



LIKE WATER AND OTHER STORIES

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TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1** In her opening statement, the author claims that “the lines between the past, present, and future become blurred in the anxieties of moment-to-moment child care.” This is what literally happens in the opening story of the collection, “Rubicon,” when the narrator encounters a young man from her childhood, unchanged, and he hands her an audio tape. Can you point to other stories in the book that treat time as fluid? Do you relate to the connection the author makes between the destabilized sense of time and parenthood?
- 2** The author suggests that becoming a parent “turns one’s lived experience into a battleground for potential identities.” Do you think parenthood affects identity? Have you experienced something similar yourself, or have you observed this about your friends or family members?
- 3** Many of the characters in this collection don’t have names, while others do, including some characters of very short stories: Sonya and Debra Polk in “Graduate School,” Rose in “Rose’s Mother,” Jeanne in “Three Losses.” Who are the most memorable named characters? Unnamed? What considerations do you think have contributed to the author’s decision to leave her characters unnamed?
- 4** The author grew up in the Soviet Union and several stories, such as “My Mother at the Shooting Range,” “The Broken Violin,” and “Janik’s Score” deal specifically with the experience of Soviet childhood. What do you see as the particularities of these experiences? How do they compare and contrast with the experience of children in the United States?
- 5** Several stories, such as “Dandelion” and “Companionship,” veer from traditional realism into the fantastical. Do you think these moments impact the collection as a whole? What is the effect of placing stories of different genres next to each other?
- 6** The author is an exophonic writer: she grew up speaking Russian and learned English as an adult. Have you found any vestiges of Russian, intentional or unintentional in these stories? How would you characterize the writing style?
- 7** Several stories, including “Evasion,” “Graduate School,” and “Helen More’s Suicide” include characters taking their own lives. What are the causes of the characters’ despair? Do you think the author succeeds in addressing her characters’ choices with respect and a sense of wonder?
- 8** The settings of stories in this book jump from San Francisco to Hawaii to Moscow to New York and so on. Were some of these jumps disorienting? Which of the settings did you find most memorable, most intriguing?
- 9** The author often resists the traditional rules of punctuation in stories. For instance, she omits quotation marks in “A Wish,” omits commas in “Stroller Selection,” begins “Three Losses” with an extremely long sentence. How do you think these choices serve the stories?

- 10** Relationships between family members form the central conflict in several stories, from “Her Left Side” and “Janik’s Score” that feature grandparents and grandchildren to “Doctor Sveta” and “Cream and Sugar” in which grown children have to contend with their parents’ presence in their lives. Do you see any common themes in these stories, in the the way older and younger generations interact with each other?
- 11** Fear and anxiety are an underlying theme to many stories in this book. Some younger women fear pregnancy, fear infertility, fear pregnancy loss. Some women with children are anxious about their children’s health and emotional well-being. What are a few of the strategies the characters use to address or evade their fears? Did you find any of their ways of handling fear and anxiety to be culturally specific? Is there something to learn about these characters through their fears?
- 12** Heterosexual couples in “Rubicon,” “Infestation,” and “Blan-Manzhe with the Taste of Pears and Cream” cohabitate in this book alongside homosexual couples in “Legacy,” “Ambition,” and “A Bear’s Tune,” while other stories, including “Like Water” that gives its title to the collection, deal with the subject of ambivalent, or changing, desire. Do you feel these stories add to each other in ways that they represent complexities of human experiences and desires? Do you see a particularity in which the author addresses sexuality through the prism of her birth culture?
- 13** Children in this book often resist growing up. Such is the case with the little girl turning four in “A Wish” and the protagonist of “Ada at Twelve and Half.” Three-year old Michael in “Companionship” dislikes growing up so much he literally decides to return to his mother’s stomach. Do you remember feeling this way when you were young? Why do you think so many children in this collection process their age as a loss?
- 14** In addition to traditional narrative structures, the author uses more experimental art forms, including a prose poem, “Falling Violently Ill Beneath the Torrey Pines,” lists in “Computational Creativity” and “How to Deliver a Genius,” a cover letter in “Dear Yellow Pages,” stream of consciousness in “Practice a Relaxing Bedtime Ritual,” and sketches “Forty-five Minutes and Counting” and “B-.” Did you find some of these jarring? What do you think these experiments contribute to the collection?
- 15** Certain images and objects recur in this collection: an orange stroller in “Stroller Selection” and orange chair in “Companionship”; audio tapes in “Rubicon,” “We Were Geniuses,” and “Plastic Film with a Magnetic Coating”; girls’ braids in “My Mother at the Shooting Range,” “The Broken Violin,” and “My Sister’s Game”; mugs and cups of water in “There Will Be Dragons,” “Cream and Sugar,” and “Like Water.” What other recurring patterns have you noticed? What do you think is their function in the collection?
- 16** Throughout this book, the author references well-known authors and ideas that have influenced her characters. “Helen More’s Suicide” is overtly about feminism and is dedicated to the memory of Professor Carolyn Gold Heilbrun who wrote mysteries under the pseudonym Amanda Cross. In “The Swallow” several characters quote from Chekhov. In “Dear Yellow Pages,” the author mentions science fiction writers, including Karel Čapek and Ursula Le Guin. What authors and stories came to your mind when you were reading this collection? Did this book provide you an opportunity to reflect on any political or philosophical ideas?
- 17** The collection includes 52 pieces. Is that number too many, not enough? Do you recognize a certain narrative logic in the way the author has assembled the pieces? Would you have arranged them differently?
- 18** Which stories are most memorable for you? Why do you think that is? For example, were they relatable, surprising, poignant ...