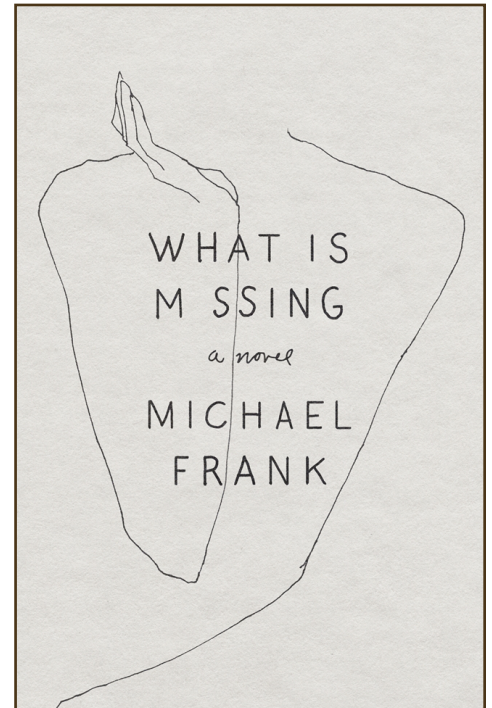


# Reading Group Gold

## *What Is Missing*

*A novel*

by **Michael Frank**



ISBN: 978-0-374-29838-8 / 320 pages

**Suspenseful and gripping, award-winning author Michael Frank's *What Is Missing* is a psychological family drama about a father, a son, and the woman they both love.**

Costanza Ansaldo, a half-Italian and half-American translator, is convinced that she has made peace with her childlessness. A year after the death of her husband, an eminent writer, she returns to the pensione in Florence where she spent many happy times in her youth, and there she meets, first, Andrew Weissman, an acutely sensitive seventeen-year-old, and, soon afterward, his father, Henry Weissman, a charismatic New York physician who specializes in—as it happens—reproductive medicine.

With three lives each marked by heartbreak and absence—of a child, a parent, a partner, or a clear sense of identity—*What is Missing* offers Costanza, Andrew, and Henry the opportunity to make themselves whole when the triangle resumes three months later in New York, where the relationships among them turn and tighten with combustive effects that cut to the core of what it means to be a father, a son, and—for Costanza—a potential mother.

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who is the “I” in the prologue and what are the events (the drugs, the drink, that brutal night, etc.) that this speaker references? What expectations does this passage create? When does it take place within the timeline of the story? Why do you think that Michael Frank choose to tell most of the story as a flashback?
2. Andrew Weissman is the first character to be introduced. He is a teenage boy who prefers the solitude of running and of taking photographs to spending time as a tourist in Florence. How is Andrew different from his father and his brother? Why do he and Costanza Ansaldo, a much older stranger, become friends? In the course of the story, what significant life events does Andrew experience?
3. Before we meet Dr. Henry Weissman, we see him through Andrew’s eyes. How is Henry, as a father, a different man from the one who falls in love with Costanza? How would Henry describe each of his sons? How would he describe himself as a father? Would Justin and Andrew agree with him?
4. What are the parallels between the beginning of the narrative and its conclusion? As we meet Andrew, Henry, and Costanza in Florence, what is revealed about each of them that foreshadows events to come?
5. Why is Costanza in Florence? What is her frame of mind on the day she meets Andrew and Henry? Why are she and Henry attracted to each other? What has each of them experienced that might explain why their relationship becomes serious so quickly?
6. How do Henry, Andrew, and Costanza each see the world differently—Henry as a doctor, Andrew as a photographer, and Costanza as a translator? How are these differences made apparent by their comments about the art and other sights in Florence? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each way of seeing?
7. What do the men in Costanza’s life have in common? How does each meet her expectations or disappoint her? Is her mother right when she says, “Your whole life has been too much about your father’s death.” How did growing up as a fatherless daughter shape Costanza’s personality?
8. When Costanza first sees Henry’s apartment, she notices that the rooms seem underfurnished, with shadows on the walls where pictures once hung. How is Henry’s home different from the apartment Costanza keeps downtown? From Morton Sarnoff’s apartment? What does Costanza do to make herself feel at home in other people’s spaces?

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9. Why does Henry ask Andrew to stay away in the early days of his marriage to Costanza? Is this reasonable? Does he feel a rivalry between his son and himself? What is Andrew's reaction? Why doesn't Henry tell Costanza why Andrew has stopped staying at the apartment?
10. During Maria Rosaria's visit to New York, Costanza says, "My mother always puts her finger on the thing that's missing." What are examples of "missing things"—experiences, connections, stories, truths—that appear throughout the book? What does Maria Rosaria think Costanza is missing? What might Henry and Andrew be missing? What about Leopold?
11. Are there moments of warmth, love, and humor among the members of the Weissman family? Are they a happy family? How is their family life different from that of Andrew's ex-girlfriend Charlotte? What are the conflicts, rivalries, and dissatisfactions beneath the surface of the Weissman family's relationships? How do these impact Henry and Costanza's marriage?
12. Fatherhood is a central theme in the book. Why did each of the male characters make the choices they did about becoming fathers? Who are the 'good' fathers? What makes them good? As the family patriarch, what values has Leopold Weissman instilled in his son and grandsons? What is his legacy?
13. Who is Isaac Schoenfeld? What caused the rift in his partnership and friendship with Henry? In hindsight, what details of his chance meeting with Henry and Andrew at the shirt shop in Florence hint at deeper truths about the past?
14. Henry is an esteemed expert in the field of infertility. Does he do a good job, as a doctor and as a husband, in helping Costanza through IVF? Was it a wise decision for her to go to Henry's clinic? As she begins treatment, is she adequately prepared for the physical and emotional changes she experiences?
15. Why did Henry and Judith keep the facts of their sons' conceptions from them? Why did Henry delay telling Costanza the truth? Were Andrew and Costanza justified in their reactions to Henry's revelations? By the end of the book, have Henry, Costanza, and Andrew each found what they have been missing? Does Henry walk through that gate and up those stairs? What kind of a future might he have with Costanza and her baby?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Michael Frank** is the author of *The Mighty Franks*, the winner of the 2018 Jewish Quarterly Wingate Prize. His essays, articles, and short stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, and *The Yale Review*, among other publications. He lives with his family in New York City and Liguria, Italy.