

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Dervishes*

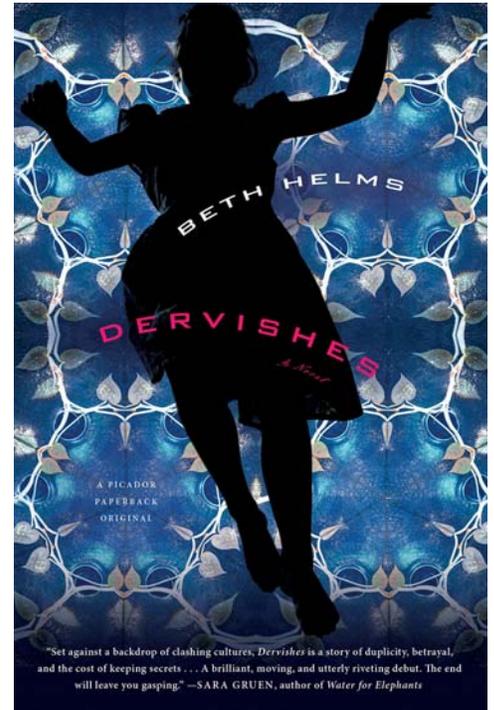
*A Novel*

*by Beth Helms*

*A Picador Paperback Original*

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-42619-4

ISBN-10: 0-312-42619-4



### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Dervishes* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Dervishes*.

### About the Book

When she is twelve years old, Canada moves with her mother and father to Ankara, Turkey, where her father has been stationed by the government. It is 1975--the Cold War is in full swing and tensions in the Middle East are escalating. But in Ankara's diplomatic community, the days are lazy and indulgent--one long cocktail party. While her father routinely disappears on official business, Canada and her mother, Grace, find themselves in the company of gossipy embassy wives and wealthy Turkish women, immersed in a routine of card games and afternoons at the baths. By the time summer comes, and the city's electricity shuts down from dawn to dusk, mother and daughter can no longer tolerate the insular society—or each other.

Alternating between their perspectives, *Dervishes* follows Canada and Grace as they set out into the larger city: Grace is drawn to the lover of her wealthy, manipulative Turkish friend; Canada competes with another girl for the attentions of an arrogant Turkish houseboy, one who knows all their mothers' secrets. Before long, both are in over their heads, and their transgressions threaten to strand them between the safe island of westerners and a strange city that guards its secrets fiercely.

Written with sensuousness and empathy, Beth Helms's debut is the story of a mother and daughter cut loose from their foundations, hungry for independence but dangerously naive.

## Praise for *Dervishes*

"Set against a backdrop of clashing cultures, *Dervishes* is a story of duplicity, betrayal, and the cost of keeping secrets. . . . A brilliant, moving, and utterly riveting debut. The end will leave you gasping."—Sara Gruen, author of *Water for Elephants*

"Not since Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* have I read a first novel so perfectly executed from start to finish, so evocative of place and time. Helms is a master."—Kate Walbert, author of *Our Kind* and *The Gardens of Kyoto*

"Mesmerizing . . . Elegant prose and exacting insight illuminate Helms's tale of intrigue and deception."—*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"What an elegant, wrenching storm of a novel! Beth Helms writes in crystalline, luminous prose that is reminiscent of the finest of James Salter's novels. Not since *The Great Gatsby* have I read a tragedy quite like this one."—Rick Bass, author of *The Lives of Rocks*

## About the Author

**Beth Helms** is the author of the story collection *American Wives*, which won the 2003 Iowa Short Fiction Award. She spent her childhood in Iran, Iraq, Germany and Turkey, and now lives in upstate New York. *Dervishes* is her first novel.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the effect on the main characters—Grace, Canada, Catherine, Simone—of living in an isolated Western community inside a strange city? How much of their behavior and the conflicts in the novel can be attributed to that cultural isolation?
2. How do you interpret Canada's lines at the end of the prologue, "What did I know then? I knew everything; I knew nothing."? By the end of the novel, which of those seems closer to the truth?

3. Does Grace do the right thing in lying to Canada about what has happened to Rand? Do you think this kind of fiction is necessary for every parent, or is it likely to do more harm than good?
4. What draws Catherine and Canada to John, despite his contempt for them? What does their relationship with him say about the westerners' attitude toward the Turks in the novel?
5. Why do you think Canada pushes the neighbor girl, Angie, down to the ground on Olson Loop (pp. 30-31)? Do you see other signs of that anger in the novel? Where do you think it comes from?
6. What do you imagine happening between Grace and Canada after the last scene in the book? Where do you think they will go from here?
7. Why does Canada remain so loyal to her father, when he's so consistently absent from her life? Do you think Grace deserves her resentment?
8. Do Grace's ideas about motherhood change over the course of the novel? Does her decision to lie to Canada about her father's fate suggest a new degree of protectiveness, or just more denial?
9. Why does Canada leave Grace's letters in her father's suitcase? Does this gesture have the effect she is hoping for?
10. Who is telling this story? It begins and ends with Canada's perspective, but the chapters about Grace incorporate things Canada cannot have known. Are these two separate narratives, or is the entire book Canada's version of things, including the chapters on her mother?
11. Look at the section about the early days of Grace and Rand's marriage. Do you see any sign here of what went wrong, of what they wanted from each other and where that got lost? Or do you think the relationship was doomed from the beginning?
12. Is Grace to blame for what happens to her at the end of the novel, for her expulsion from the embassy society? Could she have saved herself by behaving differently in some way, or is she simply at the mercy of women like Simone and Bahar, and the rules of their society?

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5259

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: [readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com](mailto:readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com)

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: [www.picadorusa.com](http://www.picadorusa.com)

Picador

What to Read Next®