

Reading Group Gold

Louisa Meets Bear

by Lisa Gornick

ABOUT THE BOOK

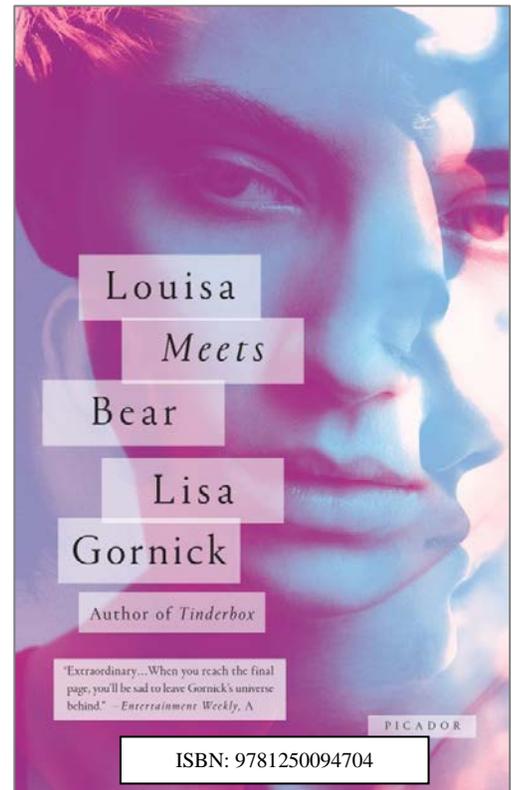
When Louisa and Bear meet at Princeton in 1975, sparks fly. Louisa is the sexually adventurous daughter of a geneticist, Bear the volatile son of a plumber. They dive headfirst into a passionate affair that will alter the course of their lives, changing how they define themselves in the years and relationships that follow. Lisa Gornick's *Louisa Meets Bear* is a gripping novel in interconnected stories from an author whose work "starts off like a brush fire and then engulfs and burns with fury" (*The Huffington Post*).

Reading *Louisa Meets Bear* is like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, as we uncover the subtle and startling connections between new characters and the star-crossed lovers. We meet a daughter who stabs her mother when she learns the truth about her father, a wife who sees herself clearly after finding a man dead on her office floor, a mother who discovers a girl in her teenage son's bed. Each character is striking, each rendered with Gornick's trademark sympathy and psychological acuity. We follow them over the course of a half century, from San Francisco to New York City and from Guatemala to Venice, through pregnancies, tragedies, and revelations, until we return to Louisa and Bear.

With flawed and deeply human characters, and piercing insight into the lives of women, *Louisa Meets Bear* grapples with whether we can--or can't--choose how and whom we love.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In "Instructions to Participant," Lizzie's mother tells her that she decided to leave her father because she'd "stopped loving." What do you make of this reasoning? What other factors might have compelled her to leave, and how did her departure—and her return—affect Lizzie?
2. What were your first impressions of Louisa and Bear? How did your understanding of their relationship—defined as much, it seems, by cruelty as by love and infatuation—change throughout the book?



3. After Louisa leaves Andrew in “Lion Eats Cheetah Eats Weasel Eats Mouse,” she chastises herself: “What did you expect? I asked myself. You betrayed Bear with Andrew, Andrew betrayed you with Cat-Sue, Cat-Sue will betray Andrew with God-knows-whom. Lion eats cheetah eats weasel eats mouse.” In what ways does the book support or reject Louisa’s point of view?
4. According to Louisa, “there are two kinds of people: those who die of needing others, die attempting to rip open their skins so as to snuff out the emptiness with someone else, and those who, like Andrew, maneuver through life as though the purpose is to avoid being touched more deeply than the dermis.” Do you agree or disagree with this point of view? In which category would you place other characters?
5. In “Raya in Rapahu,” siblings Marnie, Sam, Kyle, Nancy, and David face a tough decision: Their mother Raya is in a coma, and they must decide whether to pull the plug. What do you think of each siblings’ stance? Do you agree with their ultimate decision, revealed in a later story, to let Raya go? Richard makes the same decision, in “Misto,” when his art historian stepfather is diagnosed with terminal cancer. “What matters,” Richard decides, “is the vision, not the year count.” What does he mean by this? Do you agree with Richard’s reasoning?
6. Themes of class and privilege are explored throughout the book. Louisa comes from a well-to-do household—but one with clear emotional deficits. Bear achieves financial success after escaping hard-scrabble origins—unlike his brother-in-law Wen, who seems to succumb to the demands of commercial fishing and day labor, in the story “Priest Pond.” What is the book telling us about class? How does privilege, or the lack thereof, affect each character’s path through life?
7. In “Parachute,” Andrew terrifies his second wife, Marnie, with a story about a lynching he’d witnessed in Guatemala—the same story that had shocked Louisa during their affair years earlier. Why does Andrew repeat this tale? Do you believe, as Marnie does, that he should have tried to intervene?
8. Corrine’s life was shattered by the sudden death of her daughter, Lily. The fraught years that followed reach a climax of sorts, when her second daughter, Conchita, attacks her with a kitchen knife. In what ways did losing Lily shatter Corrine’s life? How does Lily’s death factor into her relationship with Conchita—and her ability to reconcile with her, after the assault?
9. In “Nate’s Bed,” Louisa decides to give up her poetry—what her husband Nate calls “art for art’s sake.” Like Nate’s mother, she takes up baking, explaining to Nate that she is “done with making something only for [herself].” How did you feel about her decision? Do you agree with her reasoning?
10. Visual art features prominently in many of these stories: Louisa and her mother visit the Pushkin; Richard and Brianna marvel at a mosaic of the Madonna in Venice, while Lena fusses over a Uffizi catalogue, and her father, a Canaletto scholar falls ill; Raya abandons her work on a Frida Kahlo catalogue, to raise her family. What is the role of visual art in the book? What do the works described mean to the characters who encounter them?
11. What motivates Louisa to finally choose happiness after the encounter with Bear in the city that she describes in “Nate in Bed”? How does the idea of happiness differ for each character—or evolve for them over time? How does the idea of love play into this?

12. Domesticity is a major theme throughout the *Louisa Meets Bear*. In what ways do female characters embrace or reject what might be called the traditional roles of women? What conflicts do themes of domesticity raise in the book? How does domestic life inspire joy?
13. Almost all of the characters in the book suffer some kind of major loss—the death of a parent or child; the suicide of a sibling; sudden blindness from a vicious assault. Discuss the extent to which these tragedies define each character’s life. How do the characters overcome these tragedies—and what lessons do they impart?
14. *Louisa Meets Bear* seems to straddle the line between novel and story collection. Lisa Gornick delicately weaves the lives of her characters into an elaborate web, spanning decades of intimate if at times distant connections. What form—novel or collection—do you think best describes this book? In what ways is it more than the sum of its parts?

Guide written by John McElwee



PICADOR
BOOK CLUB

Join the discussion online:

www.facebook.com/PicadorBookClub