



The Mark

FRÍÐA ÍSBERG

About the author

Fríða Ísberg is an Icelandic author based in Reykjavík. She has written the poetry collections *Stretch Marks* and *Leather Jacket Weather*, the short story collection *Itch* and the novel *The Mark*, which won the Fjara Literature Prize, the Icelandic Booksellers Award, and the P.O. Enquist Award. She was the 2021 recipient of the Optimist Award, given by the President of Iceland to one national artist. Fríða is a member of the writers' collective Svíkaskáld and an occasional contributor to *The Times Literary Supplement*. Her work has been or is to be translated into nineteen languages.

About the book

In the near future, in Reykjavik, in a world like our own, society is divided about the controversial Empathy Test, which measures an individual's capacity for compassion and identifies anti-social behaviour in citizens. Two thirds of the country, including public servants and politicians, have undergone the test, and 'marked' themselves in an official register, open to the public. One third remains 'unmarked' and more and more private and public spaces are closing their doors to them. In two months' time, citizens face a national referendum, in which they will vote on whether the test should be mandatory or not.

Amid the rising tension and via the voices of four compelling characters—the sceptical teacher Vetur, the influential psychologist Óli, the businesswoman Eyja, who fails the test, and the school dropout Tristan, who is fighting for the right not to be tested—we are confronted with

urgent ethical dilemmas, prejudice, injustice, and private trauma. The suspense intensifies as these four individuals try to navigate a brave new world. The rules of the game have changed. What are the consequences?

Discussion questions

1. Language and semantics play a big role in *The Mark*. How are words used as weapons to keep this society in line?
2. Vetur, the schoolteacher, looks down on those who fail the empathy test, though she tries not to. Discuss her anxieties.
3. How is technology used in this world to promote suspicion between the marked and unmarked?
4. Letters between Tea and Laíla appear throughout the novel. What do these letters tell you about their friendship?
5. Discuss the character of Tristan. How has the marking mandate affected his life?
6. "‘He doesn't define you!' says Vetur. 'You're safe! You got a second chance! And here you sit, empty-handed, waiting for you and your daughter to be kicked out!'" (p202). Why do you think Vetur is incapable of extending empathy to those 'unmarked' in a similar situation to hers?
7. Polarisation and the creep of radical politics is referenced throughout the novel. What do you think Ísberg is trying to tell the reader?
8. Eyja's ex-husband Breki says she 'tends to lie about people who give up on her.' (p221).



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Discuss the way the interactions between Eyja and Breki change your understanding of Eyja's story.

9. How far into the future do you think this novel is set? Do you think it could be construed as a warning?
10. 'Óli says he feels for the boy...he understands the boy, in a way. But understanding someone isn't the same as helping them' (p260). Discuss this idea. What is the author trying to tell us about the empathy experiment?