

The Death Catchers: A Reader's Guide

About the Book

Crabapple seems like an ordinary town on the surface even though it's odd for any place in California to have graves dating back to the year 687, and there are few eccentric characters who are a bit *too* into Arthurian legend. But until Lizzy Mortimer's fourteenth Halloween, she has no idea about the town's mysterious—and dangerous—connections to the Isle of Avalon. In the space of a few days, Lizzy is hexed by a terrifying woman in black, hears that Doomsday is coming, and has the world go topsy-turvy when a death-specter warns of her best friend Jodi's demise. Lizzy is quickly inducted into the Hands of Fate by her grandma Bizzy, and together they take on a mission to find the Last Descendant and save Crabapple from destruction at the hands of Vivienne le Mort. For the sake of the world as we know it, we'd best hope they're up to the task...

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Death Catchers* is structured in a nontraditional fashion: it reads like a long letter to Mrs. Tweedy, Lizzy's English teacher. What do you think about this format? Are there places where Lizzy does a more (or less) effective job of applying literary devices? Were there techniques that were new to you? Are there ways in which you would have applied them differently than Lizzy?
2. Describe Jodi, who Lizzy says "sticks out like a sore thumb" in Crabapple (8). How do you think she got to be that way? What draws her and Lizzy together as friends?
3. Lizzy says that she loves Bizzy, but that Bizzy is "not exactly" the person she wants to grow up to be; she also says that she "may not have much choice in the matter"(27). What does she mean? In the story, how are Lizzy and Bizzy alike and different?
4. To most folks in Crabapple, Bizzy appears eccentric: her "pearls," Dixie, her medical textbooks, and her daily swims all make her seem somewhat peculiar. Lizzy learns more, though: explain how these quirks are tools for coping as a Death Catcher. What strategies does Lizzy adopt in order to be a successful Death Catcher? What do you imagine she'll be like when she's older and more experienced?
5. Bizzy explains to Lizzy: "As far as I can tell, we only see unjust deaths. Deaths that are unnatural. If we figure out the *why*, we can do something about 'em" (75). Why do you think the Death Catchers exist? Morgan le Faye gives one explanation: do you think that's sufficient?
6. The Seven Sisters of Avalon battle one another in this story, but it wasn't always that way: what made them into enemies? What would it take for them to reconcile, or is that even possible? Can you think of a similar situation where your relationship with someone went through a rift, or changed into something decidedly negative?
7. As Lizzy sees him initially, Drake Westfall seems... well... rather perfect. Do you believe that he is? How does your image of him change throughout the story? Do you know people like Drake in real life? What traits do they share with the boy who is "the archetype" when it comes to being perfect (108)?
8. Contrast the Mortimer and Westfall families. How are Lizzy's parents different than Drake's? What effect does the character of each parent have on the relationship with his/her child? Can

you relate more closely to one of the parents in the story than another? What makes your relationship similar or different?

9. Why do you think Rita left a note for Lizzy along with the copy of *Pride and Prejudice*? Have you ever found it easier to write to someone than to talk with them? Does Rita's note do anything to prepare Lizzy for the conversation they have on the beach? How much, if anything, do you think Lizzy should have told her mother about the Death Catchers? Are there times when it's right to keep secrets?
10. Bizzy tells Lizzy that they're fighting "the most terrible enemy of 'em all": fate (145). Do you believe in fate? Do you think that what you do has an influence on the future? Explain how fate works in this story: how long can someone hold on once their thread has been cut? Are there things that mortals can do to stick up for themselves when they're dealing with forces as powerful as the Seven Sisters?

Activities and Writing Projects

1. **Pearls of Wisdom, Free of Charge:** Compile three of your favorite out of Bizzy's Pearls of Wisdom and start a Bizzy dictionary: explain what each pearl means and give an example of how it might be used. Then, listen for pearls from your friends and family. Are there sayings you can add to your dictionary? Why do you think people store wisdom in small pearls?
2. **The Right Book:** Rita, Lizzy's mom, is a "librarian for anyone who will listen" (68). She recommends books for other characters multiple times throughout the story. Choose one of those times, and analyze it carefully: what do the characters want in that situation? What kind of book would you give them, and why? (Do you know people who might enjoy the story of the Death Catchers? Who, and what makes this stand out as a story that might appeal to them?)
3. **It's Not Stalking If You Have a Good Reason:** Jodi gives Lizzy lots of relationship advice in this story, and some pieces of advice are better than others. Compile Jodi's advice and evaluate it: is it the same as what you would have told Lizzy throughout the course of the story? Write a letter to Lizzy at the end of the story: what advice do you have for her now given where things stand with Drake?

4. **Obviously, I Went through a Bit of an Arthurian Phase Myself:** Lizzy hears about several other famous retellings of Arthurian legends: for example, Mickey talks to her about *Le Mort d'Arthur* and *The Once and Future King*. Read one of these alternate accounts. How are these classic tales different than the one offered in *The Last Descendant*? Write a recommendation for Lizzy: should she read the book you read? Why, or why not?