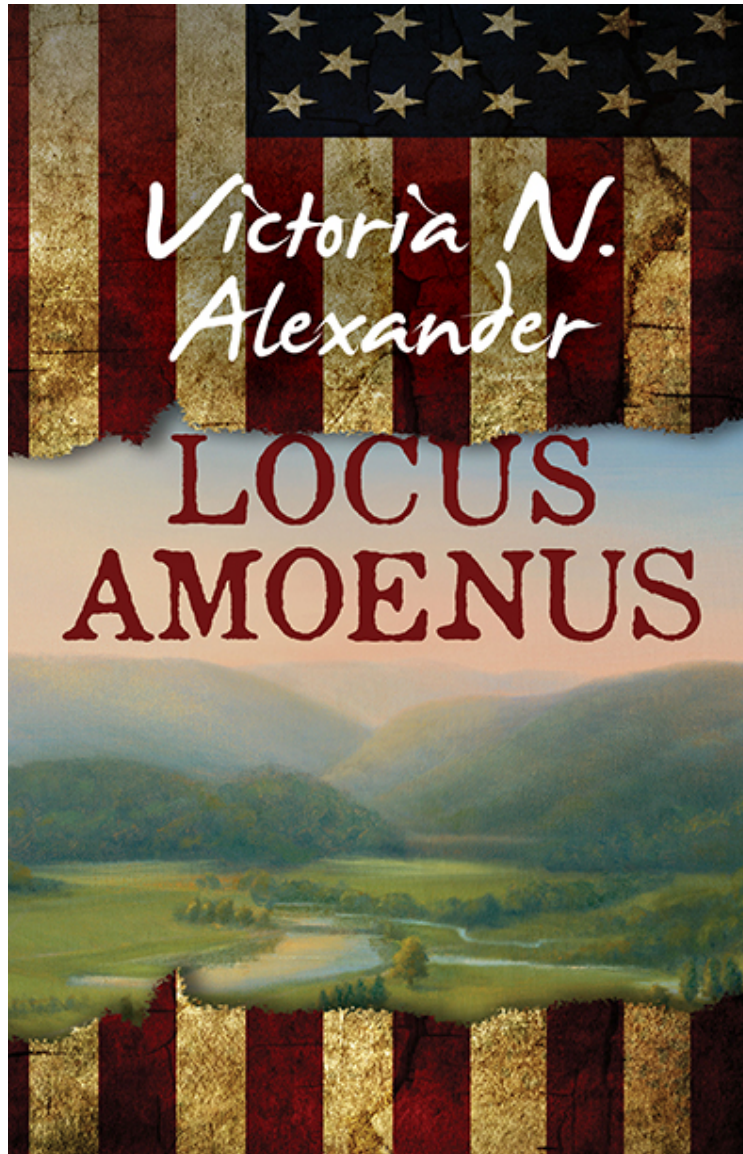


Locus Amoenus

Reading Group Guide



In this dark comedy, a 9/11 widow and her son, Hamlet, try to run a sustainable farm while their neighbors prefer the starchy products of industrial agriculture. Hamlet, now eighteen, suspects that something is rotten in the United States, where health, happiness, and freedom are traded for cheap Walmart goods, Paxil, endless war, standard curriculum, and environmental degradation. Then, on the 8th anniversary of his father's death, Hamlet's mother marries a bureaucrat named Claudius, and Horatio, a conspiracy theorist, arrives to tell him Claudius is a fraud. The deceptions, spying, and corruption ultimately lead, as in Shakespeare's play, to tragedy. Though Alexander's novella presents a dystopian scene, readers will laugh out loud at the familiar absurdity of life in America and will relish the lyrical and clever writing that makes Shakespeare's themes contemporary.

Selected Reviews

A clever and engaging novel...Alexander has a free-spirited style that entertains on every page. -*Likely Stories Book Review*, KWBU Heart of Texas Public Radio

Locus Amoenus uses hilarity and conspiracy theories to present the tragicomedy of a contemporary America that is beyond belief. An important contribution to contemporary American fiction. -William Irwin Thompson, *Wild River Review*

This is Hamlet reimagined as a truther. The protagonist isn't just feigning madness--he's genuinely losing his mind. -*Kirkus*

A satirical examination of how we live in the 21st century, in the United States of America, with less civilization and more discontents than hitherto. I haven't laughed this well while reading in a long time. -Josip Novakovich, author of *Shopping for a Better Country*, Man Booker Prize finalist

Alexander brings Shakespeare into the post-9/11 world we currently experience and sows an emotionally powerful geopolitical drama. -WBAI radio NYC

Locus Amoenus is, above all, a mean book...That said, I don't dare deny Alexander's technical skills. She has a gift for prose that makes the book remarkable in some respects, language that begs to be read aloud at times just to revel in the feel of it. And the book's conclusion, particularly the final pages, are phenomenal. I reread those last pages more than once, laughing giddily at the audacity, at the perfect marriage of theme and execution contained within. -*Luxury Reading*

The most stark divisions in America may spring not from political, ethnic or racial backgrounds but from informational sources and a currently prevailing chasm between American cultural lifestyles. This is a theme explored in the darkly humorous novel. -*Woodstock Times*

Alexander manages to do the three things that Nabokov says a good novelist must do: tell a story, inform, and enchant. –Dorion Sagan, author of *The Cosmic Apprentice*

Discussion Questions

1. Is *Locus Amoenus* a dark comedy? Or is it a tragedy? Or a thriller?
2. Did you have any preconceived ideas about the characters whose names correspond with Shakespeare's characters? What effect did this have on your reading?
3. Do some of the Amenia townspeople seem more like caricatures than fleshed out characters? Why is this?
4. In a "coming of age" novel, a young person perceives hypocrisy in the adult world and learns to cope. In a dystopian novel, a young person identifies oppressive elements in society and tries to escape. How does *Locus Amoenus* fit or not fit into these genres?
5. Is Hamlet feigning madness, or has he really gone mad?
6. *Locus Amoenus* is a literary term that means "pleasant local," a pastoral setting where nothing bad can ever happen, but which, ironically, is often the scene of a terrible crime. What is the function of the pastoral elements in this narrative? For example, Hamlet keeps sheep; Hamlet, as an interloping narrator, sometimes uses ironic, elevated diction compared to the locals, and Hamlet and Gertrude are disappointed that country life has many of the same problems of city life: junk food, junk entertainment, and political corruption.
7. Alexander has noted that she got the "voice" for her Hamlet from David Tennant, who plays the manic, glib Hamlet in the 2009 Royal Shakespeare Company production, as well as the tenth doctor in the popular BBC television show *Dr Who*. Do you see Hamlet as manic and glib? Or do you see Hamlet as depressed and somber?
8. What matters most to Hamlet in this narrative? Getting rid of Claudius, understanding and coming to terms with his father's death, or political issues?
9. What about questions of gender? Has Alexander represented a young man's perspective convincingly? What do Hamlet's cross-dressing and Horatio's homosexuality add to the story? How do you feel about Gertrude and Ophelia? To what extent are they strong female characters? To what extent are they passive?
10. How does the regicide theme in Shakespeare's play fit (or not fit) with the theme of conspiracy theory?

11. How should the reader interpret the ending of Hamlet's narrative versus the coda?
Why did the author end the novel from a different perspective?