

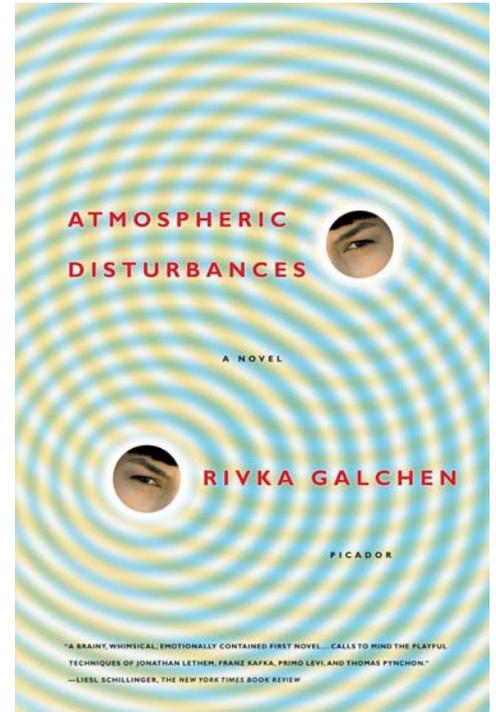
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Atmospheric Disturbances*

*A Novel*

*by Rivka Galchen*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Atmospheric Disturbances* 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 *Atmospheric Disturbances*.

### About the Book

Hailed as a virtuosa storyteller, garnering comparisons ranging from Borges to Murakami, Rivka Galchen has received a level of ebullient acclaim rarely bestowed on debut novelists. Exploring the nature of love, identity, truth, and reality itself, *Atmospheric Disturbances* is equally funny and fantastical, yet grounded in colorful details capturing the conflicts of daily life. At the heart of these quandaries is Dr. Leo Liebenstein, his missing wife, Rema, and his psychiatric patient Harvey. The only clue Rema has left behind is an illusion of herself, a cunning simulacra that looks, talks, and behaves just like the real Rema and has fooled everyone but Leo. Attempting to unravel the mystery of spousal replacement, he embarks on an investigation that leads him to the

inner sanctum of the Royal Academy of Meteorology in their cosmic conflict with the 49 Quantum Fathers, and the unwelcome conviction that somehow he—or maybe his wife, or maybe even Harvey—lies at the center of these unfathomable developments. From Buenos Aires to Manhattan, with many cosmic sojourns in between, Leo’s erratic quest yields both a suspenseful psychological thriller and a moving love story. Inventive and provocative, *Atmospheric Disturbances* deftly explores the nature of human relationships, and how we spend our lives trying to weather the storms of our own making.

## About the Author

**Rivka Galchen** received her MD from the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, having spent a year in South America working on public health issues. Galchen recently completed her MFA at Columbia University, where she was a Robert Bingham Fellow. Her essay on the Many Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics was published in *The Believer*, and she is the recipient of a 2006 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers’ Award. Galchen lives in New York City. This is her first novel.

## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the novel’s epigraphs. Does your own experience with love and friendship match the observations of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze? What is the effect of reading a quote from the “real” Tzvi Gal-Chen, followed by scenes of a fictional character who bears his name? How do Gal-Chen’s thoughts on prediction and knowledge predict various outcomes in the novel?
2. How much did you trust Leo as a narrator? What did you initially think the novel’s mysteries were? How did you interpret the various clues provided by the characters?
3. What symptoms does Harvey have in common with his healers? How did Rema’s scheme, coaching Leo through his impersonation, affect the mental health of the other characters?
4. What makes meteorology an ideal metaphor for love and marriage?
5. On page 14, Leo describes the limits of reality testing for some patients. How do the novel’s characters distinguish between reality and illusion? How do most of us test reality—in love, at work, in politics?
6. In what ways does Leo’s “Dopplerganger effect” (emphasized in Chapters 8 and 9) prove to be both true and absurd?
7. Consider Rema’s puppy. What role does it play in propelling the storyline?
8. How does the situation change when Leo meets Magda? What effect do she and Anatole have on Rema? Ultimately, does anyone know Rema better than she knows herself?
9. On page 157, Leo describes the significance of the interpretive leap. How did you interpret the sign at the bottom of the page? How do the novel’s characters balance their interpretive leaps with empirical laws?
10. In what way do the desaparecidos, the vanished victims of Argentina’s “dirty war,” form a meaningful part of Leo’s travels in South America?

What shifts occur when the setting changes to Buenos Aires? What keeps Leo oriented in both New York and Argentina?

12. How was your reading affected by the photographs that appear on pages 26 and 147? Can photography capture fiction?
13. What criteria would your family and friends use if they were trying to determine whether you were the real You or an impostor?
14. Rivka Galchen weaves many philosophical references into the novel, ranging from the term “simulacra” itself to critical theorists of the Frankfurt School (such as Theodor Adorno) to poststructuralist theory (such as Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage). Yet she was also hailed by the novelist Francisco Goldman for producing a novel that is “as funny as any episode of *The Simpsons*.” What techniques enable her to achieve such a broad range of tones? Is this novel a spoof? A tragedy? A realistic account of a fracturing mind? A fable? How does the genre affect your reading of the story?
15. Chapter 22 is written almost entirely in the future tense. How does this affect your reading of the closing scenes? What do you predict for the characters’ futures?

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