

Reading Group Gold

A Manual for Cleaning Women *Selected Stories* by Lucia Berlin



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A Manual for Cleaning Women compiles the best work of the legendary short-story writer Lucia Berlin. With the grit of Raymond Carver, the humor of Grace Paley, and a blend of wit and melancholy all her own, Berlin crafts miracles from the everyday, uncovering moments of grace in the Laundromats and halfway houses of the American Southwest, in the homes of the Bay Area upper class, among switchboard operators and struggling mothers, hitchhikers and bad Christians. We hope you revel in this remarkable collection from a master of the form.

The following discussion topics should enrich your reading group's experience.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. "Mama" is one of several stories portraying a mother who is seldom nurturing, often vicious, frequently drunk. The relationship is complex. Is Sally, one of her daughters, bitter? How does Sally feel about this mother? How do you feel about her?
2. "Tiger Bites" is about crossing the border for an abortion during the 1950s, when abortion was generally not available in the United States. What is the author's attitude toward the narrator? Does the author present a stance on a society that offers no other way? Why does the narrator decide against the abortion?

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3. Berlin's characters often seem to act on a whim, even when faced with important decisions. Is this seen as a good idea? A bad idea? Why? ("So Long," "Bluebonnets")
4. Does Berlin pass judgment on her characters? Are any of them villains? How does she make seemingly bad people likeable?
5. Many of Berlin's characters exist on the margins of society. They work at odd jobs; they are jazz musicians, expatriates, alcoholics. Does Berlin champion such people? Does she pity them? ("A Manual for Cleaning Women," "Emergency Room Notebook," "Carpe Diem," "Melina," "Strays," "502")
6. In "Phantom Pain," the narrator has always felt affection for her father, but the sense of awe and intimidation is finally letting up as he ages. How does Berlin show us this? Are the ending and its fast reversals too much?
7. In "Emergency Room Notebook," Berlin writes about good deaths and bad deaths. It is easy enough to view death as bad, but what about "good deaths?" Is it, in fact, positive to see someone's death as good?
8. In "Sex Appeal," Bella Lynn tells her young cousin she'll attract Rickie Evers by looking at him "as if he was the lowest-down, mangiest old hound dog [she] ever saw." Is it plausible that Evers would actually take that kind of bait? Why?
9. In work stories such as "A Love Affair" and "Mourning," low-paid women display great empathy as they do their work. Yet the employers (a doctor, an affluent brother and sister) offer them very little respect. Still, the women soldier on, helping others and carrying themselves with dignity. How do they do that? And why?
10. "El Tim" is a very early story, written more than ten years before the others. Does it differ from the rest?
11. From her backseat perch, the child in "Electric Car, El Paso" seems aware that the doddering older women up front don't share her view of things. In what ways is she both rebellious and protective of the older women? Is she a trustworthy narrator? How does she help us see so vividly what it was like inside the little car?
12. "Good and Bad" features a misguided schoolteacher who wants to do good in a poverty-stricken country. The main character, a young girl, looks down on her, partly because of her clothing. The girl's father, who collaborates with the CIA, has the teacher fired after the girl tells him about her. Are any of these characters sympathetic?

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13. In “Bluebonnets,” there’s a whole trajectory of ups, downs, and ambiguity in the couple’s rapidly forming and dissolving relationship. Can this be seen as a microcosm—a tiny model of an entire marriage?
14. Many of Berlin’s stories are autobiographical. How do you suppose it felt for her to expose herself this way, especially given the dark terrain? Painful? Cathartic? Who else does she expose? Is that fair to her sons, ex-husbands, and parents?
15. Berlin’s lively style is sometimes unorthodox. But “La Vie en Rose” offers a straightforward example of short, choppy sentences building tension as Gerda and Claire defy the father and sneak off with two boys in a boat. How does this clipped style serve the narration? What does it feel like to be these girls?
16. In “Silence,” Berlin’s narrator closely depicts the contrasts between her own household and her friend Hope’s. What do these contrasts mean to the girl herself? As the story winds forward over decades, what makes her estrangement from Hope so bitter?
17. “502” is a comical story about alcoholics and their missteps. Why is it so funny?
18. “Mijito” portrays a young mother contending with poverty, abuse, a perplexing transit system, and an ailing baby. Do you think Berlin sees the mother as a victim of social forces? Does the mother try hard enough?
19. In “Homing,” Lucia Berlin seems to look back on her own life, on the things that have gone right and gone wrong. How does she see this colorful life that she’s lived? How do you see it?

PRAISE FOR *A MANUAL FOR CLEANING WOMEN*

“I have always had faith that the best writers will rise to the top, like cream, sooner or later, and will become exactly as well-known as they should be—their work talked about, quoted, taught, performed, filmed, set to music, anthologized. Perhaps, with the present collection, Lucia Berlin will begin to gain the attention she deserves.” —Lydia Davis

“An important American writer, one who was mostly overlooked in her time . . . She is the real deal.” —Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

“Sheer literary star power . . . I just loved it.” —Marion Winik, *Newsday*

“Berlin . . . deserves to be ranked alongside Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, and Anton Chekhov.” —Nick Romeo, *The Boston Globe*

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

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“This writing affirms . . . Berlin’s rightful place in the canon of American short fiction.” —Maggie Doherty, *The New Republic*

“It’s just an incredible book. Lucia Berlin is a laugh-out-loud & burst-into-tears writer.” —Elizabeth McCracken (on Twitter)

“Lucia Berlin’s electrifying posthumous collection *A Manual for Cleaning Women* is a miracle of storytelling economy, showcasing this largely unheard-of writer’s genius for streetwise erudition and sudden, soul-baring epiphanies.” —Lisa Shea, *Elle*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucia Berlin (1936–2004) worked brilliantly but sporadically throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Her stories are inspired by her early childhood in various Western mining towns; her glamorous teenage years in Santiago, Chile; three failed marriages; a lifelong problem with alcoholism; her years spent in Berkeley, New Mexico, and Mexico City; and the various jobs she later held to support her writing and her four sons. Sober and writing steadily by the 1990s, she took a visiting writer’s post at the University of Colorado Boulder in 1994 and was soon promoted to associate professor. In 2001, in failing health, she moved to Southern California to be near her sons. She died in 2004 in Marina del Rey.