

Discussion Questions

The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary by Simon Winchester



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1. The book's title lists its main characters: Professor Murray, Dr. Minor, and the Oxford English Dictionary. Is there a hero?
2. The title of each chapter is accompanied by the definition of a word that tells the reader what the chapter is about. Does this method enhance or detract from the author's tale?
3. The author frequently used alliteration and metaphor. How effective were phrases like: "around which winter winds whip bitterly" (p. 6); "sad little stream seeped" (p. 6); and "marching blindfolded through molasses" (p. 109)?
4. Winchester employs all the senses in his description of Lambeth Marsh (p. 7): "vile...swampy gyre of pathways...miserable rows of ill-lit houses...sickly smell of yeast and hops..." and later, in his descriptions of Ceylon (p. 44) and Broadmoor (p. 117-118). Do his multi-dimensional descriptions apply to other subjects?
5. Elephants appear frequently in this book; in both the text and as a definition (p. 81, 90, 94, 96, 101, 217). What is the purpose? Is the use of elephants a metaphor for the size of the OED? An example of the evolution of a word?
6. How was the OED linked to the development of English as a global language?
7. What is madness? (p. 157) Murray and Minor were both described as meticulous and obsessed. Where does "meticulous" end and "obsession" begin?
8. A comparison is made between the confinement of being in prison and being committed to scholarship (p. 157). Murray and Minor were both prisoners in some ways, or, as Winchester wrote, "Strange symmetry of the two men's settings—pinioned as each was among great stacks of books" (p. 177). How did their shared love of lexicology become a source of freedom or release?
9. A key element of the book is irony. What would have happened had Dr. Minor been treated with modern-day medications?
10. How are forgiveness and redemption handled in the book? One example of redemption is Minor's work on the OED. An example of forgiveness is Eliza Merrett, widow of the man Minor shot, who publicly forgave him and visited him at Broadmoor. Mrs. Merrett brought books to him and he and his stepmother gave her money (p. 194). Yet, Winchester wrote that she "never really recovered from the shock of what had happened: Before long, she had taken to drink and when she died it was of liver failure." (p. 225)