

READING GROUP GUIDE

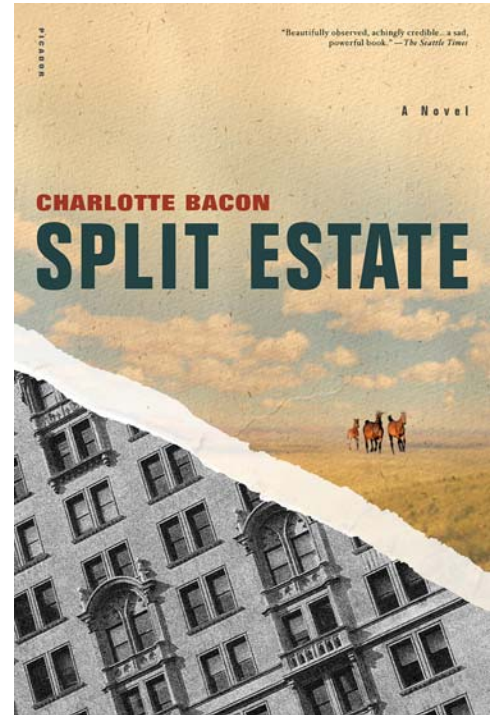
Split Estate

A Novel

by Charlotte Bacon

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Split Estate* 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 *Split Estate*.

About the Book

A wonderfully tough-minded novel from a master dramatist of the poignant, interwoven crises of modern life

Split Estate opens with devastating scenes of a family at a horrific juncture: the wife of Arthur King and mother of his two teenage children, Celia and Cam, has recently committed suicide, jumping out the window of their New York apartment.

Charlotte Bacon's luminous new novel tracks the King family as it struggles to survive in the months that follow. Arthur, an attractive lawyer who has always been edgy about city dwelling, decides they must move back to his home state of Wyoming for the summer, where his mother,

Lucy, welcomes her orphaned grandchildren and her wounded son to her much loved but diminished ranch. From the perspective of each protagonist in turn, we watch shy Celia and handsome Cam, distraught Arthur and brave Lucy face themselves and their future in a Wyoming that is beautiful and consoling, yet beset by new threats of destruction.

A split estate is a form of real property in which the mineral rights have been split off from the other land uses to which the owner is entitled. This has transformed the landscape the Kings love and jeopardized Lucy's independence. In truth, the Kings' very lives have become split estates—for Celia, on the brink of adolescence; for Cam, approaching independent adulthood; for Arthur, divided between the West and New York. *Split Estate* is a heartrending depiction of an American family struggling to deal with irrevocable damage to their lives and surroundings.

Praise for *Split Estate*:

"Charlotte Bacon has an acute understanding of how grief can yield, in the tiniest increments, to healing and renewal. She is so beautifully attuned to both inner and outer landscapes that each character in *Split Estate* (and especially its teenagers) moves at a wholly convincing pace through layers of pain and bewilderment toward a tentative wholeness. But Bacon is too honest to make any of this easy or final and too fine a writer to offer up a single uninteresting page."

—Rosellen Brown, author of *Before and After*

"The prose of novelist Charlotte Bacon's *Split Estate* is as unflinching and raw as the Wyoming landscape in which most of the book is set . . . Bacon adeptly captures the less obvious and less pretty aspects of the King family's grief . . . There are no easy resolutions here, just haunting meditations on character that are as compelling as they are austere."

—Adelle Waldman, *Time Out New York*

About the Author

Charlotte Bacon is the award-winning author of *There is Room for You* (FSG, 2004) and *Lost Geography* (FSG, 2000). She lives in Bali with her husband and two children.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Laura, based on the remembrances of each of the characters in the novel? Do you think she was a good mother to her children before her death, a good wife to Arthur? Was Lucy right to be mistrustful of her?
2. "There was no prying beauty from danger," Celia thinks (p. 72), when a horse rears and nearly kicks her. What does the author mean by writing that beauty and danger are inseparable? How does theme appear in other parts of the novel?

3. “When the worst things happen,” Celia thinks (p. 211) “you’re oddly freed from caring about what other people think.” Is this true of all the Kings in this story? Is it a change for the better? In your own experience, does that freedom bring about changes for the better or worse in people?
4. Describe how Laura’s death affects Arthur, Cam and Celia in different ways. Which one of them do you think deals with his or her grief in the healthiest way?
5. How do you interpret the epigraphs for part one and part two of the novel? How do they relate to the events in those sections?
6. “Since Laura died,” the author writes of Arthur (p. 42) “he’d discovered that he was not very clear on what his character was or might become. It appeared to be built of spiky, disparate parts that had clumped together depending on what those around him needed.” Does this reliance on others for his sense of himself subside over the course of the novel? Does Arthur find another way of relating to the world?
7. Do you think Lucy’s acts of vandalism are admirable or reprehensible? Do you see any connection between her graffiti and Carson’s mother burning the tires?
8. Does the move to Wyoming accomplish what Arthur hoped it would, or does it make things worse for the family? Can a change of location sometimes bring about a lasting change in someone’s state of mind, or is it just a way of running from the real problems?
9. Why does Cam take such satisfaction from his work for Mac Barlow? What draws him to Amber? How does his relationship to each of them affect his grieving over his mother?
10. Are Arthur’s relationships with Carly and Denise self-destructive, or is he just acting recklessly? What role do Cam and Arthur’s sexual relationships play in their grief over Laura’s death?
11. Why does Celia’s discovery that Carson is gay lead her to steal his horse? What drives her to put herself in such danger? And why, when she’s thrown off, do you think she emits a sound that suggests happiness?
12. Look at the last line of the novel. Where do you think Cam is going? What is he feeling? What do you think will happen to him?

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