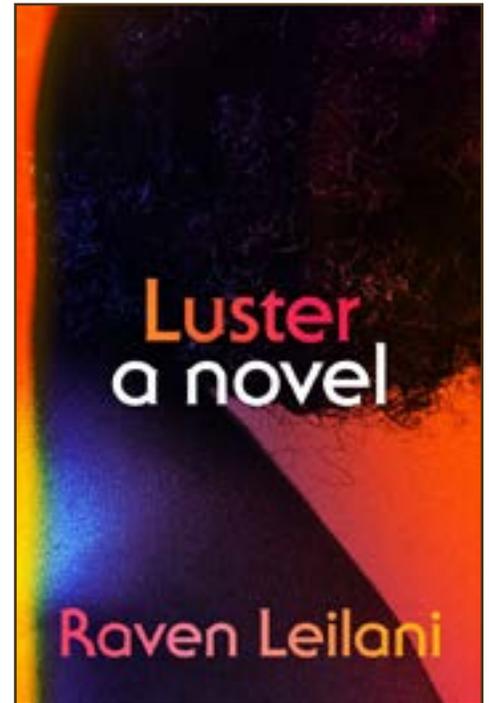


Reading Group Gold

Luster

A Novel

by Raven Leilani



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No one wants what no one wants.

And how do we even know what we want? How do we know we're ready to take it?

Edie is stumbling her way through her twenties—sharing a subpar apartment in Bushwick, clocking in and out of her admin job, making a series of inappropriate sexual choices. She is also haltingly, fitfully giving heat and air to the art that simmers inside her. And then she meets Eric, a digital archivist with a family in New Jersey, including an autopsist wife who has agreed to an open marriage—with *rules*.

As if navigating the constantly shifting landscapes of contemporary sexual manners and racial politics weren't hard enough, Edie finds herself unemployed and invited into Eric's home—though not by Eric. She becomes a hesitant ally to his wife and a de facto role model to his adopted daughter. Edie may be the only Black woman young Akila knows.

Irresistibly unruly and strikingly beautiful, razor-sharp and slyly comic, sexually charged and utterly absorbing, Raven Leilani's *Luster* is a portrait of a young woman trying to make sense of her life—her hunger, her anger—in a tumultuous era. It is also a haunting, aching description of how hard it is to believe in your own talent, and the unexpected influences that bring us into ourselves along the way.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When we meet Edie, the narrator of Raven Leilani's *Luster*, she is an aspiring painter who hasn't taken a brush to canvas in years. She explains, "The last time I painted, I was twenty-one. The president was black. I had more serotonin and I was less afraid of men" (7). Discuss the reasons for Edie's initial paralysis when it comes to making art. Later, what motivates her to start painting again?
2. In the novel's opening chapter, Edie goes on her first date with Eric, an older man she met online. Rather than diminishing her attraction to him, their age difference forms part of Eric's appeal for Edie. "Beyond the fact of older men having more stable finances and a different understanding of the clitoris, there is the potent drug of a keen power imbalance," she observes (7). As their relationship evolves, what forms does Eric's power over Edie take? Why is a relationship marked by "a keen power imbalance" appealing to her?
3. The novel takes us through Edie's past, shedding light on her sexual history and the loneliness that has defined her life since she was young. Considering her dynamic with Eric, she thinks, "If I'm honest, all my relationships have been like this, parsing the intent of the jaws that lock around my head. Like, is he kidding, or is he hungry? In other words, all of it, even the love, is a violence" (206). What role does violence play in Edie's connection with Eric? How do her prior experiences of sex, love, and violence inform her response to him?
4. In her relationship with Eric, the fact that Edie is black contributes to "our asymmetry, which even in New York is a stumbling block for waitresses and cabbies and which Eric is totally oblivious to, even as I am routinely making assurances that yes we are going to the same place, and yes, it is a single check" (5). Consider Edie's feelings about this asymmetry. What factors allow Eric, a "friendly, white, midwestern man," to remain unaware of it (36)?
5. Early in their relationship, Eric informs Edie that he and his wife, Rebecca, have reached an understanding: their marriage is open, but governed by rules that she has laid out for him. Talk about the significance of these rules for Edie, Eric, and Rebecca. How does this significance shift over the course of the novel? Are there unspoken rules that apply to the changing relationships between these characters?
6. Edie's curiosity about Eric's life with his wife drives her to enter their home on a day when she expects neither will be there. To her surprise, she encounters Rebecca in the couple's bedroom, and winds up attending their anniversary party, where she notes, "Eric's fly is down and this current iteration, this soft, breathing haircut—I can't say what it is, but I get this feeling that this is actually his most honest form, and it really pisses me off" (56). Why do you think Edie reacts this way? How does the "form" Eric takes in his private encounters with Edie differ from the man his family and friends know? How does it change as his relationship with Edie progresses?
7. Over the course of the novel, Edie engages in a variety of work: as a managing editorial coordinator at a publishing house, as a delivery person, as a job applicant, and—in a way that is complicated, and unspoken—within Eric and Rebecca's home. Consider Edie's expectations for each of these kinds of labor and the work environments, as well as what expectations are held of her—directly and indirectly. What role do aspects of Edie's identity play in these dynamics? How does work figure into Edie's self-concept and self-worth? What other characters do "work" in the book and how does that work play into your understanding of who they are and their places in the world? Finally, how does the idea of work engage with the idea of art—the reality of being a worker with the ambition of being an artist?

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8. Edie is fired from her publishing job because of her "inappropriate sexual behavior" at the office: she has had affairs as fleeting as a single encounter or as significant as her abruptly truncated relationship with Mark, the head of the art department (25). What motivates Edie to pursue these encounters with her coworkers? What makes her relationship with Mark special?
9. After Edie loses her job and apartment, Rebecca allows her to move into the couple's home—without Eric's knowledge. Talk about why Rebecca makes this decision. What does she gain from getting to know Edie during her stay in New Jersey? What does Edie get out of their time together?
10. Eavesdropping on a conversation between Eric and Rebecca, Edie thinks that they resemble "a couple of aliens who have seen all the invasion agitprop and want to reiterate that they come in peace" (141-142). Consider the evolution of Eric's marriage to Rebecca. Why might their relationship feel alien to Edie?
11. Like Edie, Eric and Rebecca's adopted daughter, Akila, is black. Edie feels that she has been "invited here partly on the absurd presumption that I would know what to do with Akila simply because we are both black" (120). Discuss Eric and Rebecca's parenting of Akila. How do they approach parenting a black girl as white parents? What impact do they expect Edie's presence in their home will have on her?
12. Talk about Edie's relationship with Akila. How does their shared race affect the development of their relationship? What does Akila make of Edie's relationship with each of her parents?
13. When Eric begins to pull away from her, Edie thinks, "I have learned not to be surprised by a man's sudden withdrawal. It is a tradition that men like Mark and Eric and my father have helped uphold" (153-154). Discuss Edie's father and mother. How have her relationships with them influenced what Edie expects from the people in her life? How have they shaped her view of herself as a woman and an artist?
14. Edie finds inspiration for her long-dormant art practice throughout her stay with Eric and Rebecca. After she realizes that Eric has gotten her pregnant, Edie feels that her paintings are better than ever, noting, "I can't sleep knowing what is happening inside my body, and when I don't sleep, I paint. I have never been so tired. I have never been so prolific" (194). Talk about the art Edie creates during her time in New Jersey. Why does pregnancy have this effect on her?
15. Discuss the closing lines of the novel: "I've made my own hunger into a practice, made everyone who passes through my life subject to a close and inappropriate reading that occasionally finds its way, often insufficiently, into paint. And when I am alone with myself, this is what I am waiting for someone to do to me, with merciless, deliberate hands, to put me down onto the canvas so that when I'm gone, there will be a record, proof that I was here" (227). What are some of the ways Edie has sought to create a record of her existence? At the novel's end, what has she learned about herself as an artist?

Raven Leilani's work has been published in *Granta*, *The Yale Review*, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Conjunctions*, *The Cut*, and *New England Review*, among other publications. She received her MFA from NYU and was an Axinn Foundation Writer-in-Residence. *Luster* is her first novel.

Guide written by Michelle Waters