

**BOOK CLUB KIT**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- 1.** In a conversation with Lucien, Aurelius says, "It is from the thin air and the high hopes of our patrons' imaginations that I build. If it can be dreamt, Lucien, if it can be believed, then it can be seen and realized." Discuss how the author expanded upon the ideas of magic, hope, illusion, reality, and the traveling circus in *The Carnivale of Curiosities*. How did she take these familiar concepts and make them her own?
- 2.** Aurelius Ashe has tarot cards tattooed on the back of each hand: the Wheel of Fortune on his right, and the Magician on his left. Why do you think the author chose these images to help define Aurelius's character?
- 3.** At the beginning of the novel, Lucien expresses his displeasure in returning to Southwark to Aurelius. Do you believe that you carry your origins with you, wherever you go? Why or why not?
- 4.** Early in the novel, Dita reflects on Lucien's otherness: Discuss the dichotomy this otherness represents, and Lucien's gravitational appeal to multiple characters in the novel.
- 5.** Dita cautions Lucien that incessantly remembering the dead is burdensome for the living. Do you agree or disagree with Dita? Did Dita's statements resonate with your own personal experiences regarding loss and grief? Why or why not?
- 8.** Discuss the significance of names in the novel: Aurelius, meaning golden; Lucien, meaning light; Angelique, meaning angelic; Pretorius, meaning leader; Harlequin, meaning mischievous devil; Odilon, meaning prosperous in battle; Columbine, meaning dove; and Charlotte, meaning free. How did each character's name inform his or her personality and trajectory in the novel?
- 9.** Harlequin compares Charlotte to Frankenstein's monster when he runs into her on High Street. What do you think of this comparison? Do you believe the author was inspired by Mary Shelley's 1818 novel?
- 10.** In a conversation with Charlotte, Angelique says, "myths aren't always meant to be optimistic. Often, they are as much lamentation as celebration, but they are always a good story and that's what matters in the end. The stories we tell of ourselves, the truths, the lies, the smoke and mirrors." Did you agree with Angelique in this scene?
- 11.** How did you feel about Charlotte's character arc, and what do you think her future looks like, beyond the pages of the novel?
- 12.** How did the end of *The Carnivale of Curiosities* make you feel, knowing once again that Lucien was denied a truth that would alter his outlook of the world?

# AN ESSAY FROM AMIEE GIBBS



For me, the road to The Carnivale of Curiosities was a bit unusual, because the story was never one I set out to write. Rather, it seems, it was a story that found me.

It began in 2012, when I was working on a novel that, for two years past, had me essentially stuck in Baltimore with a troubled British forensic psychologist turned professor character who was lured back into the field by a disturbing cold case. Not a terrible place to be, but with only fifty pages to show, I was less than thrilled with my progress. After two years, I had hoped to be further along. I had hoped to have finished at least a full draft, working on revisions. I hope, I hope, I hope had become something of a mantra.

To be fair, though, those two years, starting in 2010, saw a fair amount of change. I was in the last months of my master of liberal arts program when I first started writing the story. I had started a new position in sales with Penguin Random House (when it was still Random House). And the biggest and most personal of all: In 2011, I experienced the end of a long-term relationship, which, looking back, would never go down in the books as a grand romance but as more a sociological study in indifference as time wore on. It was a significant relationship—my first. It was, in its way, a strong friendship; in the end, it was a loss.

Having all of that in play, my writing—and my desire to do so—had waned. So, when 2012 rolled around and I was still only fifty pages into my mystery, I began to worry that the promise she had seen was a fluke.

Fortunately, I did have a support system, a writing group that had been born from that very same creative writing course I had been taking. And it was suggested in this group that we put aside for a month what we were currently working on, as most of us were feeling a bit stagnant in our works, and do the NaNoWriMo challenge. We only had to start something new and, in essence, get the creative juices flowing again. It was a wonderful idea that I was on board with, as I had many ideas floating around that were waiting to be explored. I have always been in love with the Victorian era in all its morbid splendor. But at this point, while I had all the elements, I lacked the story.

Eleven or so days into the challenge, I had absolutely nothing to show. And while it was not a feeling of panic, it was an overwhelming sense of frustration and failure I found settling over me. Each day when I got to work, I would open a blank Word doc in case inspiration struck, but each day before leaving, I closed the screen as blank as when I opened it. It was no better at home. So not only was I not writing something new, but I also wasn't working on the mystery, either. I wasn't writing anything at all, and that was a bit scary.

So it was in this murky soup of self-doubt when, on the twelfth day of this cycle, something that I still cannot explain happened.

I was sitting at my desk at work as usual, about midmorning, a cup of coffee in hand with a blank document blinking like an accusation in the background of my computer, when the phone rang. Our phones have caller ID on them, so I recognized the caller—it was my ex-boyfriend. This was not entirely unusual, as he had wanted to remain friends, but we had not spoken in several months and this call was coming almost a year to the day that we had parted ways. I had considered letting the call go to voice mail, to deal with later, but I answered instead, and after a bit of mindless chit-chat came the reason for his call. I could tell by the way he began, saying he had done it, which to me suggested a series of possibilities save for the one that it was—that he was calling to announce his engagement to the woman he had fallen for during the last dying months of our relationship.

Anyone reading this might ask why this call ever took place, and Reader, to this day, I do not know, as the protocols on this are subjective. But the call was made, and the call ended, although not before he said how much he hoped I would date again soon because, in his words, I “have a great personality and there has to be someone out there who can take it.”

And with that I was left sitting at my desk, not so much upset by the announcement or insulted by the back-handed compliment, but confused by his needing to tell me. And as the clock ticked on, I felt a bit irritated by the fact that while he had built a whole new life in a year, I couldn't complete a novel or even string together two words of a new story when that was all I wanted to do. I wanted one good idea to prove to myself that I could write. And this is when it happened, something that has always felt a bit out of the ordinary.

I'm not a stranger to the weird, the unusual, or the supernatural for that matter. There has always been a strong affinity to nature and the natural world in my family, a certain knowledge, so I know things happen in our lives that we cannot always easily explain away. Whether we choose to refer to these unexplained acts as manifestations or the law of attraction, wish fulfillment or even fate, there is an underlying sense of the uncanny. But whatever we may choose to call it, I cannot help feeling that something was at work that day because it was only moments after I hung up the phone in that stew of confusion that a name popped into my head as if it had drifted in on the air itself: Aurelius Ashe.

It was an unusual name. If I had been reading Marcus Aurelius at the time, that might have accounted for it, but it had been many years since I had done so, and the Roman emperor was a million miles from my thoughts. Aurelius Ashe was a complete stranger. I typed his name on the blank Word document and I liked how it looked. It had a flair and a cache and an intrigue that I wanted to uncover.

I knew nothing more than that. He wasn't a character yet. He was merely the first two words of a story that would come to fill my nights with magic for the next eight years. But I knew he was special, and the story he would bring out of me was going to be unlike any I had ever attempted.

Over the subsequent years, I immersed myself in Victorian and sideshow history. I had double majored in English and theater arts as an undergrad in college, so all those nights of stagecraft and costume design finally came in handy. I revisited the commedia dell'arte and the harlequinade and the paintings of John Singer Sargent and the sculpture of Guillaume Geefs. I relied on Shakespeare and Dickens, folklore, myth, and the works of John Dee. I indulged in the lush and ornate descriptions of Anne Rice and Angela Carter to decorate my world, and I crafted my perfect playlist. Every night I worked, from ten pm to nearly one am, longer on the weekends, but I kept to that schedule like faith. No matter if I wrote a single sentence to be deleted the next day, I still wrote. And in time Aurelius was joined by Lucien and Dita and Timothy Harlequin and by a young woman named Charlotte, who sits sickly by her window longing for escape—and for something more.

I understood that desire for something more and slowly the words came, as did the story, until one day, nearly nine years after Aurelius first came to me, I wrote the final word. I saved and closed the file, knowing I wasn't finished, that there was editing to be done—a lot of editing. But the story was told. The story was real. Whatever happened that day long ago, I still can't explain. But a writer friend, with whom I shared this origin story, perhaps said it best: “It all seems fated, somehow.”

I feel she may be right in that assessment. Who knows the workings of luck, fate, dreams, and wishes? Whatever they might prove to be, it can never hurt to throw a pinch of spilled salt over your shoulder or toss a penny in a fountain or always make a wish when passing through a crossroad. You never know what might happen.



Photo: © Emily Bates

# RECIPE

## THE CURIOSITY

This curiously looking cocktail isn't what it seems. With a sprinkle of magic, how it looks and how it tastes are marvelously deceiving!

*Recipe courtesy of Covalent Spirits. Visit them [online](#).*



- 1.5 oz Gin
- 2 oz Pineapple Juice
- 1 oz Sour Mix\*
- 3 Sprinkles Black Edible Glitter  
(available online)

Combine ingredients and ice in a shaker. Shake and strain into a rocks glass with fresh ice.

\*We recommend homemade sour mix: equal parts fresh orange juice and lemon juice, plus simple syrup to your desired level of sweetness.

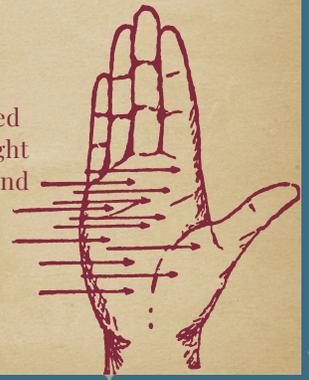


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# MORE RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOOKCLUB

## MOOD MOVIES

The Illusionist

**Bram Stoker's Dracula**

The Elephant Man

**Crimson Peak**

The Crow

**Todd Browning's Freaks**

Water for Elephants

**The Prestige**

## Further Reading...

**Geek Love by Katherine Dunn**

*Nights at the Circus* by Angela Carter

*The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*  
by Melanie Benjamin

