

HALLEY'S COMET

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

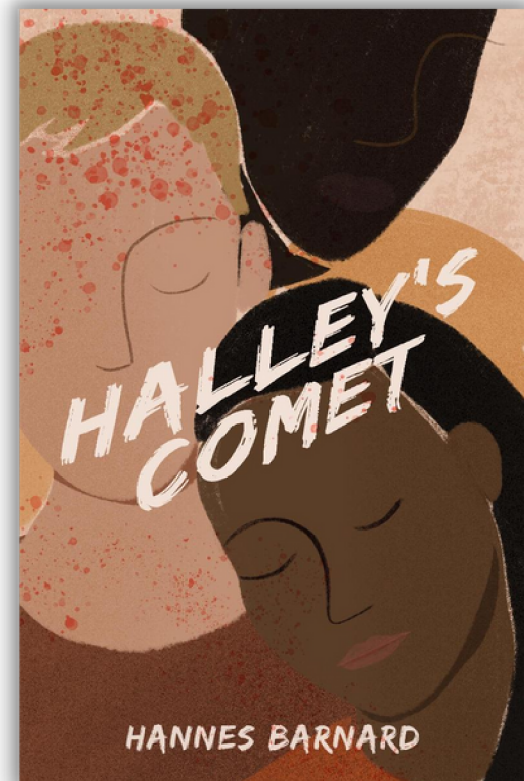
COVER

Discuss the cover of the book: Do you think it accurately depicts the story? And what does the cover tell you?

Research: Do an online search of the covers used for Halley's Comet in South Africa, both the English and Afrikaans versions.

Discuss the differences in the covers and what this tells you.

Author's note: It's not often that you have three covers for your book. I love all three. Each for different reasons. They all reveal something about the story and evoke different feelings. I must admit, that when I saw the international (Catalyst Press) cover for the first time, I was in awe. Emotional even. It's art and captures so much in one image.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Research: Compare Apartheid to racial segregation in the USA pre-1960.

Compare South Africa's liberation struggle to the civil rights movement in the USA.

What did you not know about the era that you know now after reading Halley's Comet?

Explain The Group Areas Act.

Author's note: I love history. I believe in the power of history. Not just what happened a hundred years ago, but also what happened last week. We get to reflect, look at the same thing from a new (more experienced) perspective. My hope is that we won't make the same mistakes twice, even though we mostly do. History has a tendency of repeating itself, that is why it is important to know history. Perhaps a better collective understanding of the past will result in instances where (bad) history, doesn't repeat itself. I chose to write about this period in South Africa's history because I wanted to better understand where I come from, and where South Africa comes from. And, although young, I was alive and aware of the world in 1986, therefore that 'known' context gave me the perfect base to explore. It was such a tumultuous time in South Africa, a time when it was 'normal' to look under your family car for a car bomb after you went to the shops. When it was 'normal' that people were segregated in all aspects of life based on the color of their skin.

HALLEY'S COMET

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE SETTING

Why do you think the author used Dannhauser, a small town in rural South Africa, as the setting? Would a big city such as Johannesburg, Cape Town or Durban not have been more appropriate?

How would you describe life in Dannhauser?

What role does the setting play in this story?

There are a few settings in the book. Besides Dannhauser and Dundee, which setting plays the most important part in Pete's "coming-of-age"? Explain your answer.

Author's note: I grew up in Dannhauser. It's not a made-up place! I used it because I knew it intimately, and I knew what it was like in 1986. We lived such a sheltered life, far away from the protests and violence, but also, not really. The car bomb attack in Newcastle is based on my own experience. It was this peculiar paradox of living a sheltered life whilst being periodically exposed to the terrible things. I also thought Dannhauser would be the perfect setting for this story as the color lines were slightly murkier than in larger towns and cities. Don't get me wrong, it was still there, but I suppose that only exacerbates how bad it was in many other places.

THEMES

Why do you think the author decided to use *Halley's Comet* as the title? What is the significance of the comet?

If you had to choose an alternative title, what would it be?

What are the main themes in *Halley's Comet*?

How is race relations depicted in this story?

Explain what message Pete, Petrus and Sarita wanted to bring across with their play at the concert.

Discuss the moral ambiguity of government minister, Geevert van Wyk.

Discuss 'hope' as a theme.

*Author's note: I very much doubt that there are many authors out there who set out to write about specific themes. I didn't. I had a story that begged to get out. When I look at it now, I see themes. One obvious one is the title of the story as metaphor. I did see *Halley's Comet* in 1986. I saw it in the Drakensburg, just like Pete did, albeit at a different spot in the mountains, a breathtakingly beautiful place called Injisuthi. The comet was a huge disappointment. I borrowed Pete's grandad's tale of the 1910 comet from my own grandad. It was a small homage to a great man who passed away when I was still very young.*

HALLEY'S COMET

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHARACTERS

What is the significance of using a regular teenager with little to no political opinions as the main protagonist?

Is Halley's Comet the coming-of-age story of Pete de Lange only, or are there other characters also 'coming of age' during the story? Discuss.

Does the term 'coming-of-age' always refer to growth, or can it refer to the regression of a character?

Consider Pete, Petrus, and Sarita. Name the similarities between these characters as well as their differences.

Who is your favorite character, and why?

Discuss Pete's dad, Rikus. Do you think he is a good or a bad role model for Pete? Argue your point.

Describe the dynamics and relationship between Pete and Christina within the political and societal context of the time.

How would you describe the relationship between Pete, Petrus, and Sarita?

Would you say there is a love triangle in this story? Explain your answer.

Contrast the two characters, Petrus and Barend.

Who is the antagonist this story, and is there more than one antagonist? Explain.

What does Rudie's character symbolize?

What does Pete's character symbolize?

Discuss the validity of Venny's motives. Do you consider his actions justifiable?

Author's Note: I have been asked whether I based Pete on myself. The answer is no. I did use events from my own life and made Pete relive it, but not many. The Newcastle bomb is one example. From all the characters, Rikus was the one that surprised me the most. Initially I thought he'd have a very small part to play; take Pete to rugby, have a few dad-like chats, mostly about sports, but he had other plans. In doing so he became one of my favorite characters. Someone once asked me how I came up with Rudie as a character. Without revealing too much, I can say he is (loosely) based on an actual person. The three, Pete, Petrus, and Sarita will always be very dear to me. They took me on an incredible journey for which I am very grateful.

HALLEY'S COMET

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE NARRATIVE

What would the story of Halley's Comet look like if it was set in the present day in your town or city?

Most likely, the world of Pete and the others in small town South Africa in 1986 is very different to the world you know now. What similarities are there? What aspects of the characters, their interactions and relationships can you identify with?

How is the story of Halley's Comet relevant today?

Did anything in the book shock you? Elaborate.

In your opinion, what is the intention of telling Pete's story and Venny's story?

Consider the following statement: 'Halley's Comet is a love story.' What is your opinion about this statement? Is it true, false, or neither? Explain your answer.

Consider Pete's relationships with Renate and Sarita. What are the differences and is this important to the story?

Do you consider this story to have a satisfactory ending, or not? Argue your point.

If you had to imagine where Pete and Petrus were now, where and what do you think they would be, and would they still be friends?

Author's note: From the very beginning I had a very clear picture of the ending of the story but had no idea where to begin. That is what makes writing so wonderful, in many ways you become a tool the story uses to get told. I hope you have read the book by the time you read this comment. Just in case, I'll try not to spoil too much. Believe me, I considered changing the ending a hundred times. Each time I tried to change it, it just wasn't right. Life doesn't always have fairy tale endings. Lastly, I want to thank you for reading my book. Of the books I have written (currently four published and three unpublished), Halley's Comet is the one closest to my heart. It drove me to tears at times, but writing it was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.