

ANIMAL LIFE

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TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Climate change is a subtle but constant presence throughout *Animal Life*: “Nothing is the way it ought to be any more” (19) says a farmer in a news report about flooding. So too says Dómhildur’s sister, the meteorologist. What conclusions might we draw from this novel about humanity’s relationship with the natural world?
2. Both Dómhildur and her grandaunt are fascinated by animals, including whales, bees, monkeys and more. To paraphrase the older Dómhildur, what do animals have that humans do not (117)?
3. *We don’t know much except that soon it darkens. We don’t know much except that soon it brightens* (27). How does the interplay between light and dark develop throughout the novel? Do these changes mirror changes that Dómhildur herself is undergoing?
4. There are hints of past traumas and difficulties throughout *Animal Life*, with Dómhildur briefly describing the depression that her mother would experience after arranging the funeral of a child, as well as Dómhildur’s own personal losses. Why do you think that the author chooses to reveal so little about these events?
5. Although Dómhildur lives in Reykjavik, *Animal Life* does take us to the Icelandic countryside – in the trips that Dómhildur takes with her grandaunt to collect the testimonies of elderly midwives, and the diary entries where her great-grandmother describes journeys to deliver babies. Do the characters in *Animal Life* seem to experience life differently outside of the city?
6. All that we know about Dómhildur’s grandaunt comes to us through other people’s recollections of her. Dómhildur’s mother says that “After three generations we’re all forgotten” (42). Do you think that who we are is defined by how other people remember us?
7. When Dómhildur discovers the second box of her grandaunt’s writing, one thing she notices is that the manuscripts ‘contain a number of disparate topics, isolated sentences, and snippets of text that seem to have no contextual relationship with the rest.’ (113). When reading *Animal Life*, what did you notice about Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir’s writing style?
8. “I’m a midwife, and I know that man grows in the dark like a potato.” (31) Which is your favourite of the older Dómhildur’s many refrains?
9. “The fact is I haven’t changed much in the four years since my grandaunt died. Nothing at all, to tell the truth.” (54). Dómhildur is referring to the apartment that she inherited from her grandaunt, but could this statement be applied to other aspects of her life? By the end of the book, how has this changed?
10. At the very beginning of the novel, Dómhildur notes that it is ‘A human’s most difficult experience. To be born.’ (15). By the end of the novel, does this statement still seem to be true?