

# READING GROUP GUIDE

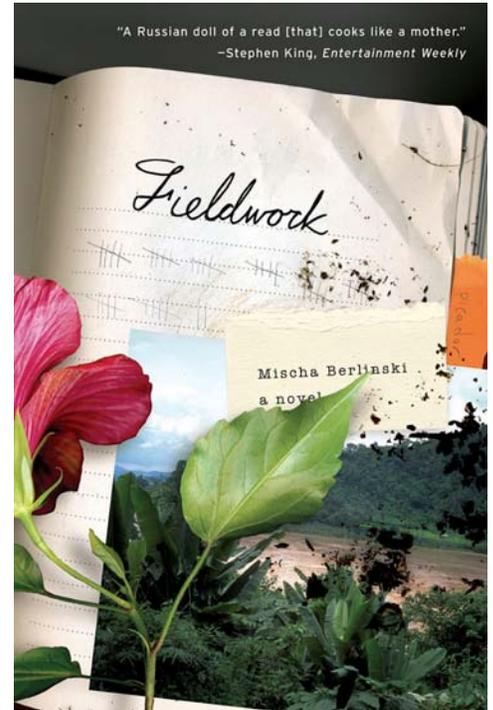
## *Fieldwork*

*A Novel*

*by Mischa Berlinski*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Fieldwork* 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 *Fieldwork*.

### About the Book

When his girlfriend takes a job in Thailand, Mischa Berlinski goes along for the ride, planning to enjoy himself and work as little as possible. But one evening a fellow expatriate tips him off to a story: a charismatic American anthropologist, Martiya van der Leun, has been found dead--a suicide--in the Thai prison where she was serving a life sentence for murder. Curious at first, Mischa is soon immersed in the details of her story. This brilliant, haunting novel expands into a mystery set among the Thai hill tribes, whose way of life became a battleground for the missionaries and the scientists living among them.

## Praise for *Fieldwork*:

"A Russian doll of a read . . . A story that cooks like a mother." —Stephen King, *Entertainment Weekly*

"An intoxicating journey filled with missing souls and vengeful spirits." —*The Washington Post*

"An entertainingly readable novel of ideas . . . Berlinski's narrative is brilliantly plotted and builds to a shattering but entirely credible conclusion." —*Los Angeles Times*

"A sad and powerful tale . . . Inspired and courageous." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"An impeccably structured novel portraying two strikingly different milieus . . . Bravura storytelling." —*The Seattle Times*

"Airtight and intensely gripping . . . His treatment of both religious missionary and anthropological fieldwork is subtle and insightful. Impeccable research and a juicy, intricate plot play off in this perfectly executed debut." —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Gripping and entertaining . . . A quirky, often brilliant debut, bounced along by limitless energy." —*The New York Review of Books*

## About the Author

**Mischa Berlinski** was born in New York in 1973. He studied classics at the University of California at Berkeley and Columbia College. He has worked as a journalist in Thailand. *Fieldwork* is his first novel.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does it affect your reading of the novel that the narrator's name is the same as the author's? Do you imagine them to be the same person?
2. "A child needs the happy family," Elena tells Mischa (pg. 23) in an attempt to describe why Martiya's life turned out as it did. "It is the base." Do you see a connection between Martiya's parents' marriage, the atmosphere in which she was raised, and her desire to immerse herself in the life of the Dyalo, or any of her other decisions as an adult?
3. How does it change the story to hear so much of Martiya's story from other characters? Do those who tell Mischa about Martiya—Tim Blair, for example, or Josh O' Connor—seem reliable to you? Why do you think the author chose to include them in the story, rather than just telling Martiya's story entirely from Mischa's perspective?

4. What was your opinion of the Walkers and their work among the Dyalo? Do you think they were helping the Dyalo, or interfering with their native culture? Did the book change your opinion of Christian missionary work, or your opinion of anthropology?
5. What do you think happens in David's mind at the moment he decides to return to his religious practice (pg. 170)? Do you think there is a connection between David's devotion to the Grateful Dead and his passion for Christianity and the mission?
6. What's your impression of Mischa, the narrator? Why do you think he becomes so obsessed with Martiya's story? How does his pursuit of the story change Mischa's own life and way of thinking over the course of the book?
7. Do you see any similarities between Mischa's relationship with Rachel, their life together in Thailand, and Martiya's relationship to the Dyalo and their village?
8. Why do you think the author includes the interlude about the anthropologist Malinowski? What does that story suggest to you about the difficulties and rewards of anthropology?
9. Do you see Martiya's conversion to a belief in Rice, her investment in the mystical elements of Dyalo life, as a conversion, a rational decision, or a departure from sanity? Do you think she went crazy, or just went native?
10. How do you interpret the book's epigraph? How do you think a belief in spirits like those the Dyalo fear differs from a belief in an all-powerful god?
11. Does the book suggest that there are any similarities between anthropology and missionary work? Do you think one or the other is more intrusive, or more beneficial? Which would you rather do, if you had to choose?
12. To what extent do you think David and Martiya were products of their upbringing? If each had been born into the other's family, do you think they would've followed more or less the same paths?

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