

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Brief History of the Dead*

Author: Kevin Brockmeier

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27 W. 20th St., Ste. 103,
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Career:

Novelist and short story writer. Instructor at Iowa Writers Workshop, University of Iowa.

Awards:

Nelson Algren Award, Chicago Tribune; Italo Calvino Short Fiction Award; James Michener-Paul Engel fellowship; three O. Henry awards; National Endowment for the Arts grant.

Writings: For Children

City of Names (novel), Viking (New York, NY), 2002.

Grooves: A Kind of Mystery (novel), Katherine Tegen Books (New York, NY), 2006.

Writings: Other

Things That Fall from the Sky (short fiction), Pantheon (New York, NY), 2002.

The Truth about Celia (adult novel), Pantheon (New York, NY), 2003.

The Brief History of the Dead (adult novel), Pantheon (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor of fiction to periodicals, including *Georgia Review*, *New Yorker*, and *McSweeney's*. Contributor of fiction to anthologies, including *The Oxford American*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*.

Media Adaptations:

Warner Bros. acquired film rights to *The Brief History of the Dead*.

Sidelights:

An O. Henry Prize-winning author of short fiction, Kevin Brockmeier has gained critical recognition for his lyrical prose. Though he began his career focusing on short fiction for adults, Brockmeier has also expanded his audience to teen readers with the novels *City of Names* and *Grooves: A Kind of Mystery*. "I began writing children's fiction for two reasons," the author explained to an interviewer for Earth Goat online. "First of all, I began to read children's fiction again ... and I found that the best of them offered me as much aesthetic pleasure



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as the adult fiction I was reading. Second, when I was in college, I used to teach at a nursery school, where I would make up stories for the children in my class, and I wanted to find a way of continuing to tell stories to those particular children.”

In all his works, Brockmeier’s characters often find themselves in absurd situations. His fiction borders the fantastical and often draws on fairy tales for inspiration; one story in *Things That Fall from the Sky*, for example, brings Rumpelstiltskin into the future—or, at least, half of him because, according to the Grimm fairy tale, the original Rumpelstiltskin tore himself in half. Other tales include the story of a man who lives on a never-ending airplane, a thirty-something male babysitter who becomes obsessed with the toddler he cares for, and a man who realizes the sky is falling while he copes with his wife’s extramarital affair. Reviewing *Things That Fall from the Sky*, *Booklist* contributor James Klise wrote that Brockmeier “demonstrates a fluid use of language, playfulness of story, and mature insight into a world” of strange choices, while in *Publishers Weekly* a critic deemed the author “a formidable young writer.”

In contrast to the serious overtones in *Things That Fall from the Sky*, the plot of *City of Names* revolves around a book discovered by fifth-grader Howie that is titled *The Secret Guide to North Mellwood*. A fold-out map of Howie’s home city contained within the book allows the boy to transport instantly to any point when he utters the location’s “true” name. Even stranger things are happening below ground, however; town hero Larry Boone, thought to be dead for centuries, is still alive and well and keeping the magic of the city’s names flowing. “There’s nothing like a bit of unexpected magic to liven up a thoroughly ordinary day,” Anne O’Malley wrote in her *Booklist* review of the novel, while in *Kirkus Reviews* a critic deemed *City of Names* “a giddy but enjoyable ride with a whiff of mystery ... that may leave readers regarding their own supposedly ordinary neighborhoods with new eyes.”

Also written for younger readers, *Grooves: A Kind of Mystery* is an odd-ball adventure that follows the same tone of *City of Names*. When Dwayne, a seventh grader living in a small town, runs a phonograph needle down his jeans, he discovers that the grooves of his jeans contain a hidden call for help. With two friends, Dwayne tackles the mystery head on, challenging the town’s most powerful businessman, who he believes is turning factory workers into personality-less zombies. Readers who enjoy “wacky fantasies ... will be delighted,” predicted a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor in a review of *Grooves*. Debbie Carton, writing in *Booklist*, considered Brockmeier’s tale “a frothy, fanciful, and entertaining blend of science fiction and mystery,” and Walter Minkel wrote in *School Library Journal* that, “with its crazy deadpan humor, [*Grooves*] ... is a hoot.”

Brockmeier’s adult novels include *The Truth about Celia*, which focuses on the kidnapping of a seven-year-old girl, and *The Brief History of the Dead*. Recommended to sophisticated teen readers by *School Library Journal* critic Matthew L. Moffett, *The Brief History of the Dead* follows a researcher struggling to survive in Antarctica and make her way back to a civilization that may no longer exist. Meanwhile, the still-existing dead dwell in a place known as The City, but last there only as long as someone remembers them. “The elegiac, thoughtful tone of the writing is balanced by the survivor’s adventure-filled travels across the frozen landscape,” wrote Moffett, and Charles de Lint complimented Brockmeier’s writing, noting in the *Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy* that “his prose is wonderful, ranging from straightforward to elegant and luminous.”

“I’ve found that my children’s books are more conversational in tone than my adult books, and a lot more jokey,” Brockmeier noted in his *Earth Goat* interview. “I want them to read as though you’re listening to a child who’s simply telling you his story as it occurs to him, along with anything else that happens to cross his mind,” the writer added. In characterizing his work to Diane Baroni for *Interview*, Brockmeier dubbed his style “speculative autobiography.” Regarding his inspiration, he told an interviewer for *Powells.com*: “I write out of gratitude for all the books I have loved over the years.”



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Further Readings:

Periodicals:

Booklist, February 15, 2002, James Klise, review of *Things That Fall from the Sky*, p. 990; June 1, 2002, Anne O'Malley, review of *City of Names*, p. 1720; July, 2003, Elsa Gaztambide, review of *The Truth about Celia*, p. 1863; January 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 52; February 1, 2006, Debbie Carton, review of *Grooves: A Kind of Mystery*, p. 47.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, May, 2002, review of *City of Names*, p. 312; March, 2006, Karen Coats, review of *Grooves*, p. 303.

Guardian (London, England), April 8, 2006, Colin Greenland, "Living on Cola," p. 17.

Interview, April, 2002, Diane Baroni, "Book 'Em: Five First-Time Authors to Bookmark," p. 76.

Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2002, review of *Things that Fall from the Sky*, p. 119; May 1, 2002, review of *City of Names*, p. 649; May 1, 2003, review of *The Truth about Celia*, p. 622; December 1, 2005, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 1243; January 15, 2006, review of *Grooves*, p. 82.

Kliatt, November, 2006, Mary Purucker, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 42.

Library Journal, February 15, 2006, Barbara Hoffert, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 106.

Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy, April, 2006, Charles de Lint, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 33.

New Statesman, March 27, 2006, Alex Larman, "End of the World as We Know It," p. 54.

Publishers Weekly, January 14, 2002, review of *Things that Fall from the Sky*, p. 37; May 27, 2002, review of *City of Names*, p. 60; June 30, 2003, review of *The Truth about Celia*, p. 56; December 19, 2005, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 38.

School Library Journal, July, 2002, Elaine E. Knight, review of *City of Names*, p. 113; March, 2006, Walter Minkel, review of *Grooves*, p. 218; July, 2006, Matthew L. Moffett, review of *The Brief History of the Dead*, p. 132.

Washington Post Book World, April 2, 2006, Andrew Sean Greer, "Soul Survivor," p. 13.

Online:

Del Sol Literary Dialogues, http://www.webdelsol.com/Literary_Dialogues/ (January 8, 2007), Mary McMyne, interview with Brockmeier.

Earth Goat, <http://earthgoat.blogspot.com/> (April 3, 2006), interview with Brockmeier.

Interstitial Arts Foundation Web site, <http://www.interstitialarts.org/> (January 8, 2007), "Kevin Brockmeier."

Powells.com, <http://www.powells.com/> (January 8, 2007), interview with Brockmeier.

Random House Web site, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (January 8, 2007), "Kevin Brockmeier."*

Source:† Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Source Database:† Contemporary Authors Online



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Spotlight on: *The Brief History of the Dead*

Reviews:

Booklist Reviews: January 15, 2006

The fictional metropolis known as "The City" has two requirements for residence: citizens must be recently deceased, and they must "exist" in the memory of at least one living soul. Among The City's inhabitants are a nervous newspaperman, a homeless prophet, and an elderly married couple falling in love for the second time. Brockmeier's uneven novel oscillates between this world and the real one, specifically Antarctica, where Coca-Cola scientist Laura Byrd is stranded with failing equipment and dwindling supplies. Braving the arctic tundra, she eventually comes upon a research station only to discover that her colleagues—and much of the world, for that matter—have succumbed to a deadly virus distributed through the company's namesake soft drink. Three-time O. Henry Prize winner Brockmeier (*The Truth about Celia*, 2003) cleverly reveals the relationships between his characters, but he spends too much time on earthbound Laura (whose proximity to death unleashes a flood of maudlin memories) and not enough on the eerie and infinitely more interesting afterworld. Although it never quite lives up to its promising premise, the novel's Borges-like spirit will appeal to select readers. ((Reviewed January 1 & 15, 2006)) Copyright 2006 *Booklist* Reviews.

Library Journal Reviews: February 15, 2006

Inhabitants of the City eat at Jim's sandwich shop and read Luka Sims's mimeographed News & Speculation Sheet—never mind that they are all deceased. They've made the crossing—each person's is uniquely beautiful—and they don't know what happens next. People do disappear, and it is surmised that you remain in the City as long as you remain in the memory of someone left behind. Hence the concern when people start vanishing in droves; evidently, a horrendous virus called the blinks has hit Earth (perhaps with some help from the Coca-Cola Corporation). Marion and Philip Byrd remain in the City, however, as do others who recall their daughter, Laura; she's stuck alone at a research station in the Antarctic and eventually launches on an arduous trek back to a civilization she does not yet realize is virtually wiped out. Even more painful than watching her struggle is realizing that she's going back to nothing : what's the point if there is no one with whom to share? Beautifully written and brilliantly realized, this imaginative work from the author of *The Truth About Celia* delivers a startling sense of what it really means to be alive. Highly recommended. —Barbara Hoffert, *Library Journal* [Page 106]. Copyright 2006 Reed Business Information.

School Library Journal Reviews: July 2006

Adult/High School -In a not-so-distant future, a deadly virus kills off every human on Earth, except for Laura Byrd, a wildlife specialist on an expedition to the South Pole. Readers quickly learn that the dead move on to another life in a fantastic city on another plane of existence; there, they live out a second life free from aging and disease until every person who knew them on Earth dies. The chapters alternate between Laura and those in the city of the dead, often showing how these individuals connect to her. The elegiac, thoughtful tone of the writing is balanced by the survivor's adventure-filled travels across the frozen landscape as she hopelessly searches for signs of others. A crisis develops in the city as the only ones who remain finally realize that they continue to exist because Laura is still fighting for her life on Earth. Brockmeier's style-elements of fantasy mixed with a strong sense of character and a wonderful lyricism-will remind readers of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (Random, 2004). Although lacking some of the far-reaching depth of Mitchell's work, Brockmeier's haunting reminder of how connected people are to one another will appeal to readers of fantasy yearning for a bit more to think about than the usual fare offers. —Matthew L. Moffett, Ford's Theatre Society, Washington, DC [Page 132]. Copyright 2006 Reed Business Information.



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Spotlight on: *The Brief History of the Dead*

Reviews: (continued)

BookPage Reviews: February 2006

How many people could you remember, if you sat down and tried to make a list? We're not just talking about folks you know well, but anyone whose face you can conjure up, your mail carrier, that girl at the coffee shop, an old teacher. In Kevin Brockmeier's new novel, an ever-shifting city of the dead is populated by the souls of those who have died but are still remembered by the living. These folks hang around in an afterlife that's pretty much like regular life, reading, eating, working, possibly changing but never aging, until the last person who remembers them dies. Then they vanish. It's a city built on memory, and memory makes a fragile building block.

The city's already impermanent population is threatened when, back in the living world, a bio-engineered virus starts to spread. Journalist Luka Sims, who runs the dead city's only newspaper, hears and publishes the early reports of the plague from new arrivals. With incredible speed, the virus kills millions. Wave after wave of the dead arrive in the city only to vanish hours later. Before long, Luka finds himself without a single reader, apparently alone in a desolate city.

Meanwhile, back in the living world, Laura Byrd is on a research expedition in the Antarctic. When the radio dies, her two partners venture out to the nearest research station in an effort to contact headquarters. When they fail to return and Laura's supplies start running low, she has no choice but to go after them. Her epic journey across the frozen landscape and, simultaneously, through her own memories, is utterly gripping and beyond suspenseful.

This novel began life as a short story in *The New Yorker*, and a feature film based on that story is said to be in the works. But Brockmeier's tale is so vividly imagined that filming it seems almost superfluous. He writes with cinematic clarity but never sacrifices one speck of mystery. The book may serve as an indictment of such contemporary threats as biological weapons and unfettered corporate power, but it's also simply a beautiful story. If there's one key lesson here, it is that all actions have consequences and people can leave indelible impressions. Kevin Brockmeier certainly has.

Becky Ohlsen writes from the living city of Portland, Oregon. Copyright 2006 *BookPage* Reviews.

Kirkus Reviews: December 1, 2005

What if those enjoying the afterlife require for their continuing existence being remembered by Earthlings? And then a pandemic virus called "The Blinks" kills off everyone but an isolated researcher in Antarctica who is forced by an accident to make two heroic treks to save herself, and her dear departed, though she doesn't know that. In alternating chapters, Brockmeier (*Things That Fall from the Sky*, 2002, etc.) describes life after death as a retro city where people don't change and tells the harrowing tale of plucky, 30-something Laura Byrd. Since the afterlife, as depicted here, is never believable (the denizens show little stress about their temporary status), the stakes of Laura's sledding aren't what Brockmeier hopes. Set in a future riven by planetary wars, global heating and the extinction of other mammals, the book wants to be an allegory of saving interdependence, what Emerson called, each and all, but not even the story's halves mesh. The highly detailed polar chapters seem composed for their own cinematic sake. And the newly united dead, Laura's parents, an old lover, an executive she worked for, a religious fanatic, people casually known, are too briefly sketched and allowed too little freedom to elicit much engagement. In this speculative fiction, perhaps the most interesting element to wonder about is how Brockmeier will get away with blaming Coca-Cola for causing the pandemic. After a charming first chapter that imagines highly individual "crossings" to the other side, a novelistic virus called "The Flicks" debilitates the rest. Copyright *Kirkus* 2005 *Kirkus*/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.



Reading Group Guide (3)

Spotlight on: *The Brief History of the Dead*

Summary:

The City is not unlike those on earth: it has parks and streets, stores and restaurants, garbage and homelessness—all of the pleasures and problems of modern life. This City, however, is inhabited by the recently departed, who reside there only as long as they remain in the memories of the living. Among the current residents of this afterlife are Luka Sims, who prints the only newspaper in the City, with news from the other side; Coleman Kinzler, a vagrant who speaks the cautionary words of God; and Marion and Phillip Byrd, who find themselves falling in love again after decades of marriage.

On earth, Laura Byrd is trapped by extreme weather in an Antarctic research station. She's alone and unable to contact the outside world: her radio is down and the power is failing. She's running out of supplies as quickly as she's running out of time. Kevin Brockmeier interweaves these two stories in a spellbinding tale of human connection, self-preservation, and the future of mankind. *The Brief History of the Dead* is the work of a remarkably gifted writer.

Discussion Questions:

1. *The Brief History of the Dead* is prefaced with a quote describing African societies that believe humans pass from being alive to living-dead, to dead. How does the author explore this idea throughout the novel?
2. The novel begins with a description of crossings to the city of the dead. What sense do you get of the city from the first chapter? What is the emotion created by opening with varied stories of the crossings, and particularly with the first story of the blind man? What is the significance of beginning and ending with the blind man, and how are he and Laura connected or separate from each other in their relationship to their respective worlds?
3. "The stories people told about the crossing were as varied and elaborate as their ten billion lives, so much more particular than those other stories, the ones they told about their deaths." For many of the characters, telling the stories of their "crossing" is essential to their sense of self in the city of the dead. What are some of the different crossings like, and how does each character tell their story? What does the importance of these stories suggest about a transition from the world of the living to the city? Why are some people, like the blind man, unable to let go of their story?
4. "The city was not heaven, and it was not hell, and it was certainly not the world." How does the city operate and expand or contract? What is the thumping noise and how does it affect the characters? How is the city different from the world of the living, both in physical and emotional ways?
5. When Marion wonders what it means to exist in the city, Phillip replies that "the only thing we can do is stop asking impossible questions and just make the best of it." How do the different characters respond to their new lives in the city? What does it mean that some, like Bristow, take advantage of their situation and play a new role; in his case, switching from tollbooth operator to restaurant owner? Had dying changed Marion in the same way it changed Bristow? Or Phillip? What sort of stereotypes about dying does Brockmeier explore through his characters' rebirths in the city?
6. Much of *The Brief History of the Dead* is structured around memory and its role in Laura's survival and in the lives of those in the city. Are the memories of the living and the living-dead different? How do they function in the characters' lives, and do they change how each character experiences the world he or she exists in? What do you imagine the author is suggesting about the role of memory and the role of storytelling?



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Spotlight on: *The Brief History of the Dead*

7. In many ways, Luka is the voice of the city of the dead. What does his character suggest about the role of the media in creating a world?
8. “How many people was any one human being likely to remember?” Puckett asks himself. Marion feels that the city is comprised of “hundreds of faces she could not quite place but was sure that she had seen somewhere before.” What does the existence of the city of the dead suggest about the depth of everyday interactions? Laura believes that she is “no one special....When she died, there would be no one to remember her.” How does the author explore the clichés of remembering the dead? What does Laura’s remembered world look like? Does the strength of her memory affect the presence those in the city of the dead?
9. Minna creates her place in the world and in relationships by asking questions. “Which do you like better, the idea of the past or the idea of the future?” and “What do you think is better, this world or the other?” How does Luka respond to her questions? How might Marion respond? Coleman? The blind man?
10. How does *The Brief History of the Dead* address the idea of guilt? What is the role of Lindell Trimble in the book? What does it mean that, “To his last breath Lindell would continue to deny any responsibility for what happened.” Why does the author create the absurd scene of Lindell with his trash can, making his lonely way through the snow?
11. Discuss the role of faith in the book. “But for every person who lost his faith, there was someone who held fast to it, and someone else again who adopted it.” What is the meaning of the man who dies holding a red and blue envelope, and picks the wrong one? What does this story, the crossing stories, and the popularity of the Sims Sheet in times of change suggest about the characters deep need to know what will happen and has happened. Is there a difference in characters’ need for knowledge? What is the role of Coleman Kinzler and his signs?
12. “At some point...you had to determine whether you were going to be the sort of person who held tight to every single thing that passed through your life, no matter how insignificant, or the sort of person who sets it all adrift.” Laura thinks of herself as the kind who won’t let go. Luka describes himself as someone who exists on the peripheries, an observer and not a participant. What effects might their different perspectives have on the kind of world their lives would create? How does the book explore ideas about living in the present and participating in life?
13. In many ways, the end of *The Brief History of the Dead* functions as the opening to new world of stories. What do you think comes after the city of the dead?

Review from Salon.com

Spotlight on: *The Brief History of the Dead*

Review: *The Brief History of the Dead* by Laura Miller

Feb. 13, 2006 | Kevin Brockmeier's second novel is both eerie and intimate, as befits a book whose first chapter appeared in both "The O'Henry Prize Stories" and "The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror." It begins in a city, or, rather "the city," a metropolis not unlike New York (it has a river, a subway and a Christopher Street) but that has no discernible boundaries—in fact, it seems to go on forever. The people who inhabit the city work in diners, banks and jewelry shops; there's even a modest newspaper. They drink coffee, drive garbage trucks and play mah-jongg. Everything about them is ordinary except for the countless different hallucinatory ways they got to the city: by crossing a "desert of living sand," riding a trolley through a forest of giraffes, and falling into an "ocean the color of dried cherries." Everyone in the city is well aware of the fact that they are dead.

The city and its residents make up one strand of Brockmeier's story. The other concerns Laura Byrd, a "wildlife specialist" employed by the Coca Cola Corp. in a near future where whales, gorillas and elephants are extinct and the polar ice caps have begun to melt. We only gradually discover the differences between Laura's time and our own because her strand of the novel takes place in Antarctica, where Laura—along with a couple of guys who carry on like a latter-day Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—has been stationed on a somewhat bogus research expedition. A few weeks into their stint, communications with the outside world get cut off and the supply helicopter doesn't show, so the two guys head off for another station to seek help, leaving Laura alone.

Then we're back to the city again, where recent arrivals, materializing in hordes, talk about an epidemic sweeping the planet. And then the population of the city begins to thin out drastically. The remaining inhabitants gather together in one neighborhood and contemplate the theory that their city is an intermediate zone and that they "would remain there only so long as they endured in living memory." Huge chunks of the city vanish, "in one case, a weedy, half-dead golf course stretched over what ought to have been—but was not—four city blocks named for the great cities of Southern Africa: Kinshasa, Nairobi, Lusaka and Johannesburg?

Once the survivors compare notes, they realize that most of them remember some connection to a single person—Laura Byrd. Though dead, they get a second chance, of sorts, with life. Laura's childhood best friend falls in love with one of her college professors; a computer programmer acquires a newfound appreciation for tiny fragments of memory that he suspects are "where the true meaning of his life's burden lay." Laura's parents, who have drifted apart, begin holding hands in restaurants again.

This is one novel that gives a whole new meaning to the saying "the living will envy the dead." While her loved ones and acquaintances savor the city's normality, Laura embarks on a grueling polar adventure involving a motorized sledge and temperatures so low she has to assume a sledging position the moment she leaves her heated tent since her clothes will freeze in that configuration. The story from then on is fairly simple, but it's the mood and Brockmeier's unostentatious reverence for life's details (of primary interest to both the struggling Laura and the idling dead, if for different reasons) that make *The Brief History of the Dead* so entrancing.

Most literary fiction is full of characters' random thoughts, offered to the reader as quirky nuggets of sub-essayistic insight. When Brockmeier does this—as in a tour de force scene in which Laura begins to succumb to the cold—the musings are genuinely disorienting and beautiful, even revelatory. Striding through the figment of a skyscraper where she once worked, Laura thinks, "It was hard for her to believe that she had spent so much of her life in this building, or in other buildings just like it, walking around inside rooms that were thirty or forty feet above the earth, whose walls and floors and ceilings had been constructed around spaces where no human being had ever set foot just a few years before."



Review from Salon.com (2)

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The (downplayed) implication of such moments is that Laura's world, with its fantastical appropriation of midair space for the peddling of fizzy sugar water, has always been improbable and doomed. And so, by extension, is the city, so utterly dependent on the last, miserable human being on earth. The two narratives converge with a pristine loneliness and a forlorn wondering about what lies beyond, past the borders of the city and beyond the reach of living memory.

—By Laura Miller