Beyond Black
A Novel

by Hilary Mantel

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about Beyond Black are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach Beyond Black.

About the Book

Beyond Black is the insightful, often chilling, and darkly humorous story of Alison Hart, an overweight clairvoyant traveling the London suburbs and passing along messages from the dead to the living. Accompanying Alison is her assistant, Colette, fresh off a sobering divorce and in search of life-affirming experiences.

Alison, the daughter of a prostitute, is haunted by the dead—cruel and demonic men who knew her mother and made Alison’s childhood an especially morbid one. The worst of these nefarious spirits is Morris, a vulgar low-life whom Alison cannot escape.

Troubles tumble out of control when Alison and Colette move to the suburbs and take up with a spirit guide and his drowned therapist. Alison soon realizes she must deal with the terrors of her childhood and her connection to the place beyond black if she is ever to find peace in this world, or beyond.
Praise for the Book

“The strangest, creepiest, most sorrow-and-pity-inducing book I’ve read for a very long time. As a picture of the morally and physically squalid Britain of today, it’s unsurpassed; it’s also a great ghost story. A chilling masterpiece.”

—Philip Pullman

“A terrible and swirling horror-comedy about a very fat medium on the perimeter of the M25, haunted by mean and nasty spirits, veering between damnation and the trivial.”

—A. S. Byatt

“Funny and harrowing . . . A great comic novel. Hilary Mantel’s humor, like Flannery O’Connor’s, is so far beyond black it becomes a kind of light.”

—The New York Times Book Review

“Beautifully written . . . Strange, funny, and affecting . . . Mantel is . . . the possessor of a peerless prose style.”

—John Banville

“Spooky, smart, and deep.”

—Claire Dederer, New York magazine

 “[One of] my favourite [books] of the year . . . More people really need to get with the concept that Mantel is one of the best writers in England.”

—Zadie Smith

“Her finest [novel] . . . Mantel’s writing is so exact and brilliant that, in itself, it seems an act of survival, even redemption.”

—The New Yorker

“Original and deeply dark . . . New and compelling . . . With Beyond Black [Mantel] shows us how fiction can lift us into the extraordinary.”

—The Washington Post Book World

“Grimly seductive [work from] a writer of dark extremities. [Mantel] performs as if from the depths of a well, her prolonged bleakness pierced by splinters of beauty and treacherous wit. . . . Imperceptibly, artfully, Mantel has elevated her material monsters into metaphysical monsters.”

—The Boston Globe

About the Author

Among Hilary Mantel’s major novels are A Change of Climate, A Place of Greater Safety, and Eight Months on Ghazzah Street. She has also written a memoir, Giving Up the Ghost. Winner of the Hawthornden Prize, she reviews books for The New York Times and The New York Review of Books and lives in England.
Discussion Questions

1. *Beyond Black* is set in contemporary England, a world of internet, suburbs, and commuting. Why do you think Hilary Mantel chose this period in time? How would the novel be different had she set it in a different time period? What does Mantel seem to be saying about contemporary English life?

2. Describe Alison’s relationship with Colette. What do the characters offer one another? How does their relationship change as time passes? How do they think their histories and appearances (Alison being extremely overweight, Colette being thin and drawn) affect the way in which they deal with one another and why?

3. Describe Alison’s connection with those on the other side. How different are the living from those “beyond black”? How would you describe Morris? Has his behavior changed since he was living? If so, in what way? Do any characters, dead or living, seem happy or healthy?

4. How does Princess Diana’s death play a key part in the book? How do you feel about the way Mantel handled the fictional representation of a real person? Why did Mantel choose to draw her in this particular way and is it different from the Princess Diana you imagined?

5. Alison’s terrible childhood is revealed gradually in the novel, through flashbacks and Morris, her despicable spirit guide. Why did Mantel choose to do this? How would the novel and your opinions of the characters have changed had Alison’s childhood been revealed sooner?

6. *Beyond Black* is a dark and often disturbing novel. Did Mantel’s use of humor and wit make the story more digestible? Had Mantel addressed the themes of the book in a more serious fashion, how would the reading experience have been different? Where is the light in *Beyond Black*?

7. By the end of the book, did you feel as though Alison had found some redemption? What do you see in Alison’s future, beyond the end of the story?

8. Mantel presents the life of a psychic as banal and ordinary. Why do you think Alison is portrayed simply as a woman doing a job? Why do you think Mantel presents the supernatural world to be as mundane as everyday life? Did the story make you reconsider your thoughts and feelings about the supernatural?

9. Alison has extrasensory powers, but can only vaguely recall her childhood. Did you find this ironic? What does Mantel seem to be saying?

10. Do you see a difference between the way Alison deals with clients and audience members when talking about their pasts and futures and the way in which she deals with her own? How is her language and tone different?
11. Alison knows whatever she says to her audience members or personal clients will be accepted, though she may, on occasion, have to tweak and hone. What assumptions does Alison make about the types of people who seek her services?

12. How are the jobs of novelist and clairvoyant similar? How are they different? What advantages did Mantel, an accomplished novelist, have in the telling of this story?

13. Morris’s mates start to show up just as Alison begins dictating her autobiography. Is this coincidence? Is it metaphor?

14. Did you believe Alison was truly seeing or hearing all of the supernatural events? Did it matter to you?

15. Have you had any experiences with psychics or clairvoyants either in person or on television, for instance America’s John Edwards? Was the experience similar to what’s portrayed in Beyond Black?

16. Many novels (from Dante Alighieri’s The Divine Comedy to Alice Sebold’s The Lovely Bones) and movies (The Sixth Sense and Ghost) have depicted the afterlife. How is Mantel’s depiction different from those? In what ways is it similar?