

THE GEOGRAPHY OF MADNESS

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Reading Group Guide

1. One main theme of *The Geography of Madness* is that stories (about the world, about our lives, about our bodies) are contagious. Can you think of a story, or an experience, that changed what you believed was possible?
2. Do you believe the brain and the mind are the same thing? If not, what is the difference?
3. The stories in *The Geography of Madness* raise the question of free will: How much do you choose the life you live? How much do you learn (or catch) your life choices from those around you?
4. Have you ever found yourself immersed in a situation where you did not know the rules? What was that like?
- 5) In *The Geography of Madness*, the author argues that our mindsets and our expectations have biological consequences. Does that resemble your experience? If so, how?
[Further reading: On the Body as Machine.
<http://undark.org/article/mind-machine-medicine-militaristic-healthcare/>]
- 6) Try to imagine living in a world where it was possible to have your genitals stolen, either by magic or by ghosts. How would you protect yourself?
- 7) In *The Geography of Madness*, the author argues that a strong sense of self—of your story— can help to activate your endogenous (internal) healing systems and vice versa. Do you remember a time when a stressful or difficult period seemed to be followed by a

health problem or sickness?

[Further reading: *Writing the Self*

https://www.pw.org/content/writing_the_self_some_thoughts_on_words_and_woe]

8) In *The Geography of Madness*, did anyone's genital actually disappear? If not, what happened? Does it matter?

9) Is there a belief that everyone around you holds, but that you don't share? How did you come to doubt this?

10) *The Handbook of Depression* points to a genetic marker associated with greater vulnerability to depression. Yet this link proves real only in Western cultures. Why would that be?

11) Have you ever had a health problem you were afraid to talk about, or that others didn't believe in?

12) In *The Geography of Madness*, the author argues that cultural syndromes are "real" syndromes, but that their causes might not lie where we think they do. Do you think they are "real" or "imaginary"?

13) Over the last few years, gluten intolerance has been rising. This rise occurs at a time of increasing anxiety about the relationship between food, health and identity. What's changed: our bodies or our culture?

14) After reading *The Geography of Madness*, how would you describe what culture is?

15) How much does a your culture create you? How much do you create your culture?

16) Have you ever had a cultural syndrome?

