

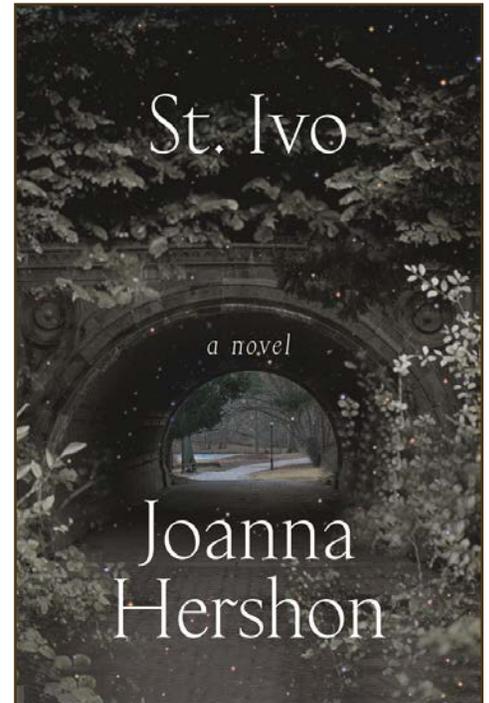
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

St. Ivo

A Novel

by Joanna Hershon



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It's the end of summer when we meet Sarah, the end of summer and the middle of her life, the middle of her career (she hopes it's not the end), the middle of her marriage (recently repaired). And despite the years that have passed since she last saw her daughter, she is still very much in the middle of figuring out what happened to Leda, what role she played, and how she will let that loss affect the rest of her life.

Enter a mysterious stranger on a train, an older man taking the subway to Brooklyn who sees right into her. Then a mugging, her phone stolen, and with it any last connection to Leda. And then an invitation, friends from the past and a weekend in the country with their new, unexpected baby.

Over the course of three hot September days, the two couples try to reconnect. Events that have been set in motion, circumstances and feelings kept hidden, rise to the surface, forcing each to ask not just how they ended up where they are, but how they ended up who they are.

Unwinding like a suspense novel, Joanna Hershon's *St. Ivo* is a powerful investigation into the meaning of choice and family, whether we ever know the people closest to us, and how, when someone goes missing from our lives, we can ever let them go.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. St. Ivo is “the patron saint of lawyers and a sometime symbol for justice” as well as “the patron saint of abandoned children.” Why might Hershon take the name of Alex’s bar for the title of her book?
2. Sarah is disappointed that Kiki’s house is in town rather than on the water, and she resorts to wetting her feet in the creek that Kiki warns her is “iffy”; the two couples spend Sunday at the lake, where Sarah swims all the way to the shore where she encounters the neighbor; Sarah lies to Kiki, telling her that she and Matthew rented a boat for Leda’s birthday; Sarah last sees Leda on a beach in Baja. What might water represent in the novel? What does water mean to Sarah? Why does Sarah later imagine the woman she sees struggling in the lake to be Leda?
3. Why don’t we learn what has happened to Leda until late in the novel? Hershon offers us clues—often temporal markers—that we can try to piece together: “that was over five years ago,” or, “it had been nearly twenty-five years,” or, “Sarah was forty-four.” What’s the effect of our being encouraged to keep track of events in this way?
4. When Sarah thinks she spots Matthew and Arman from a distance, Kiki replies, “No way. Those guys are younger and better looking.” Sarah insists that Kiki really does not “look her age,” until, when the subject of money comes up, Kiki suddenly does. Alex asks Sarah if she has a baby at home; she tells him that she’s too old. Why might people’s ages be points of confusion in the novel? Why might the relationship between age and appearance be tenuous?
5. Sarah and the man on the subway speak about the feeling of being a spectator to one’s own life. Upstate, Sarah sneaks into Sylvie’s room and, “as if Sarah were watching herself..witness[e] herself...picking up the sleeping baby.” Why does this feeling of spectatorship take over during this particular moment? Why does Sarah pretend not to have picked up the baby? Do you think Kiki hears Sarah on the baby monitor?
6. How does Heather and Karim’s presence shape Sarah and Matthew’s visit with Kiki?
7. When Sarah can’t sleep on Saturday night, she sits down beside a sleeping Kiki, only to realize that the form she has taken to be her friend is just a pile of blankets. Sarah runs her hand through Arman’s hair as he lies in the hammock, only to discover that she is touching not Arman but the neighbor. What do you take from these moments of misrecognition? What role does misrecognition play in the narrative more broadly?
8. A truck parked at the lake has a Confederate bumper sticker; Sarah imagines whoever resides in the tent by the lake to be a neo-Nazi with a “mini-Confederate flag” in his pocket; she assumes the faded flag at the neighbor’s house to be Confederate. How does the image of the Confederate flag function in this story in particular? What do you take from the revelation that the neighbor’s flag is not actually Confederate but Russian navy.
9. Why does Sarah let the neighbor believe that her husband has beaten her? Why might she let him touch her on the beach? What do you make of his appearance at Kiki and Arman’s house?

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10. What power dynamics are at play in Sarah and Matthew's relationship with Kiki and Arman? How do those dynamics change over the course of the weekend? How are they reflected in, and shaped by, what information each couple chooses to reveal to the other?
11. What might it mean to Sarah to discover that Alex's father has dementia? Does this revelation change how you understand their conversation on the subway? Repeated reference is made to the fact that the old Czech man calls St. Ivo a "restaurant," when it proves to be only a bar. Why does it matter whether St. Ivo serves food?
12. Does the revelation that Matthew has heard from Leda change how you understand the events of the weekend update? Do you think Matthew is right not to have told Sarah that their daughter called?
13. Do you think Sarah will end up making the movie inspired by Leda's life? Do you think Leda will come back? Why or why not?

Joanna Hershon is the author of four novels: *Swimming*, *The Outside of August*, *The German Bride*, and *A Dual Inheritance*. Her writing has appeared in *Granta*, *The New York Times*, *One Story*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and two literary anthologies, *Brooklyn Was Mine* and *Freud's Blind Spot*. She is an adjunct assistant professor in the creative writing department at Columbia University and lives in Brooklyn with her husband, the painter Derek Buckner, their twin sons, and their daughter.

Guide written by Helen Rouner