



Book club 20: Family & identity

The Seventh Son
by Sebastian Faulks

Rules

In this book club you will discuss *The Seventh Son* by Sebastian Faulks in a group of 4-6 readers. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds:

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 questions about the plot. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of asking and answering questions each of you have about the book/story: in turn, the players say what they did not understand about the book and try to find an answer together. When the biggest confusions are solved, round 3 starts.
- 3 Round 3 consists of discussion questions. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions from round 1 gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is when you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teacher's guide and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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The Seventh Son

Introduction

“I suppose the main finding is this,” said Wood, putting down his cup with a rattle. “The thing we thought defined modern humans – us – was in fact available to other creatures. Neanderthals had a consciousness very much like ours, and in some ways superior. I think we will be able to show one day that there were several levels. Or perhaps flavours, of human consciousness.”

Talissa Adams, a young researcher from New York City, agrees to be a surrogate mother for a British couple. Her motives are simple: she needs money. In return for carrying their baby, she receives a large fee, enabling her to pursue an academic career in palaeoanthropology. But Talissa doesn't know that by agreeing to the pregnancy, she herself becomes an object of research. Years later she discovers that the boy she carried is a hybrid between a human and a Neanderthal, born out of a human egg and Neanderthal sperm reconstructed with experimental DNA technology. When the secret comes out and media start publishing stories about Seth, 'the hybrid', both Talissa and Seth realise they will be chased for the rest of their lives.

In this book club you are invited to discuss the ethical dilemma's addressed by Sebastian Faulks' *The Seventh Son*. Would it be a good idea to bring extinct human species back to life for the sake of science? And what can we learn from this scientific experiment about the distinctions between different groups of people, or even different species, in our society?

Round 1: Quiz

Turn over the 5 cards with quiz questions one by one. Write down the answer on a piece of paper.

Round 2: Initial questions

What questions popped into your head while reading *The Seventh Son*? Were there any parts that left you confused or wondering? Take turns sharing your questions about the story and try to come up with answers together. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Round 3: Discussion

The player with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to turn over a card first from one of the two piles of discussion questions. Once they have answered the question, the other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Review

Review *The Seventh Son* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

What happens to Felix, Talissa's ex-boyfriend?

Question 2

What are the character traits that distinguish Seth from (other) human beings?

Question 3

How does Talissa discover that Seth is an extraordinary boy?

Question 4

Who are Mary and Alaric?

Question 5

Who is Lucas Parn?

Answers

1. He becomes psychotic and ends up in a mental health institution.
2. He is unable to make plans, he is insensitive to danger and he has an extra sense.
3. She orders a DNA test based on one of his hairs.
4. Mary and Alaric are Seth's biological parents.
5. Lucas Parn is the billionaire who funded the research project leading to the birth of Seth.



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? 1

What did you know about human species other than *Homo sapiens* before you had read *The Seventh Son*? What is the most important thing you learned from the novel about the evolution of human beings?

Personal connections? 2

Would you be willing to carry someone else's baby (if you were able to), for example because you could help them or because you got paid for it? Why (not)?

Personal connections? 3

Talissa is willing to do a lot for her career, even if that means she has to carry someone else's baby for nine months. Do you feel similarly ambitious about anything in your life? How far would you go to pursue your goals?

Personal connections? 4

Do you think it should be legal to create hybrid humans if that were scientifically possible? What would be the benefits and the risks?

Personal connections? 5

In the novel, there is a lot of discussion about the legal status of a hybrid human like Seth. Would you say that someone like Seth should have the same rights as any other human? Consider also the character traits that seem to be a result of Seth's Neanderthal genes.

Personal connections? 6

The discussions in the novel about Seth's identity as a hybrid human are essentially about the role of genes in shaping our individual identities. Could you give an example of how your genes influence who you are?

Personal connections? 7

There have been several cases in the Netherlands where medical professionals deliberately replaced sperm samples during IVF treatments, sometimes using their own. Could you explain, based on your reading of *The Seventh Son*, how this could affect the child in question, if they discover that they were born from a different father?

Personal connections? 8

The novel addresses the philosophical consequences of creating hybrid human beings. It questions the grounds on which our society distinguishes between people of different skin colours or backgrounds, or even between different species. Explain what the consequences of creating human hybrids could be for relationships between human beings or between humans and animals.



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4

Personal connections?

8

Personal connections?

7



Food for thought? 1

The Parn Institute breaks several ethical rules by secretly replacing Alaric's sperm with that of a Neanderthal. Which ethical rules would that be? Try to be as specific as possible.

Food for thought? 2

Discuss how each person involved in the IVF process (Seth, Alaric, Mary and Talissa) is affected in their own way by the illegal experiment to create a hybrid human being.

Food for thought? 3

It is crystal clear why fertilising a woman with Neanderthal semen is unethical for medical and moral reasons. Lucas Parn would argue that the experiment had to be carried out nonetheless because its scientific value was more important than the personal consequences of the people involved. How would you describe that scientific value, and do you agree with Parn? Why (not)?

Food for thought? 4

How would you describe Seth's character? Do you think that his unusual character traits are unique for a hybrid human-Neanderthal, or could they occur in any (other) human being as well?

Food for thought? 5

The narrator allows you to view the story both from Talissa's and Seth's perspective. Do you feel that you get to know the two characters equally well? Is there anything about their character or behaviour you do not understand? Explain your answer.

Food for thought? 6

Read the quote from the introduction of this book club. What are the main differences between the consciousness of Homo sapiens and that of Neanderthals, according to the novel?

Food for thought? 7

Do you understand why Talissa feels sexually attracted to Seth? Why do you think it is significant for the novel that they eventually sleep together?

Food for thought? 8

The novel suggests that mental disorders such as psychosis or dementia first occurred after the emergence of the intelligent Homo sapiens. The Parn Institute even claims that research into human hybrids can help develop treatments for such disorders. Explain Talissa's complicated position regarding this claim, given her relationships with Felix and Seth.



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

6

Food for thought?

5

Food for thought?

4

Food for thought?

8

Food for thought?

7