

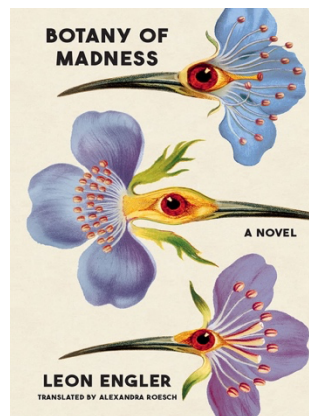


BOTANY OF MADNESS

By Leon Engler

Translated from the German by Alexandra Roesch

A Reading Group Guide



1. *Botany of Madness* opens with the erasure of a family's past—when the narrator's mother is evicted from her apartment and checks into a psychiatric clinic, her treasured belongings end up being incinerated, and the “junk” that was meant to go in its place remains behind. How does this image set up the book's major themes? What does it mean for a family to lose the signs of their personal history?
2. The young man at the center of the novel comes from a family whose history is marked by mental illness. How does the revelation of this hereditary inheritance affect the narrator as a young man? How does it alter his sense of the future?
3. “Both my father and psychoanalysis were born in Vienna.” The city of Vienna is at the heart of *Botany of Madness*. How does Engler use the history and geography of the city to mirror the narrator's own emotional journey? If Vienna comes to be a character in the novel, how would you describe its personality?
4. Consider the narrator's relationship with his bookish, Viennese neighbor. How does this friendship transform him? What does he learn from the neighbor, and how do these lessons resonate throughout the rest of the book?

5. *Botany of Madness* makes use of many literary, theoretical, and scientific allusions in the text, which allow us deeper into the narrator's mind. How do these intertextual references affect your understanding of the book as a whole? Why did Engler choose to refer to these particular writers or works?
6. Consider the narrator's relationship with his mother and father. How do they differ from one another? What kinds of mental illness or pathologies do each exhibit? How do each of their conditions change as the novel goes on, and the narrator grows older?
7. The narrator's biggest fear is that he might follow in his parents' footsteps—that his fate might be predetermined. But the novel is also full of chance encounters, like that between the narrator and Ellen, which transform his sense of the world. Discuss the role of chance in the novel. Do you think the narrator is, finally, in control of his own life?
8. Vienna's Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital comes to play a central role in the novel, as the narrator begins to work there as a psychologist. How does this experience transform him and change his understanding of what being "normal" means? Consider his relationships with both patients and doctors in the facility. What does he learn from both of them?
9. As much as *Botany of Madness* is concerned with the so-called "madness" which has shaped the narrator's family, the novel also becomes a story about what it means to watch one's parents grow old. How does the narrator deal with each of his parents' decline? How does his work at Steinhof prepare him for these experiences?
10. The question of how to live with what one is given permeates *Botany of Madness*. What might Engler be saying about how we deal with our personal and collective histories? Think about Carl Linnaeus's words, which act as one of the novel's epigraphs: "If you do not know the names, the knowledge of things perishes as well." How does the narrator's life exemplify what those words might mean?

For more information about *BOTANY OF MADNESS* and other books, please visit www.newvesselpress.com.