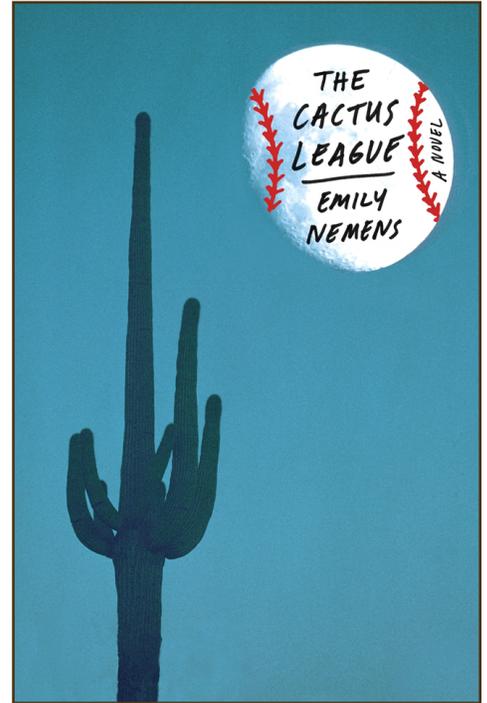


# Reading Group Gold

## *The Cactus League*

by Emily Nemens



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Jason Goodyear is the star outfielder for the Los Angeles Lions, stationed with the rest of his team in the punishingly hot Arizona desert for their annual spring training. Handsome, famous, and talented, Goodyear is nonetheless coming apart at the seams. And the coaches, writers, wives, girlfriends, petty criminals, and die-hard fans following his every move are eager to find out why—as they hide secrets of their own.

Humming with the energy of a ballpark before the first pitch, Emily Nemens's *The Cactus League* unravels the tightly connected web of people behind a seemingly linear game. Narrated by a sports-writer, Goodyear's story is interspersed with tales of Michael Taylor, a batting coach trying to stay relevant; Tamara Rowland, a resourceful spring training paramour, looking for one last catch; Herb Allison, a legendary sports agent grappling with his decline; and a plethora of other richly drawn characters, all striving to be seen as the season approaches. It's a journey that, like the Arizona desert, brims with both possibility and destruction.

Anchored by an expert knowledge of baseball's inner workings, *The Cactus League* is a propulsive and deeply human debut that captures a strange desert world that is both exciting and unforgiving, where the most crucial games are the ones played off the field.

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Each of the chapters in Emily Nemens's *The Cactus League* follows a different character or set of characters—from Los Angeles Lions outfielder Jason Goodyear to aging batting coach Michael Taylor to ailing sports agent Herb Allison. What does this structure suggest about the nature of baseball and of the culture that springs up around teams like the Lions?
2. At the start of each chapter, an unnamed sportswriter reflects on the novel's events, Arizona history, and the Lions' fortunes. What purpose do these sections serve? Discuss the forces that have shaped the sportswriter's career. What makes his career different from, or similar to, that of a baseball player?
3. The sportswriter invites us to "consider the history of this place in geological time" (39). Talk about the novel's Scottsdale setting. How do the landscape, climate, and culture of the area affect the Lions as they train?
4. The sportswriter tells us that *The Cactus League* is, at its heart, "about Jason, all the improbable things that got him—us—to this very instant, to right now" (254). Why is Jason a good choice for the focus of the novel? How might the story differ if it revolved around another player, or around another character?
5. Tami Rowland, whose encounter with Jason has disastrous consequences, is drawn to baseball players because "the difference separating ballplayers from everyone else is that they care about something tremendously, and have since they were little. It's thrilling, and Tami feeds off it" (57). Consider the dynamic between the Lions and the women—like Tami—who seek them out during spring training. Do you think the other women share Tami's reasons for feeling drawn to these athletes?
6. The Lions' wives spend a great deal of time together while their husbands prepare for baseball season. Nemens writes of the wives: "Imagine some handsome—or at least talented—man saying, *Now, here, this is your new life*. It is strange, indeed, and theirs is a necessary sorority" (172). In what ways are the wives' friendships with one another necessary? How do these friendships differ from the relationships the players form during spring training and beyond?
7. The players' wives know "that at any point, they, too, could become ex-baseball wives" (178). What issues do the couples featured in the novel face in their marriages? How do they manage, or fail to manage, these problems?
8. The narrator notes: "Conventional wisdom is that it's bad form for management to socialize with athletes. It's like a teacher fraternizing with her students or a homeowner hanging out with the help" (133). Are there other relationships in the book to which this principle might apply? How do the Lions and the wealthy men and women associated with the team conform to or defy this expectation?

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9. Professional baseball players must remain in excellent physical condition if they are to continue their careers. How does this fact influence the behavior of the various players we meet over the course of the novel?

10. Several players fail to make it through spring training with the Lions. The sportswriter observes that “the ‘no crying in baseball’ line is nice, but a load of bull: plenty of us walk around on the verge of tears” (83). Discuss the varieties of pressure spring training puts on Jason and his teammates. Why might they feel it’s important to conceal their emotions?

11. Jason’s gambling habit affects his marriage, his financial prospects, and his baseball career. Think about what motivates Jason to gamble. How is this habit at odds with his public image? Did your understanding of Jason change when you learned how he’d met his ex-wife, Liana?

12. The novel ends with Jason rescuing Alex, the young son of a stadium concession stand employee, from his mother’s hot car. What is the significance of this moment for each of these characters? Why close *The Cactus League* with this scene?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emily Nemens** is the editor of *The Paris Review*. She was previously the coeditor of *The Southern Review*. Her work has been published in *Esquire*, *n+1*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere.

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