptively disappointed, setting out on the tandem for the mauve shadow of the hills, to know that I would in all likelihood see no newborn calves, that our adventure would have a different character to the adventure undertaken by my brother and my father. I had settled, I think, into an adult frame of mind.

I drove through Arthur's Pass recently, and stopped to climb Avalanche Peak for the first time in several years. The ascent is taxing, rising sharply through beech forest to the sudden treeline and bare grassy peaks above. The summit offers a view across the blue ranges and snow-capped summits of the island's keel. The final length of the ridgeline stands as a rocky comb of shale against the sky, dropping down on either side to wide scree slopes and rocky bluffs and nothing. Across the valley to the west is the rumple of a high glacier, a face of snow; to the east, a horseshoe cup of grey and green. And yet it is hard to describe – indescribable, until you're up there, looking down – because the mountain is something other than its substance, something more.

Travel brochures try to capture the quality of New Zealand's panoramas with adjectives – "pristine", "untouched", "majestic". But the words seem cheap and insubstantial, however accurate they may be, in the face of the real thing. The language of description is always a matter of equivalence (a word equals the thing it describes) and so cannot contend with the sublime. But the language of paradox, oxymoron and subtle contradiction – the language of children – does better. Aotearoa is a land made perfect only by its opposites, the water and the air. It is both north and south at once. It is a land that casts its shadow on the clouds.

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