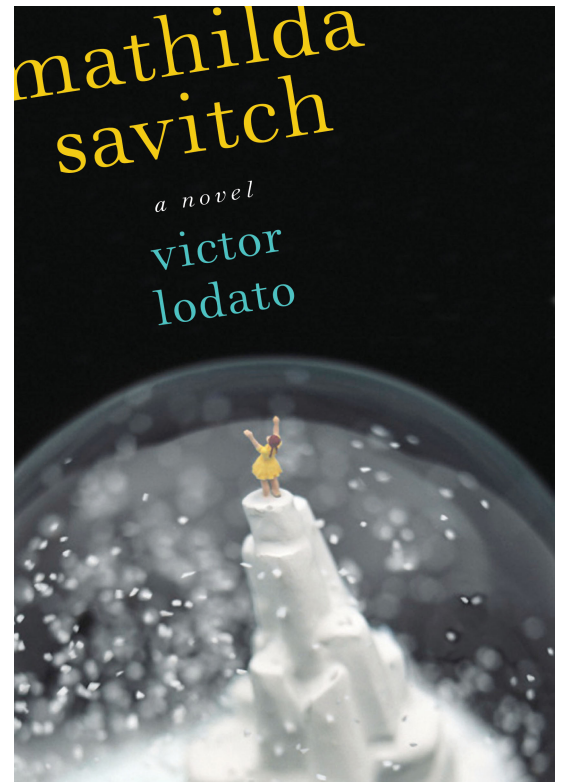




Reading Group Gold

MATHILDA SAVITCH by Victor Lodato



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The topics and questions that follow are designed to enhance your reading of *Mathilda Savitch*. We hope they will enrich your experience of this extraordinary debut from one of America's most promising new literary talents.

INTRODUCTION

At the cusp of adolescence, Mathilda Savitch has a lot on her mind. The anniversary of her big sister's death is looming. Her parents live in a fog. She's curious about sex, but the guy she wants is more interested in her best friend. She also has to cope with a dangerous world, living in a community that is haunted by recent terrorism. Her solace lies in the strands of truth she is able to uncover about her sister, including the mysterious affair Helene was having just before she died. Hacking into Helene's e-mail account, Mathilda reads about a volatile relationship with an out-of-town man named Louis, who doesn't realize that his girlfriend is no longer alive. For the mischievous and still grief-stricken Mathilda, the temptation to impersonate Helene online is impossible to resist—leading her to an underworld of raw truths and wry disillusionment.

ISBN-13: 978-0-374-20400-6 | 304 pages

Written in Mathilda's unflinching voice, this is a fiercely funny novel of life and loss, capturing the realities of adolescence in scenes that are by turns hilarious and heartbreaking.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was it like to read Mathilda's story in her own words, with phrases directed at you? Why does Mathilda sometimes lie to the reader? Do you think she is consciously manipulative, or do you believe she is lying to herself?



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2. Reread the book's epigraph. Do you agree with G. K. Chesterton's statement that the desire for justice is related to innocence, while the desire for mercy is related to wickedness? How do Mathilda's feelings about justice and mercy evolve over the course of the book?
3. What makes Mathilda's friendship with Anna so unpredictable? Who was your best friend when you were their age? How was that relationship different from the friendships you have now?
4. What do you think lies behind Mathilda's desire to be "awful"? What does she seem to want? Do you sympathize with her? What were the most irrational thoughts you had as a teenager?
5. What does the current relationship between Ma and Da, combined with the legacy of their passionate younger days, teach Mathilda about love?
6. Mathilda has heard a lot about sex and has many beliefs about its power and pleasures. How does she want to use sex? What type of gratification is she looking for when she pursues Kevin? Discuss Mathilda's understanding of Helene's sexuality. In your opinion, how accurate are her perceptions about her sister?
7. Is Mathilda wise to stop trusting adults? What kind of role models are they in regard to dealing with her sister's death? Do you believe, as Mathilda states, that "Grief is an island"?
8. Why is it important for Mathilda to believe that Helene was pushed? What do you think lies behind Mathilda's brutal fantasies?
9. What drives Mathilda's compulsion to save strands of hair? Discuss other instances of her magical thinking. How do these thoughts serve her? Are they helpful or debilitating?
10. An award-winning playwright, Victor Lodato makes his debut as a novelist with *Mathilda Savitch*. Does it affect your reading to know that a man created Mathilda's voice? Can you think of other instances where a male writer convincingly renders a female interior life?
11. Try to see the adults in this novel—including parents, teachers, and the Tree—apart from Mathilda's views and judgments. Are they doing the best they can? Do you think Mathilda misunderstands, at times, their behavior and intentions?



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12. Discuss Mathilda's feelings of responsibility in regard to her sister's death. How much does self-blame drive her actions?

13. How did your image of Helene change throughout the novel? Why does Mathilda have such mixed feelings in regard to her sister? Do you think her version of Helene's life is a fantasy, or did she know her sister better than anyone else in the family did?

14. What do you think Mathilda is looking for when she decides to go to Desmond? How is she different when she returns?

15. Why doesn't Mathilda tell Louis the truth? What is she trying to accomplish in her last moments with him? Why doesn't she tell her parents what she uncovered about Helene?

16. Discuss the backdrop of terrorism running throughout the novel. How does it affect Mathilda's perception of the world? How does it shape the emotional state of a new generation of teenagers?

17. How does dark comedy enhance Mathilda's storytelling? What passages made you laugh out loud (even if laughter seemed inappropriate)?

18. Discuss the final scene between Ma and Mathilda. What common ground do they share? Why are they silent when they are reunited? What do they communicate to each other without words?

ADVANCE PRAISE

"From page one, the outrageous, pitch-perfect voice of this book grabs you up and won't let go. A bravura performance." —Mary Karr, author of *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry*

"Mathilda Savitch is a hilarious, self-deprecating and outrageously open-hearted creation—an oracle struggling to understand her own proclamations. Mathilda's cluelessness and brilliance are captured in a language so true, it will make you feel like you are right back in the madness and squalor that is the schoolyard. And you will be forced to confront, once again, the truth that all adolescents grapple with, that the lunatics have indeed taken over the asylum." —Heather O'Neill, author of *Lullabies for Little Criminals*

"Stunning . . . Lodato chooses every word with extreme care; Mathilda's observations read like a finely crafted epic poem, whose themes and imagery paint an intricate map of her inner life. She's a metaphysical Holden Caulfield for the terrifying present day." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victor Lodato is a playwright and poet. He is the recipient of Guggenheim and NEA fellowships and has won numerous awards for his plays, including one from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays. *Mathilda Savitch* is his first novel. He divides his time between Tucson and New York City.