

READING GROUP GUIDE

What I Loved

by Siri Hustvedt

A Henry Holt Book

What I Loved

0-8050-7170-9 (400 pages)

Introduction to *What I Loved*

About this Guide

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

About the Book

A powerful and heartbreaking novel that chronicles the epic story of two families, two sons, and two marriages.

What I Loved begins in New York in 1975, when art historian Leo Hertzberg discovers an extraordinary painting by an unknown artist in a SoHo gallery. He buys the work; tracks down the artist, Bill Wechsler; and the two men embark on a life-long friendship.

Praise for *What I Loved*

"*What I Loved* is Siri Hustvedt's most ambitious, most rewarding novel. It mesmerizes, rouses, disturbs. Hustvedt is that rare artist, a writer of high intelligence, profound sensuality and a less easily definable capacity for which the only word I can find is wisdom." – Salman Rushdie

"An impressive new talent . . . Relationships, like everything else in Hustvedt's world, are lively, unpredictable, full of mysterious emotion: the dark side of everyday life." – *Time*

"A writer of eloquent and vivid disposition." – Don DeLillo

"[Hustvedt] has a knack for intimate detail, for suggesting, with some intensity, the compulsive psychological spiral of drowning souls, for creating powerful moods with just enough words."
– *The New York Times Book Review*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Leo Hertzberg asks, "what is memory's perspective?" (p. 21) How does this apply to his reminiscences in the account of his life during the twenty-five years that make up this novel?
2. The ambiguity between male and female is a theme examined throughout the book. Discuss the way in which each character deals with gender. Violet explains what she calls "mixing" (see p. 91). The art critic Hasseborg claims Teddy Giles' art to be a "spectacle of shifting identities." How does this turn up in the writings of Violet, Bill's work, and Matt's drawings? What does Mark's cross-dressing mean? In what way is sexual ambiguity erotic?
3. In Bill's first paintings of Violet she is growing and shrinking (i.e. "Self-Portrait"). Discuss how this imagery affects Leo when he first sees it, and then later after Matthew is gone. How does it pertain to the other characters as they age throughout the novel? How is the concept of hunger manifested in Violet's research and writing? in Bill's art? in Erica's grief? How does Teenie Gold embody these ideas in the latter part of the book?
4. Bill's constructions incorporate Violet's research regarding hysterics and dermagraphism (see p. 71). "Hansel & Gretel" (pp.81-2) is influenced by Violet's study of anorexia. How does Violet's work affect Bill's art? Discuss the various iconography he borrows from her and how it informs his work.
5. How are Bill's two marriages different from one another?
6. Throughout the novel Lucille remains somewhat of a mystery. Is she unknowable? How does her reserve affect the other characters? Why is she not more involved in Mark's welfare? Discuss the game Mark invented as a child that he played with Violet, and the way in which it deals with his feelings about a stepmother.
7. Is it possible for a marriage to survive the death of a child? Discuss how Erica and other characters handle the grief of Matt's death. How are parents to deal with the heartache of raising troubled children?
8. As a child, Matthew becomes worried about the concept of turning four. What does this reveal about his character? How is it manifested in his thinking and in his art? In the inventions of the character Dave, and the Ghostly Boy? Who do these represent?
9. Mark begins making collages (see p.171). How does his work relate to Matthew's? to Bill's? Even his assemblage of items when he takes over Matthew's room? Is Mark trying to emulate his father? He also takes on different personas (as with Teddy) and voices. Is Mark's life his creation, is this self-invention his art?
10. Another of Bill's works was a fairy tale-like project called "The Changeling." How did this piece play with the concepts of doubles and mirror images, and the idea of 'substitution?' Leo thinks about it years later regarding Mark when he remembers the stolen child in a glass coffin. Discuss this imagery, as well as Bill's series of doors and letters.
11. How has the experience of the Holocaust informed the work of both Bill and Erica? What are examples of the Holocaust imagery in Bill's art, in his paintings of Violet? in his homage's to his

father? See p. 84 for Leo's description of "words of rescue" and his exploration of this idea in Bill's work "Hansel and Gretel."

12. Leo is not a visual artist, but the private collection of objects in his drawer are a sort of art piece. Discuss in what way these objects become a recording of absence and how Leo's arrangement of them in different combinations produces various associations. How do they serve Leo as muses of memory and relate to the title of the novel?
13. Mark shows signs of his illness even in early childhood. Should everyone have recognized the seriousness of Mark's condition earlier? Were they afraid for him? or of him? What does it mean when Mark's therapist calls the boy's problems "characterological"? What does a characterological illness mean? Why is Mark so susceptible to Teddy Giles? Is it simply, as he states, that he is infected by a stronger personality? Is Mark an amoral character?
14. The New York art scene described in the novel embraced Giles' work as a clever take on the horror genre, when it was actually the sadistic fantasies of a murderer. Discuss how the cultural media can mistake monstrosity for brilliance. What is the role of the power of art in the novel?

Author Biography

Siri Hustvedt is the author of two previous novels, *The Blindfold* and *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (0-8050-5590-8). She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Paul Auster.

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