



# Reading Group Gold

## One Pill Makes You Smaller

by Lisa Dierbeck

A *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year

### About this Guide

Eleven-year-old Alice Duncan has a problem: growing at a breathtaking pace, her body has taken on a life of its own. Heads turn whenever Alice leaves the house. Men everywhere are mesmerized by the two huge globes that have miraculously sprouted from her chest. Full-figured and long-legged, Alice freakishly towers over all of her peers. In school, among her fellow sixth graders, she is ridiculed--but on the sidewalks of 1970s New York, Alice is popular, eye-catching, and sexy: an adult.



ISBN: 978-0-312-42286-8 | 2004

Young Alice is thus conflicted--and has no one to turn to. Her father, formerly a famous artist, has checked himself into a chic mental institution; her mother has run off to Italy; and her thrill-seeking, free-loving 16-year-old sister only wants to collect boyfriends and Led Zeppelin records. So, when she is sent away to the Balthus Institute, a remote, under-populated summer camp that turns out to be an exclusive art school, Alice finds herself immersed amid the gritty, exciting, and seductive glamour of the contemporary art world. But once she meets J.D., an equally dangerous and charming local drug dealer, Alice starts heading down a rabbit hole of perversion and distortion, mystery and betrayal, unhappiness and self-gratification--in short, of growing up.

Cleverly based on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *One Pill Makes You Smaller* is an audacious and fiercely original portrayal of one girl's perilous crossing into adulthood. Although its situations and subjects are at times quite disturbing, this novel is "written in exuberant, gorgeous, propulsive prose, [and] impossible to put down. [Dierbeck's] characters leap off the page with raw, anarchic chemistry; her dialogue crackles with electricity. Alice's odyssey through a dark wilderness of the soul becomes a celebration of art, our flawed humanity, and life" (Lauren Slater, author of *Prozac Diary*).

### For Discussion

1. What links did you find in how *One Pill Makes You Smaller* addresses the notions of both parenthood and morality--or the lack thereof? What about the links between artistic expression and personal experience?
2. Describe Alice Duncan. In what ways is she a victim? In what ways does she personify empowerment, skill, control, and drive? What makes her different from other coming-of-age protagonists you might have encountered in past readings? What makes her similar to other such protagonists? On finishing this novel,



# Reading Group Gold

explain how you felt about the way Alice “turned out”-- especially in the book’s final two chapters.

3. Youth is a key theme in these pages--its sweetness and innocence, of course, but also its perplexing and fleeting qualities. How, if at all, would you characterize Alice’s trustfulness, kindness, charity, wonder, and creativity as extensions, or by-products, of her youth? And how does the loss of Alice’s youth over the course of this novel affect these related traits?

4. When does *One Pill Makes You Smaller* take place? When is it set? To what extent is it “of its time”--and to what extent is it timeless?

5. Both high and low culture run through the very bloodstream of this novel, in basically equal measure. Which, if either, does the novel side with or favor? Explain. In your view, is this book finally critical or celebratory in its take on art--and artists, and artistry? Again, explain.

6. This novel is set in two very different realms: New York City and rural North Carolina. How accurate, realistic, and/or genuine did each of these settings strike you, as a reader? Given the novel’s troubling themes, difficult subjects, and harsh depictions of, for example, sex, adolescence, friendship, and family life--and given its thorough and deliberate echoing of Lewis Carroll’s famous fiction--how successful is author Lisa Dierbeck in her effort to create for this book a world that is at once realistic and fantastic, painful and fanciful, urgent and dream-like? How does Dierbeck achieve this paradoxical setting, or doesn’t she? Be specific in answering; refer to passages from the text.

7. Approximately the middle third of this novel depicts the seduction, intoxication, and molestation of Alice in disturbing if not sickening detail--and with uncanny and engaging psychological insight. This nightmarish series of events has been fully orchestrated and executed, as we see, by J.D. That being so, explain these concluding remarks of the “Alice Underwater” chapter: “What happened between them would never feel, to Alice, like J.D.’s doing. It would seem for many years afterward as if she’d raped herself.”

8. Many famous names appear throughout the novel. List as many as you can recall offhand. Next, explain how such names function humorously, ironically, or otherwise when applied--as they are in these pages--to ordinary house pets, small towns, etc. In particular, consider Salinger, Balthus, Dodgson, and Chaplin--how do the private lives and personal affections of these four celebrated artists reflect Dierbeck’s novel as a whole?

9. Reviewing Alice’s classroom experiences at the Balthus Institute, try to articulate the opinion or commentary this novel makes about art schools, creative writing programs, filmmaking workshops, etc.

10. Nietzsche is referred to more than once in this novel; Wittgenstein is also mentioned. The driver who picks up Alice at the bus stop in Dodgson is working on a degree in linguistics; later, at the art camp, Alice’s works are criticized by some for being “merely beautiful.” Discuss the philosophical dimensions of *One Pill Makes You Smaller*, the concepts and beliefs that are explored, subverted, or embraced here.

11. As a group, talk about the narrator of this novel. Who is telling us this story? How and where do the nar-



# Reading Group Gold

rator's voice, intelligence, perspective, tone, and eye for detail mirror Alice's own? How and where do they differ? How empathetic is this narrator? And how objective?

12. Finally, consider this remark about Dierbeck's novel by writer Pagan Kennedy (author of *Black Livingstone*): "[It] exposes the two opposing forces--puritanism and hedonism--that have shaped American society." Would you agree with this? Explain why or why not. And, in your view, which of these two forces ultimately wins out in *One Pill Makes You Smaller*--which force triumphs, in the end? Again, explain.

## Praise for *One Pill Makes You Smaller*

"*One Pill Makes You Smaller* is both instantly familiar and a little bit curious . . . Bracing . . . [Dierbeck] takes many risks in this fine first novel, and one of the larger risks is overturning the traditional optimism of the coming-of-age novel, the sense that its hero or heroine is about to be set free in a wider world."-- *The New York Times Book Review*

"Dierbeck is an undeniably talented writer--especially when handling difficult material concerning Alice's confusions over her body, her identity, and the adult world at large."--*The Washington Post*

"A stunning debut novel. Dierbeck's book is a wonderful, frightening, funny riff on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Realistic and tough and altogether exhilarating. An up-all-night page-turner."-- *Newsday*

"Provocative . . . A nuanced study in moral ambiguity; an expansive piece of cultural commentary. An unsettling and original book."--*The Boston Globe*

"A mordantly funny, intelligent, and accurate look at one girl's experience growing up. Alice's experiences are miserable, harrowing, illuminating, and wonderful, and fortunately for the reader, Dierbeck allows her character the intelligence and breadth to have them all."--Mary Gaitskill, author of *Bad Behavior*

"Wildly original . . . A miraculous fusion of dizzy confabulation and all too real grit and danger. [Dierbeck's] sharp, vulnerable Alice is one of the most delightfully surprising heroines I've met in contemporary fiction. The deepest pleasures of *One Pill Makes You Smaller* come from love and language, from the thrill of discovery, from Dierbeck's passion for her people as she leads us into their magical, furious, twisting tales."--Melanie Rae Thon, author of *Sweet Hearts*

"A strange and extraordinary journey through a looking glass darkly . . . By turns terrifying, funny, sinister, and, it must be sheepishly admitted, titillating . . . Dierbeck has a photographer's eye for detail and a poet's heart for language."--David Rakoff, author of *Fraud*

"Fascinating, unsettling . . . A dreaminess suffuses *One Pill Makes You Smaller*, as Dierbeck creates an unforgettable, surreal atmosphere, and writes crackling, wicked dialogue. The book is thoroughly engaging, extremely disquieting, and at times hilarious . . . [An] inspired novel loaded with creepiness and shock."--*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"Dierbeck shoots down the rabbit hole of 1970s misbehavior with this psychedelic debut, crafting a weird



# Reading Group Gold

and inspired paean to lost innocence . . . This unsettling and disorienting--but also deliciously pop-account of deplorable actions and shattered innocence is a tour de force, a meshing of the myths of the counterculture with the fantastic universe of Lewis Carroll . . . Genuinely original, compulsively readable . . . Sure to stir up controversy.”--*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“This book is both an intensely individual story of sexual awakening and betrayal, as well as a kaleidoscopic portrait of the historical milieu in which that betrayal occurs. [Dierbeck’s] writing here is intense yet restrained, deeply empathic but never melodramatic, unflinching in its moral purview without sermonizing; that it is often unsettling and just as often slyly comic is a testament to her rigorous control over her material. I have been following Lisa’s career as a short-story writer for the past couple of years, and I see in this novel all of the various fine qualities I’ve seen in those stories. [*One Pill Makes You Smaller*] is a wholly original work of fiction, and marks the auspicious debut of a distinct and important perspective in American letters.”--Dale Peck, author *Hatchet Jobs*

## About the Author

Lisa Dierbeck lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Dierbeck has also written for *Elle*, *Glamour*, *The New York Observer*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. This is her first novel.