

PICADOR

# Reading Group Gold

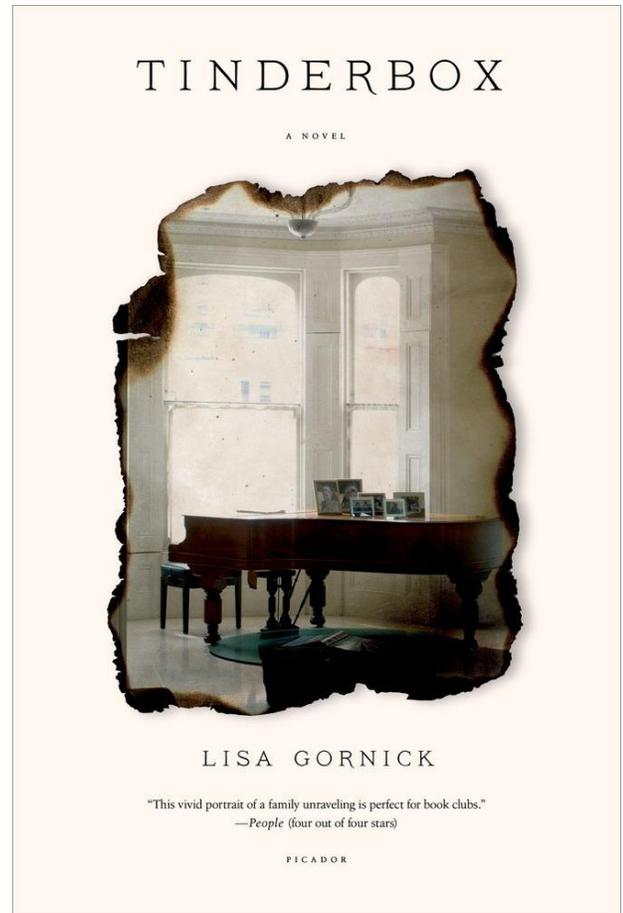
## Tinderbox

by Lisa Gornick

“This vivid portrait of a family unraveling is perfect for book clubs.” —*People* (four out of four stars)

“*Tinderbox* is a brilliant gem of a novel: a page-turner that reminds us that, while we are never without the weight of our past, we also choose how we carry it. Lisa Gornick mines her characters’ hidden histories and ignites our interest from page one. Absolutely riveting.” —**Christina Baker Kline, No. 1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Orphan Train***

“*Tinderbox* will certainly be compared to Jonathan Franzen’s acclaimed *The Corrections*. And it should be, since Gornick creates a world of characters every bit as complex and flawed—and as real—as Franzen’s subjects.”  
—*Jewish Book World*



In this mesmerizing tale of repression and revelation, the psychoanalyst and acclaimed novelist Lisa Gornick has crafted a powerful storyline in which family ties are tested by a troubled outsider.

At the heart of *Tinderbox* is the Manhattan psychotherapist Myra, whose phobia-addled son has just moved back in with her, accompanied by his wife and child. Myra hires a highly recommended Peruvian immigrant to serve as housekeeper and nanny. At first, Eva seems like a perfect fit, easily bonding with Myra’s grandson. But she is haunted by horrific images of the past, relying only on superstition to keep her safe from further harm. One afternoon, she settles into the chair normally reserved for Myra’s patients, igniting a heartrending, disturbing chain of events. Caught in a tragedy of good intentions, Myra and her family must confront the self-deception of their own long-buried traumas.

This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of *Tinderbox*. We hope that the following questions will enhance your reading group’s experience of this perceptive, provocative novel.

1. Discuss the title and the way it is echoed in Myra's wisdom regarding forest fires. What emotional tinder has been sparked in your family?
2. What accounts for the personality differences between Caro and Adam? What gives Caro the strength to know what she wants, and to ask for it (particularly from her father)?
3. As Eva describes her commitment to Judaism, what comes to light about her concept of a Jewish identity? From the point of view of Myra's family, what does it mean to be Jewish?
4. How does Myra's home reflect her shifting sense of self and her attempts to create order in an unpredictable world? What phase of her own motherhood does she confront when she makes room for Adam and his family?
5. Discuss the way Myra selects a housekeeper/nanny and how she attempts to organize their work arrangement. What strengths and weaknesses does Myra bring to the relationship with Eva? Do you think she should have fired Eva? How would you respond in a similar situation?
6. What is the nature of the evil Eva experienced? Ultimately, what did she need from Myra? Would you have handled Eva's insecurities the same way Myra did? How does the situation illustrate the dilemma of offering good advice to others but struggling to apply it to our own lives?
7. How do Adam and Rachida view love and sexuality? What are the strengths and frailties of their marriage?
8. Discuss the journey to Morocco. How is Rachida affected by loss? What does the amulet come to mean to her, if not to Eva?
9. What motivates Layla when she is pursuing a relationship? What are her most appealing traits, and her most difficult ones?
10. What did you discover about Jewish history by reading about Eva's Peruvian ancestors? How does their immigration to South America compare to the experience of the New Yorkers featured in the book? What is your family's concept of homeland?
11. Discuss the role of doctors and healing in *Tinderbox*. What tactics do the novel's psychotherapists share with the other characters who are healers?
12. What is at the root of Adam's insecurities? Do he and Eva share any of the same fears?
13. Discuss the letters between Larry and Myra in part 2, chapter 16. Would you have turned a blind eye to Larry's infidelity? How does their relationship compare to Adam and Rachida's? What accounts for Caro and Talis's ability to "love life its very self," reflecting Myra's philosophy of love?
14. Which childhood memories have the most lasting impact on the characters? For Omar, which memories will have the strongest influence on his sense of self in adulthood?
15. What does Lisa Gornick's fiction show us about the process of finding freedom in difficult truths?

### **Additional Praise**

“*Tinderbox* is the story of a family undergoing seismic changes brought on by a stranger who unwittingly forces her hosts to face themselves. A masterly and dramatic group portrait, drawn with intelligence, precision, and deep feeling.” —**Daniel Menaker, author of *The Treatment***

“A fiery, tender novel about the smoldering secrets that can destroy a family. Lisa Gornick is a psychoanalyst as well as a novelist, and the training serves her well. She exposes her characters with a skilled therapist’s blend of gentility and intensity. She knows just when to hang back—and when to light the match.” —**Lisa Zeidner, author of *Love Bomb* and *Layover***

“I was gripped from the first line of Lisa Gornick’s ingenious novel to the last. Using a polished prose to scratch hard and deep through the surface of a pristine upper-middle-class Upper West Side family’s life, Gornick’s incisive narrative explores the creepy underbelly of privilege and self-satisfaction.” —**Jenny McPhee, author of *A Man of No Moon***

“I loved this novel—it is deeply intelligent and shot through with suspense. The light that it shines on family life—from lethal traumas to daily love to misguided intentions—has a rare sort of right-ness. An extraordinary book, written for adults.” —Joan Silber, PEN/Faulkner finalist for *Fools* and National Book Award finalist for *Ideas of Heaven*

“What a smart, compassionate novel Lisa Gornick has written! In the first line of *Tinderbox*, Myra says yes when she should say no, allowing her maternal instincts to trump her wisdom as a therapist. That tension—the tug of war between the advice we give others and the life we actually live—pulls the reader through this wonderful book of family turmoil. Getting to know these characters truly, madly, deeply is as gut-wrenching and joyful as life itself.” —**Mary Kay Zuravleff, author of *Man Alive!***

### **About the Author**

Lisa Gornick is the author of the novel *A Private Sorcery* and a collection of linked stories, *Louisa Meets Bear*, forthcoming from Sarah Crichton Books in June 2015. Her stories and essays have appeared widely, in *The Agni Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Sun*, and various psychoanalytic journals, and have received many awards. She has a B.A. from Princeton and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Yale, and is a graduate of the writing program at New York University and the psychoanalytic training program at Columbia



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Reading group guide written by Amy Clements