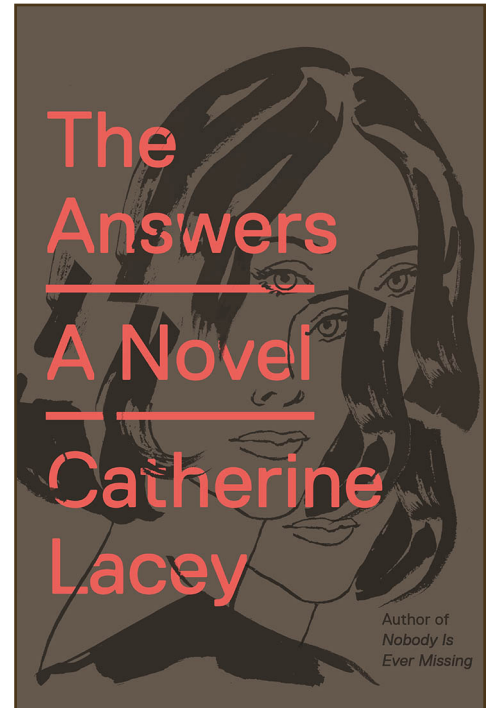


# Reading Group Gold

## *The Answers* A Novel by Catherine Lacey



ISBN: 978-0-374-10026-1 / 304 pages

In Catherine Lacey’s ambitious second novel, we are introduced to Mary, a young woman living in New York City and struggling to cope with a body that has betrayed her. All but paralyzed with pain, Mary seeks relief from a New Agey treatment called Pneuma Adaptive Kinesthesia—PAKing, for short. And, remarkably, it works. But PAKing is prohibitively expensive and Mary is dead broke. So she scours Craigslist for fast-cash jobs and finds herself applying for the “Girlfriend Experiment,” the brainchild of an eccentric actor, Kurt Sky, who is determined to find the perfect relationship—even if that means paying different women to fulfill distinctive roles. Mary is hired as the “Emotional Girlfriend”—certainly better than the “Anger Girlfriend” or the “Maternal Girlfriend”—and is pulled into Kurt’s ego-driven and messy attempt at human connection.

Told in her signature spiraling prose, *The Answers* is full of the singular yet universal insights readers have come to expect from Lacey. It is a gorgeous hybrid of the plot- and the idea-driven novel that will leave you reeling.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The main character in *The Answers* is Mary Parsons, a young woman with a mysterious ailment who accepts a unique job offer in order to pay for the only therapy that helps her feel better. Who is Mary? What are the events that have shaped her life? What does she mean when she says in the opening of the book, “There was at least one morning I was certain, though only for a few hours, that everything that could ever really happen to me had already happened to me”?

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2. Many of the characters in *The Answers* have experienced trauma that has interfered with their emotional growth and sense of identity. Mary, in particular, bears physical and psychic wounds. What might be the cause of Mary's pain? Why does PAKing help her? What have other characters experienced and how were they harmed? How have they attempted to heal?
3. What does Mary love about travel? Why, at the end of the book, has she become someone who hardly ever leaves her apartment? How does this change in Mary's behavior illuminate the themes of identity, anonymity, and celebrity that run through the book?
4. What is the objective of the Girlfriend Experiment (the "GX")? Why is Mary hired as the Emotional Girlfriend? What roles do the other Girlfriends play? How is each of them qualified? Why does the Experiment include an Anger Girlfriend?
5. Ironically, there are more questions than answers in *The Answers*. Mary says, "Sometimes it seems all I have are questions, that I will ask the same ones all my life." What are the big questions posed in the book? How do Mary, Kurt, Chandra, and others attempt to find answers?
6. Mary has had one serious relationship in her life—with a man named Paul. Shortly before going to work for the GX, she spends a day reflecting on their year together. Does she come to terms with her feelings for him as the GX progresses? Who else does Mary care about? Does she gain deeper insight into her feelings for them?
7. There are many possible reasons why Kurt Sky might be involved with the GX—to achieve a creative breakthrough, to learn how to love and be loved, to develop a product that will increase his wealth and fame. What is Kurt's motivation? Does this change as the GX progresses?
8. What is limerence? With their sensors and Relational Experiments, what does the Research Division learn about people in love? What do they miss? Why do they decide Mary is an unsatisfactory subject?
9. After three months on the job, Mary is required to tell Kurt that she loves him (p. 217). He replies, "I love you, too." Is there evidence that his feelings are genuine? Chapter 22 of Part Two is made up almost entirely of questions about love. It ends with the speaker wondering, "How to best love?" What are some of the ways love is defined? By Mary and Paul? By Kurt and Alexi? By Ashley?
10. The Girlfriends are hired to be part of a team. Each woman is assigned a specific role, which combined are meant to simulate all the facets of a romantic relationship. In the onboarding meeting, Matheson informs them that the ultimate objective of the GX is "to devise a scientifically proven system for making human pair bonding behavior more perfect and satisfying . . ." (p. 110). Do the roles chosen for the Girlfriends accurately represent interactions between real partners? Are there any roles you would add or remove? If this had been a Boyfriend Experiment, how might the roles have been different?

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11. Why has Kurt not been able to finish his film *The Walk*? Why does he want Mary in the editing room? As she sits with Kurt while he works, what is the difference between how she is required to behave and how she really feels? Are his feelings for her genuine or is he under the influence of an Internal Directive from the Research Division?
12. Are the Relational Experiments realistic approximations of how people in love behave? What effect does the Personal History and Opinion Sharing Experiment have on Kurt and Mary? Why does Kurt create an experiment that seems designed to hurt the members of the Intimacy Team?
13. What happens between Kurt and Mary the night they get high and go out to a street fair? Are their behavior and feelings more genuine under the influence of the drug? How does this public appearance compare to the Gala?
14. *The Answers* is about love and identity. It is also about escape. Mary's story can be read as a series of escapes, beginning in adolescence when her aunt Clara removes her from her father's care and, according to Mary, saves her life. Who and what else does Mary escape from and how is she changed each time? What are other instances of escape or attempted escape? What is Kurt trying to escape?
15. Mary tells Kurt, "Love is a compromise for only getting to be one person" (p. 228). Why does Kurt make her repeat this so he can record it? What else does Mary do or say that influences the development of Identity Distance Therapy and the final version of *The Walk*? Is she fairly compensated for her contributions? Has she been helped or harmed by her work for the GX?

## PRAISE FOR *THE ANSWERS*

"Remarkable . . . Lacey displays an exceptional ability to articulate the elusiveness of knowing others, as well as the desire to find meaning and trust within." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Catherine Lacey is one of the most intelligent and brittle and funny writers of her generation. In *The Answers*, she builds—out of the raw stuff of bewilderment and absence—a soaring, heartbreaking work that's just on the right side of being nearly too beautiful to bear." —Lauren Groff, author of *Fates and Furies*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Lacey is the author of *Nobody Is Ever Missing*, winner of a 2016 Whiting Award and a finalist for the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award. Her essays and fiction have been published widely and translated into Italian, French, Dutch, Spanish, and German. Born in Mississippi, she is now based in Chicago.

Guide written by Patricia Daneman