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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS | *ELLA MINNOW PEA* BY MARK DUNN

“A Fitting Review. A review of *Ella Minnow Pea* by the *Dallas Morning Herald* included the sentence, “This exceptional, zany book will quickly make you laugh,” which is itself a pangram (a sentence containing all 26 letters of the alphabet) like one that’s central to the story.”

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/ella-minnow-pea>

1. Did you know the definition of a lipogram before you read *Ella Minnow Pea*? Do you think this was ultimately just a gimmick, or did it transform this work into a unique classic?
2. How did you feel reading the last few chapters of the book? Were you amused, interested, or just annoyed when most of the letters disappeared? Did this feeling match how you felt reading the rest of the book?
3. How does Dunn manage to make *Ella Minnow Pea* both a whimsical fable and a serious anti-authoritarian satire? What elements of the novel seem comical or lighthearted? What elements seem more pointed? How well does the author integrate them into the story?
4. In response to the first proclamation proscribing the use of the letter "Z," Tassie warns, "it stands to rob us of the freedom to communicate without any manner of fetter or harness" [p. 10]. In what sense can *Ella Minnow Pea* be read as a satire of censorship and the restriction of free speech?
5. *Ella Minnow Pea* dwells heavily on the theme of communication. What is Dunn suggesting by having the members of the High Island Council read the falling letters as signs which ultimately make communication nearly impossible? What does the novel as whole say about the nature and purpose of communication and community?
6. Why do you think Dunn chose the epistolary format for his novel? Do you think this was an effective way to communicate this story?



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7. What are your thoughts on Georgeanne Towgate, the tattletale neighbor who ultimately meets an unfortunate and bizarre demise? Given that there are real life comparisons to Nollop, do you think the Georgeanne Towgates of the world would really have changed their minds about censorship and authoritarian governments, or is that wishful thinking?
8. Did you relate to any of the characters in *Ella Minnow Pea*, or do you think character development was secondary to the plot structure? In that vein, how do you feel about Amos, not Ella, finding the sentence solution accidentally?
9. At the end of the novel, Ella suggests a memorial to those who suffered from the High Council's tyranny: "a large box filled with sixty moonshine jugs piled high, toppling over, corks popping, liquor flowing. Disorder to match the clutter and chaos of our marvelous language. Words upon words, piled high, toppling over, thoughts popping, correspondence and conversation overflowing" [p. 206]. Why is this an appropriate memorial? In what ways is language chaotic? In what ways is it ordered and restrictive? Why is Ella comparing liquor and conversation in this passage?
10. All the inhabitants of Nollop are forced into linguistic contortions to avoid being prosecuted by the High Council, substituting words like "cephalus" for "head" and "sub-terra" for "underground" [p. 99]. In your opinion, what are some of the more amusing verbal acrobatics they are forced to perform? Are there any that particularly stood out to you?