

Best Book Club with Shanna and Jen Podcast  
Season 1, Episode 16 April 14, 2021

## Piranesi by Susanna Clarke

INTRO

Jen: Hello Everyone and welcome to the Best Book Club Podcast - I'm JEN

Shanna: And I'm Shanna

Jen: And today we are going to be discussing Susanna Clarke's second novel, Piranesi.

**Jen: Author Bio** Susanna Clarke is an English author, born November 1, 1959 in Nottingham and is best known for her debut novel Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell which was published in 2004 and won a Hugo Award in 2005. Her second novel Piranesi was published in 2020 and was just longlisted along with fifteen other books for the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction.

Shanna: I still haven't read Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell yet! Even though sooo many people have told me I have to check it out. It's huge, so I keep putting it off. I really enjoyed Piranesi though so really I am not sure what my problem is.

Jen: Me neither! I know it's very long - like 800 pages, so it's a commitment. It sounds more like your type of book though.

**Shanna: Synopsis** Piranesi's house is no ordinary building: its rooms are infinite, its corridors endless, its walls are lined with thousands upon thousands of statues, each one different from all the others. Within the labyrinth of halls an ocean is imprisoned; waves thunder up staircases, rooms are flooded in an instant. But Piranesi is not afraid; he understands the tides as he understands the pattern of the labyrinth itself. He lives to explore the house.

There is one other person in the house—a man called The Other, who visits Piranesi twice a week and asks for help with research into A Great and Secret Knowledge. But as Piranesi explores, evidence emerges of another person, and a terrible truth begins to unravel, revealing a world beyond the one Piranesi has always known.

Jen: This is a very short book -272 pages which is very different from her first book which is almost 800 pages.

Jen: I went into this book with very little knowledge or expectations as you suggested and I do think that was good advice. I think you will be disappointed to find though that I didn't love it as much as you did!

Shanna: I am actually not surprised to hear that at all. This book was very much to my taste, in the way that usually sets what I enjoy apart from the majority of people I know.

Jen: I can see what you mean 100%. This is very much a Shanna book. There were parts that I enjoyed and I don't want to give away too much information just yet, but I will say that I really liked the atmosphere and I liked the idea of the story but for me personally, the overall package was lacking.

Jen: I know that this doesn't matter so much to you, but I really enjoy a "point" and in this book, I just didn't find one.

Shanna: Ahh see and I thought this book had a wonderful point, I just got to decide what it was! I loved the way she discussed ... well yes I won't really get into it quite yet, but I thought this was a beautiful and interesting look at mental health and trauma response. Of course, I enjoy my stories strange and convoluted.

Jen: Yes you do! And I think I like stories to be more clear? Do I? I don't know, that doesn't really sound right necessarily.

Shanna: I have been reading with you for awhile, and I have totally noticed that while not always, but often, you seem to enjoy things that are more high concept and plot driven. Like, you like there to be a clear destination at the end. I think you thrive on order more so than me though as well, so that makes sense. There are a number of books on my shelf that I know you would absolutely hate. I almost went to recommend them to you so you can wonder what the hell is wrong with me.

Jen: One thing and, I think that this was more an "audio book problem" - The book is broken up into journal entries and instead of using the traditional date format that we are used to, he says "Entry for the first day of the fifth month in the year the albatross came to the south western halls" which I honestly liked, but hearing it said out loud probably dozens of times, got to be so repetitive and by the end I never wanted to hear those words again. But if I was reading it, I would have just skipped over it and it would have been fine.

Shanna: Hahaha and I could listen to Chiwetel Ejiofor say basically anything forever.

Jen: Yes, I definitely did not have a problem with his voice at all - the narration was quite good. It's funny because I kept getting such strong Neil Gaiman vibes but I honestly don't think I've read enough Neil Gaiman to have that opinion - well I guess I've read two and a half books so not the worst - but on the scale of Neil Gaiman, not the best. Anyways! I realized that I think it was mostly due to the fact that Neil Gaiman narrates his own books and the last one I listened to was Neverwhere - I didn't finish it and I should probably just finish it so I don't have to explain why I didn't finish it every time I mention it. I was listening to it while overdue pregnant and trying to walk my baby out. The thought of listening to it again just makes me feel tired. Anyways! I

think his and Neil's voices are similar or have similar accents or something. I kept finding myself transported into that underground London atmosphere that Neverwhere has and I think it was a little distracting. That's totally a me problem and not a "this book problem"

Shanna: I have books like that for me too, so I totally get it.

Jen: You, and the rest of the world will be aghast at my rating of...three stars. Which means that it was fine. It was medium. I liked it, but I didn't love it.

Shanna: I will get over it eventually. I'm kidding, I have heard plenty of mixed reviews, and I think it will be interesting to see what resonated, or didn't as the case may be, with each of us.

Jen: For some people, it seems to have just clicked and for others it didn't! I'm excited to hear what your thoughts are because they have been shrouded in mystery for months.

Jen: How many stars did you give it?

Okay so from this point on there will be spoilers. We are going to get a little bit deeper into the story and what we thought!

We start the book with the protagonist, who I guess we will call Piranesi because that's what he is called at the beginning of the book although it's clear from the beginning that that isn't his name and he's technically unnamed for a lot of the book.

Piranesi lives in a House that is full of countless halls and vestibules. The lower halls are flooded with the seas and the upper halls are in the clouds. Piranesi lives there alone and has come up with numerous ways of surviving and he believes that this is the entire world and that nothing else exists outside of the House and that no other people exist except him and a man he calls the Other and also 13 other people who are actually the skeletons of people he's never met. He records everyday in a journal, has various tasks that he has to attend to and though technically alone and isolated from what we know as the world, he doesn't present as unhappy.

Jen: I don't know how to describe his personality at this point - each word I come up with is wrong - he's not childlike, he's not innocent, he's not simple minded- he is smart, he is a man - he just...is. He exists and there isn't a lot that influences him.

Shanna: Content maybe? I know what you are trying to say. He does have a childlike wonder and reverence for the house.

Jen: One thing I kind of hate about the pandemic is how everything is influenced by it or somehow everything always comes back to it, but I do find myself wanting to say regardless that I found the isolation and the ritual of doing the same thing every day very relevant. I think the isolation is something that we are all struggling with and to see Piranesi, constantly try to make connections even with these skeletons. I don't know, I have just been really struggling with connection through all this and that aspect of the story stood out to me and made me very tired which may have also affected my enjoyment of the book.

The character, Piranesi, is actually named after the Italian archaeologist, architect and artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi who is famous for his etchings of Rome and of fictitious and atmospheric prisons.

Jen: Though I planned on going into this book with no knowledge, it wasn't long before my research loving brain started looking for information because very little is given away in the story. A quick google of "Piranesi" came up with the information about the man and as soon as I knew about the prison sketches, it really changed how I was interpreting the story.

Shanna: Yes I can see that colouring your perception right from the start for sure. I knew Piranesi was an Italian architect, only from spoiler free reviews that I have watched on Booktube. So I had seen some of his sketches, but I didn't look into it past that.

Jen: From that little bit of information, I felt sure that it wasn't just another world that he was living in but that he was imprisoned in some way - whether he was imprisoned in the labyrinth of his mind or in this other world, I wasn't sure, but I was really interested in finding out.

Jen: I really liked the visuals of the house. I thought it was described really well and the atmosphere was set up right from the get go although I know that I did impart Piranesi - the artist's- sketches that I had seen. I will post some of them on our socials so you all can see what I mean if you don't already know.

Shanna: Yes! This book definitely isn't lacking in atmosphere!

There was a sixteen year gap between the publication of her first book and of Piranesi and the reason is that shortly after *Strange and Norell* was released, she became very ill with what was eventually diagnosed as chronic fatigue syndrome. She wanted to write a sequel to her first book, but the illness overtook her and she was unable to do much of anything for a long time. When she finally felt able enough to start writing again, she knew that she could' take on something really complex or something that would take a lot of research so she chose to continue with Piranesi which was a story she had started writing back in her 20s.

Jen: I found this out after finishing the book and this bit of information brought everything together in a way that really made sense. I found that overall, the story was quite simple and the characters were simple. The writing was good but there wasn't a lot of depth- which isn't

necessarily a bad thing but I did find myself wanting more - more information, more back story, more current story, more character growth and development.

Shanna: And I would have to hard disagree with saying there is a lack of depth. The story is simple, and the characters are simple, I can agree with that. We are being told the story from a simple and fractured mind. It goes back to the open ended nature of the story I think, so the reader is able to project meaning where it makes the most sense to them. I love that you can take the story as fantasy, and see the story presented as an actual magical portal between worlds, and the story is still great that way.

Jen: I guess lack of depth isn't quite the right way to put it because we *are* getting the story from a simple and fractured mind as you said, so it makes sense that the story would be presented simply. The more that I sit with it, I think, the more is revealed which is something that I both love and hate about books sometimes! In the end, I definitely read it as fantasy. I can see where other layers can be found but I guess I just don't have it in me to dig that deep right now and anytime I tried moving in that direction it always felt like a bit of a reach for me. If that makes any sense at all.

Shanna: When I read stuff, because I also review stuff, I try really hard NOT to read other peoples opinions before I am finished forming my own, which can be so hard. This book was no different. Once I finished it, I developed my theory, and then I went to check my work. I was surprised and delighted to see such a wide range of interpretations of this novel. You are far from the only person who read it as pure fantasy. People who have read her previous work also had very different feelings than people who hadn't. I read this story as pure allegory, whereas other reviews I have read in researching for this episode have said they chose not to read it that way at all. I absolutely love that this book can be read so differently but also critically and still enjoyed by so many people. I think that shows either incredible skill on the authors part, or so much luck.

Jen: The story did not go the way that I was expecting which I both like and dislike. I do like to be surprised. In this case, I really thought that by the way the Other was described, that the story was that he was Piranesi's therapist or psychiatrist and that Piranesi was a prisoner in his own mind. The Other was always dressed in a suit, he was an older man and they always met twice a week -Tuesdays and fridays?- to talk about stuff. I have read some reviews where other people also thought the same thing but they were glad when that wasn't what the story turned out to be, but I would have LOVED that story, I think, a lot more. I like a psychological twist more than a culty twist.

Shanna: I thought this story had both of those twists personally. I prefer to see 16 as the therapist. She is the one who finally reaches Piranesi and brings him out of the house, whereas The Other is the one who is torturing and using him as a means to his own twisted end. His name "Ketterly" is also one of many nods to Narnia throughout the novel, and the character of Ketterly is a villain who is pompous and cruel, and he uses and hurts others to achieve his own goals. Oh, and also he discovers a magic dust and creates magic rings that can transport

people between worlds. So, there's that. I should maybe mention that I haven't actually read the entire Narnia series, and those I have read were a long long time ago. I do have a decent understanding of the broad strokes of it however because CS Lewis was a big Christian writer. I am able to recognize a few names and symbols, but I am not a Narnia expert, so please don't come at me.

I thought that both *The Other* and *16* were creations of Piranesi's psyche and not necessarily physical people, but based on them.

Jen: Yeah I can see what you mean there! We are getting a bit ahead of ourselves here, but we assume you've read the book, so you probably understand and if you haven't read the book then you should know that this is also kind of how it feels to read the book.

Shanna: Yes! Attempting to discuss this novel is challenging without jumping around all over the place!

Jen: Sixteen was described as a cop but she just didn't feel like a cop to me. I guess she was the hero to him so the title of "cop" would fit nicely into what Piranesi would think was someone who could save him?

Shanna: Way later when we get a name for her "Raphael" I think that revealed a lot about her without having to explain it. This is one of many times I will mention religion seeming to have influences in this book. Archangel Raphael is known as the angel of healing. So, that's not nothing. I know Jen you weren't raised religious like I was, so I think this is an interesting area where our different experiences naturally change our perspectives.

Jen: She was a character I would have liked more from and more information about which kind of goes back to what I said about depth - I guess what I more wanted to say was "lack of story"? I don't know, but I do understand that again we are getting everything from Piranesi's point of view and 1. He is a very unreliable narrator and 2. He doesn't know what's going on most of the time and he also doesn't know quite how to form relationships with people in his current state. So it makes sense. I'm not sure how I feel about unreliable narrators - sometimes I really like it and other times like in this book - I feel like I'm missing out on the information I actually really want to know. How do you feel about an unreliable narrator?

Shanna: I either love them or hate them. I know, how helpful. Sometimes if they feel lazy, I don't like them. I want there to be clues, or that upon a reread the fact that our narrator is unreliable becomes clear. In the case of Piranesi, I find this kind of unreliable narrator totally acceptable. He also doesn't have the information to give. I love a good reveal as far as an unreliable narrator goes. If it feels like an out of nowhere plot twist like "I was lying the whole time! Gotcha!" that bothers me. Mostly though I don't mind them. Like, if  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's of the way through the book Piranesi out of nowhere was like "I really knew what was going on this entire time!" I would be pissed.

Jen: Yes, totally agree with that.

Jen: I. Just. Had. A. Revelation. Sixteen is also the number of years between the publication of *Strange and Norell* and this book. It took “sixteen” years for Susanna Clarke to come out of her illness enough to write this book. This is probably a coincidence but...maybe not!!

Shanna: Oh! Maybe! I never thought about that.

As we mentioned before, all of the halls and vestibules of the House are filled with statues of all kinds, depicting all different types of people and scenes. There is one of a fawn that Piranesi is particularly fond of, one of the first ones we are introduced to is a woman holding a beehive....they come up over and over again in the book.

Jen: You said very little to me about this book, but you did say that you had ideas about what everything meant. With so many parts of this book, I was constantly looking for what everything meant. With each of the statues, I tried to decipher what the secret code was and I just couldn't find anything! Knowing about Susanna Clarke's chronic fatigue syndrome makes me think that there truly was no real point which bothers me because I really wanted a meaning to be revealed.

Shanna: I think her being so sick and isolated did just the opposite! In being trapped within her home and mind, I think she was able to project a sense of being trapped inside of oneself really well. I should maybe mention here that the way I interpreted this story is that the entire thing is happening inside of Piranesi, or Matthew Rose Sorenson's, mind. I think everything, from the house, to the other, the skeletons, the journals, all of it, is the character living with and working through trauma.

Jen: I just meant that I was looking for meaning in some of the details, like the statues, but I couldn't personally find it. But, yah everything you said makes sense to me for sure and I do think that's a really good interpretation and one that I would have preferred to have while reading it but it just didn't present to me. I do agree that her illness influenced this book heavily because the isolation is so complete in this novel. Though I did find it surprising in a way that he was so accepting of that isolation and of the world he was in. I wonder if that is a contrast to what Susanna was dealing with or if maybe she also had to come to terms with a little bit and accept her life as it was just to survive.

Shanna: I also tried to find meaning in the statues, but after a while I gave that up and decided I would just take them in as atmosphere and worry about it later. At the very end I had a thought about the statues. When Matthew Rose Sorenson is out and about in the “real” world, he notices that a bunch of the people there are similar to the statues in the house. I saw this as him finally actually being able to see the world around him as real, whereas before everything had to be ordered and filed away safely and pristinely in his mind.

Jen: There were a few interviews that I listened to with Susanna Clarke and I kept feeling as though the interviewers were trying to impart some kind of meaning and she would be kind of

blase about it or say “oh I hadn’t really thought of that or I hadn’t thought of it that way” so that made me think that I was trying to find meaning where there was none a little bit? I guess I thought that the book was a puzzle that needed to be solved and I’m not sure that it was or if it was that I just couldn’t crack the code and I think that I would have enjoyed it more if I had been able to figure it out.

Shanna: And I saw the puzzle as the mind as a whole, so the open ended nature of the ending felt so fitting for me. Because I saw the house and the story as ... I don't know .. symbolism and allegory... for trauma and isolation, I think having a clear answer or solution would have detracted from the greater meaning. There have been so many interpretations of the work that I can totally understand if she never gives a definite answer. I've heard authors talk about how once they release a book into the world, it stops being theirs. Any meaning they tried to put in the book doesn't mean as much as the meaning the reader takes from it, whether it was intentional or not, because the story now belongs to the reader. I love this idea, and I think this book was a prime example of that.

So Piranesi spends his time surviving in the House and also writing in his journals of his daily activities which include bringing the skeletons offerings of food and water, finding various uses for dried seaweed and fish leather. As we mentioned, he meets with the Other twice a week and the Other is using Piranesi to find a “great and secret knowledge” that is in the House. Piranesi plays along with it and his rituals, but he doesn’t really understand or believe in it.

Jen: I found it so annoying that the Other is always dressed super nice and sometimes brings Piranesi items like plastic bowls, and multivitamins etc but he never actually makes sure that Piranesi has anything he actually needs.

Shanna: To me, The Other was a mental projection of his abuser. Someone who looked good, and provided, without ever really giving him what he needed. Just enough, always, to keep him trapped. I imagined the timed visits like therapy, except instead of The Other being the Therapist, it was more that these were the times that The Other was being examined. Or, it could even have been times when The Other did visit him on the other side, but filtered through the house.

Jen: I love that interpretation! Sometimes I can be so literal and I’m just like “Man, give the guy some shoes, can’t you see him?? He’s suffering!” And Piranesi is just so accepting of his situation. He believes that the house is offering these things to the Other and not to him.

One day the Other warns Piranesi about another person who Piranesi names Sixteen because they would be the sixteenth person he knows to exist. The Other tells him to stay far away from sixteen and that he is their enemy. He even says that if Piranesi talks to him, he’ll go mad.

Jen: I think this is where it becomes very clear that the Other is manipulating Piranesi. He’s telling him what to think, he is revealing to him gaps in his memory and making Piranesi doubt



himself and what he knows. He casually mentions that Piranesi is mentally unstable and that he might have to kill him if he gets any worse. Basically gaslighting him to the extreme.

Jen: Is this where he also casually mentions that maybe he could kill sixteen? Like it was just no big deal. I feel like there were quite a few times where casual killing is mentioned.

Shanna: I imagined this as the abuse in his mind creating resistance to help. By warning him against 16, he is able to remain within the safety of the house. It isn't until 16 is mentioned that he starts seeing the cracks, or the messages, that would eventually be his way out of the house.

Jen: I also love that. I really prefer your interpretation to what I was seeing when I was reading it. Seeing these characters as real people in his world was a little bit jarring for me, but also, I can see that it would be jarring for Piranesi as well given that he has so little contact with other people and also that he doesn't have the memories of the real world.

Piranesi then meets another man in the halls who Piranesi names "the prophet" and he tells Piranesi all kinds of things like - the Other's name is Val Ketterly, that sixteen is going to come looking for him and that he should stay away from them. He mentions that some people have an easier or harder time slipping into the world that Piranesi knows as the House. He mentions the names of some other people who have been there and Piranesi assumes the names belong to the bones he has found.

Jen: Basically this felt a little bit like an awkward information dump in the disguise of the mentor archetype. In my thoughts about this book, I kind of stored the information we got and then deleted the scene from my memory because it just did nothing for me. An old man showing up out of nowhere to bestow wisdom. I could have done without it, though I am sure that there is a deeper meaning that I'm just not seeing as with every other part of this book! I can't remember, do we ever find out who the Prophet actually is?

Shanna: Yes! The Prophet was Lawrence Arne Sayles, the cult leader.

Jen: Okay, that's what I thought, but I wasn't sure if I was making that up!

Piranesi starts recording in his journals some of the things that the Prophet said and this is where we start to get a little bit more of the story

One day, Piranesi finds out that Sixteen is a woman - I think he hears her voice? -but the Other never mentioned that she was a woman. He just let him go on and on thinking that that sixteen was a man. When confronted about it, the Other says that Piranesi would have become too distracted if he'd known that she was a woman and would have wanted to make contact no matter the cost.

Piranesi, does in fact, kind of become obsessed with the fact that sixteen is a woman because in his mind, he has never seen one before. She keeps leaving him messages, but he is scared that even just reading her written word will cause him to go mad so he messes up her chalk notes so he can't read them but then he still tries to read them.

Jen: And then agonizes over what the random unmessed words are supposed to mean and also whether or not even these few words could drive him mad.

Shanna: Very clever Ketterly. That is an effective way to keep him obedient and afraid.

Eventually, he reads a message from her that says "Are you Matthew Rose Sorenson?" and I think this is where the story starts to unravel.

Shanna: After 16's question, are you Matthew Rose Sorenson, the flood gates begin to open, and he is able to slowly begin examining more painful things, and repressed memories.

After this, Piranesi finds journals with strange dates he doesn't recognize, that have information he didn't remember ever writing, despite being a very exact and careful journaler.

We learn through these journal entries that Piranesi is in fact Matthew Rose Sorenson. In another life, in another world, he was studying transgressive thinking. This led him to a cult led by Laurence Arne-Sayles. Matthew Rose Sorenson is described by Arne Sayles as "an arrogant little shit." We learn that in pursuing this research for a book on the cult leader, he is abducted and goes missing for many years.

There are other cases of disappearances associated with Arne Sayles and his beliefs. Arne Sayles was also arrested for kidnapping and spent time in jail, when one of his previous "experiments" on a missing man named James Ritter, is found locked away in a room by a housekeeper. He is a babbling mess, and was exposed to the same type of mental and physical torture we can assume Matthew Rose Sorenson was, since he also knows about the house and the statues.

Through these entries we learn who Piranesi was before the house, and it is a very different person than the one we have come to know up to this point.

Shanna: It's really hard to put together an outline of events, since what seems like important plot points to me, may not be the same parts that another reader would have picked out as important. Also, while this novel does have a plot, I would call it a character driven narrative. This is also making me a little fuzzy on the sequence of events.

Jen: Yes, I feel this. I felt like it was incredibly difficult to make an outline and to organize my thoughts because there are so many threads running through so many different parts of the book that it was hard for, me personally, to tie them together in a neat and presentable bundle.

There's also tons of details that don't mean anything to me and never really came together by the end of the book though I'm sure that they are important for some reason.

Shanna: Totally. I think that is one of the incredible parts of this book. You can take what you need and let the rest fall away and still leave with a complete picture.

We learn quite a bit through these lost journal entries, and Piranesi becomes more and more undecided about who is really his friend and who isn't. It becomes increasingly clear to him that The Other is not who he thought he was.

Shanna: We begin to see a merging of Matthew Rose Sorenson and Piranesi here. I viewed the journaling and the journal entries as therapy. Journaling is a super common thing in therapy, so to me his journaling, where he is able to put his thoughts and have breakthroughs made sense. I could also be completely off base, like, with everything, this is just how I was interpreting the story. I basically saw the entire thing as Piranesi/Matthew Rose Sorenson being a horribly abused cult survivor that has retreated so deeply into his own mind (labyrinth) that he isn't really seeing, or isn't able to see, the outside world around him right away. As we are given more information, so is he, and as the halls flood and tides turn, and he is seeing new and different parts of the house, so is he slowly being drawn out of the labyrinth.

Jen: I think that you interpreted it perfectly! We can never know if that was what Susanna Clarke was going for, but really, it doesn't even matter. Stories are different for everyone and we all get something different from them and interpret them differently based on the things that we experience in our life and the things that we wish we hadn't

Shanna: Yes! I was unsure of what I thought was happening, like, I had feelings, but nothing concrete, until the cult reveal. I have spent ... time ... learning about cults. There are some great Podcasts that do deep dives into some really intense cults, so I had an idea of just how deeply people can be changed and brainwashed by a personality like Arne Sayles. I will put some of the podcasts I enjoyed in the show notes I guess if anyone is interested. Last Podcast on the Left isn't for everyone, but I enjoy them, and they do lots of Cult deep dives, so those are worth listening to if you enjoy their style. The Heaven's Gate Podcast was a good one, and by good I mean terrible, but the podcast was great. That's the one where 2 people managed to recruit a bunch of people and convince everyone aliens were going to come and beam them up. Everyone cut their hair and wore the same clothes, and eventually they committed mass suicide. Jonestown is another wild and terrible example. Scientology as well. These cults have smart people in them. Not people who you would imagine would be drawn in and brainwashed, leaving their friends and families, giving up all of their money, in some cases cutting off or mutilating their genitalia. Mass suicide is not something that happens when everyone is in a good mental space. So I know that my opinions of how deeply this man could be traumatised after years of brainwashing made the whole story shift into that trauma light.

Jen: Hearing you say all that makes me realize how little I actually know about cults and I can see how I wouldn't come to those conclusions on my own. The cult aspect of the book is really

only touched on and I was really craving more information there and without any prior knowledge...I guess I can see where you were able to fill in the blanks. It's just completely unbelievable what people can be led to believe and do.

Jen: And just while we are on the subject, I have listened to one episode of Last Podcast on the Left and I was so completely shook by it. It was the most horrible story about a serial killer I have ever heard and I didn't even try to listen to another one of their episodes! I am curious about the cults though, so maybe I will try again.

Shanna: Oh yeah, my true crime podcasts have been on hold for a while. They are waaay too intense for me right now.

Jen: Definitely. As far as the cult stuff goes, I thought it was quite "cult light". Even looking back at those parts of the book - there's the part where they really want that body from the museum and then all the explanation of what they believed and did..I just didn't find it very interesting but again we are getting the information out of a scientist's journals so I guess it makes sense that it wouldn't be written super interestingly? I just found that I really didn't care enough.

Shanna: The way he repeats some phrases like prayers were also clues (to me) of his being brainwashed. "The Beauty of the House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite" or "May your Paths be safe, your Floors unbroken and may the House fill your eyes with Beauty." Are phrases he repeats throughout the novel and, as someone who has sat through a heck of a lot of catholic masses, reminded me a lot of the call and response aspect of it. That statement will likely piss a few people off, but I can say from experience that I could participate in a mass without actually turning my brain on. A lot of his calm personality and acceptance of his circumstance have a religious reverence kind of a feel to me.

Jen: Definitely! I've never really been to church so I can't speak to that, but I can see what you are saying. In an interview, Susanna Clarke says that her father was a Methodist Minister and so they moved around quite a lot and she was always the new kid and was always starting over. She said that as an adult she started to equate Christianity and church with feelings of isolation and alienation and it's only now that she is beginning to come back to her faith and that she feels more attuned to the Catholic church instead of the Protestant one. I don't really know the difference, but I can see those ties to this book.

Shanna: Something I didn't catch while reading it because I did it on audio was the capitalization of certain words. The House for example is always capitalized. I have read in reviews that this shifts throughout the novel, which I thought was a very subtle but effective way of showing a change in our narrator. Like I said, I didn't actually get to experience this, but now that I know about it I wish I did.

Jen: Yeah apparently there were quite a lot of words that were capitalized. From what I've heard a lot of the were aspects of the house that wouldn't normally be capitalized which I think is interesting for sure. I can really only speculate because I didn't get to experience it but to me it showed a reverence for the House. It was definitely something that we missed out by listening to the audio. I love audio books but we just never quite know when the audio is not going to be an advantage. I would have loved to see that shift.

Jen: There was one detail of the book that I did find a bit problematic. I can't remember - and this is another time when I really wish that I had a physical copy of the book - I can't remember who it was exactly, but one of the men - I want to say that it was Ketterly but it could have been Arnes-Sayles not sure - one of the bad guys anyways was described a few times as being gay. I kept waiting for there to be a reason for this, and none presented themselves other than to maybe explain why men were being abducted which isn't great? It just felt like a gay villain to me and not that gay people can't be villains but it just didn't feel necessary to this story. Again, maybe I'm just not seeing the reason...I don't know

Shanna - Yes, that was Arne Sayles, and I agree, that was probably unnecessary unless I am missing ... something. I don't know what though. I also was not a fan of that. The only thing I could maybe have seen was if she was going to add a sexual abuse aspect, which I also would have hated, but there were also female cult members, so what the hell. Overall that felt like unnecessary gay villainy. I don't think it added anything to the story. There are plenty of weird sex things in cults, but this felt ... bad.

Jen: I kept expecting weird culty sex things - especially because of that little tidbit of information.. Like maybe she felt like she needed to explain why he was with a man in an orgy later on... but there was no orgy so..

Lets see, I guess there is still more book hey. We have kind of deviated away from the already incredibly loose outline of the plot.

Jen: Yeah, I'm not sure how I went from "Nothing happened in this book" to "frick so much happens in this book that I can't even explain it!"

Okay we have said so much about what we think everything means. Now what actually happens in this book.

Piranesi realizes that there is going to be a huge flood, and he warns Ketterly, but can't think of a way to warn 16.

Ketterly Dies. Oh yes Ketterly dying. We learned through the journal entries that "The Other" is Val Ketterly, who was, like, the second in this cult. He wanted to be the leader, and he desperately wanted to find the answers he was searching for. He was not a very likable dude. When Matthew Rose Sorenson goes to him to research Lawrence Arne Sayles, he is abducted,

and from that point on is a missing person. We can assume that this is when his ... indoctrination, into this cult, or brainwashing, or magicking away to another world, began.

Shanna: So Ketterly is a real bastard. He is very much an abuser and manipulator. Oh, and definitely a freaking kidnapper. Adultnapper? Anyways, like I said, in my interpretation of the story, Ketterly is not actually there, and is more a mental stand in for what he represents to Piranesi in the house. The Ketterly in the house is gaslighting him and doing everything he can to prevent Piranesi from getting help or finding his own way out. Not that he was looking for one anymore. As things get more desperate for him he begins making preparations for "The Flood" and also sees this as a way to kill 16. One of these two is getting swept away in the waters. Ketterly's death in the house represented, to me, Matthew Rose Sorenson finally breaking free of him. He also disappears in the real world, and while this could be considered as something that kills my theory, I actually really like it. I like that it leaves the door open on the fantasy aspect of the story. I love that we don't know what exactly is real. I do have a solution for Ketterly's purchases and disappearance, but it's not important and kind of small fries.

Jen: It definitely keeps the possibility of different interpretations open which is great

Shanna: Anyways, Piranesi tries to save Ketterly, and is actually really sad when he dies, since he was his only companion for so long. This screamed Stockholm Syndrome to me and I loved it. I mean, I don't love Stockholm Syndrome, I'm not a psychopath. Probably. But I loved that the reality of that attachment people can feel towards their abusers wasn't ignored.

Jen: Absolutely. Piranesi was so conflicted because on one hand he knew that the Other wasn't on his side anymore but also, the Other was all he had for so long. It was very realistic to the situation.

Piranesi gets out. Finds James Ritter. Goes back.

Shanna: He gets out, although he doesn't really WANT to leave the house, and it takes quite a bit of work on 16's part to convince him. But yes, he does leave, and as he starts healing, is able to spend time outside of the house. He finds James Ritter, someone who has gone through the same trauma as him. Connection, understanding, and community is important. Knowing someone else in the world who has experienced those same things is useful. And as far as going back to the house. He loves the house. He spent years there and he knows it. Since I see the house as his mind and solitude, of course he can go back. The good thing is he knows how to get out now.

Jen: Aw, that's wonderful. I'm so glad that they each were able to find in each other someone who could understand what they had been through. It really is so important to not feel alone when something so traumatic happens.

Shanna: Ok, this is getting long, and there are more things I could talk about, but here, this will be my last point. I thought the way that we see the characters of Piranesi and Matthew Rose

Sorenson merge together was really well done. I love that as he heals he doesn't lose Piranesi, the Victim, but he also doesn't suddenly turn back into who he was before all of this happened to him. We are shaped and changed by the things that happen to us, and I loved the way she combined these two different people with their different experiences into who he was going to be moving forward in his life. Both of those aspects of his personality are him and are important. I dunno, I like it a lot.

Jen: Was it this book where he says that he is both Matthew Rose Sorensen and Piranesi but also neither of them? It sounds right, but I couldn't find the exact quote. I really liked that too because that is so true. It could have been another book, but it definitely applies here as well.

Shanna: Awe yes. When he goes back to live with his family is when he talks about being neither.

Jen: I think that you've convinced me that as a book, it was very well done and yes, there are tons of layers and different interpretations that I just wasn't able to see. So, I can see why it would be longlisted for the Women's Prize and I could see it being shortlisted as well. I love being shown another way to see things so thank you.

Shanna: Oh you're welcome. Thank you for letting me just be as pretentious as I possibly could. I mean, honestly, I am sure I could go on, but you get the idea. I am very deep and thoughtful lol.

Jen: Still, as far as personal enjoyment goes, I still didn't love it. I'm reminded a bit of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang actually, where we have a story that revolves around mental health and abuse of power mixed with beautiful but confusing visuals. I think what you said about that book was "a book doesn't have to be enjoyable to be a good book"? Something like that anyways, and that is how I feel about this one.

Shanna: Yes! I didn't love that one, but the longer I have sat with it, the more I have been able to understand its appeal and artistic merit. I obviously loved this one, but I can totally understand why there are so many different opinions on it. Honestly though, that just makes me love it more.

Jen: Exactly. I appreciate this book, but alas, it was not for me!

Shanna: I thought it might be worth looking at some of the ways other people read this novel from various places across the internet. Here are a few of the things I found people saying they thought the book was about: Imagination, Humanity's relationship to nature, Spirituality and belief systems, A meditation on epistemology, A fable, A thought experiment, Homage or critique of the fantasy classics, Fantasy in its purest form, Meditation on identity, Allegory of a life well lived, About how finding joy and fulfillment in the world fundamentally changes a person, A parable of living within our means and respecting our world, A commentary on becoming used

to, and even finding comfort in abusive or weird scenarios, A story about mental health or even hypnotism

Shanna: I could go on, but you get the idea. There are so many different ways to interpret this story, and I find pretty much every review of it interesting in its own way.

Jen: I guess it can be a book where as readers we can ascribe whichever meaning we need at the time of reading it. For me, I think what I needed was pure fantasy and escapism and what I ended up finding was the opposite and that just didn't work for me, but I absolutely loved the discussion around it. This would have made a great book club book.

Shanna: Agreed! And, ok, so. I think that is it. I think we covered, well a bunch of stuff. I honestly don't know if we even covered anywhere near the whole story. This was such a short novel, and the story was really straightforward when reading it, but it has some sort of extra magic, where the more you think about it the more it grows.

Jen: Yes. Straight forward is a great way of describing it. I keep wanting to say that it's simple but that's not right. Apparently there was a ton to discuss in this very short book. This is why it made it onto the list for the women's prize

Shanna: OKay so don't forget about Book Club! We are reading The Midnight Library by Matt Haig. Read it and let us know what you think by heading over to our Facebook or Instagram. You can find us at [best\\_bookclub](#) everywhere. Keep an eye out because we will be releasing discussion questions and we want to hear your thoughts! If you hate social media, don't worry, you can also email us at [best\\_bookclub@outlook.com](mailto:best_bookclub@outlook.com).

Jen: And if you don't hate us, maybe consider rating and reviewing this podcast on apple podcasts.

Shanna: Otherwise, we'll see you next week

Byeeeeee