



FLATIRON
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The Curse of the Boyfriend Sweater: Essays on Crafting **Reading Group Guide**

1. “You can’t really know what a project is going to be until it’s done. . . . You can trust the project to reveal itself to you, outside of your control” (1). “Making anything feels like seizing control, like defiant reversal in the face of grief: this thing is yours, the way you would like it to be, and it exists where before there was nothing” (16). Is the act of creating more a surrendering or a seizing of control? Is one or the other more exciting or scary?
2. “Because I think most people have their version of knitting, or spending their lives trying to find it---that small but constant motion that helps them metabolize the universe and comprises a corner of their identity” (3). “Not necessarily your calling, not exactly your passion, not a pursuit that you hope will bring you money or glory or a sense of elevation to a higher plane. Not even something that takes up a lot of space, but fits into your life so seamlessly it’s like there was always room for it. Just that quiet ‘ahh’ of slipping into place . . .” (26). Do you think most people have such a version of knitting? What’s yours? What does it help you make sense of?
3. “I’ve gone back to that memory so many times it’s starting to fray. Those small, suspended moments . . . I would grab them by the fistful and spin them into fiber if I could, knit them up into a blanket and burrow forever into its folds” (13). What memories do you regularly re-mine?
4. “It’s not a selfless act; a handmade object can serve almost like a walkie-talkie, a piece of string between two cups that the maker can whisper through: ‘I was here. I matter’ (36–7). Do you think making something for someone else is more selfish or selfless in the end? Do you have any objects that transport you to a certain time and place?
5. “Loving someone can give you a purpose and a project. It can give you a context and therefore a clearer sense of yourself: here is who I am because here is who he is” (48). Does love reveal or create identity? Should it be one or the other?

6. “As I knitted, it occurred to me that maybe the Curse of the Boyfriend Sweater *is* real, but it’s not quite accurate to call it a curse. Maybe it’s more of a litmus test, a method of determining whether what you have with someone is going to last. Is it solid enough to stand up under the weight of all those stitches, all that hope, all that work the two of you must choose to put in, or will it collapse before the final row” (52)? Do you believe in the curse? Do you think it *is* a curse?
7. “[T]he hardest part of making anything is knowing when to start over” (55). Is that true? If not, what’s the hardest part?
8. “My fear can be useful. It focuses me and makes me decisive, flags me when something truly is wrong. But it’s also limiting, knee-jerk, and makes me averse to any situation where I don’t know the outcome, because it means having to give up that most precious thing: control” (71). If you could wake up tomorrow and be free of your own fear or anxiety, would you? Might you miss tomorrow what drives you nuts about yourself today?
9. Okun describes how she shies away from crafting for cash (174). Is there a dark tinge to turning your passion into profit, even a career? Is there a certain freedom that comes with doing something knowingly imperfectly, as an avowed amateur?
10. “But there are times when I crave something less neat, less harsh, less broadcast to me by an unfeeling satellite millions of miles away. I want a method of measuring that is warmer and that is mine. I want not six, but sixish” (95). Is this a modern problem? Do you have any similar ways of unplugging on a small scale?
11. Okun shares two personal lists (100):

Do less:

Drinking
Worrying
Self-flagellating

Do more:

Knitting
Writing
Yoga
Being here now

What’s on your *Do less* and *Do more* lists?

12. “Projects, even the kind that are not so emotionally loaded, always feel smaller when they’re done, when you’re not obsessing over individual components anymore. The same is true for spans of time: happy periods, mourning periods—all of them flatten when you can look back on them from arm’s length, when you can hold them in your hands and stick them to the wall, when you can look at them in the context of your life” (102). Do you agree? Is this trick of time the root of nostalgia?

13. “Bodies are the worst. . . . Bodies are the best. . . . Bodies just . . . are” (125–26). Would you choose to be a “*brain in a vat*” if you could?
14. “Because the feelings the Internet evokes are real; the things that happen there are real” (168). How do you define what is “real”? Does the online world count?
15. “Nobody’s ordering expensive, time-consuming craft projects to tell their enemies to fuck right off . . .” (175). What is the ultimate point of crafting? Is it to make the world a more beautiful place? To gain control?
16. “You grow up thinking that somebody who loves you should automatically know how to care for you, and vice versa. That to love is to understand, and to understand is to know exactly how to act. But so much gets lost between people. We don’t even know how best to care for ourselves a lot of the time, so how could we expect to do it so effortlessly for others” (214)? Does this, in your opinion, define what it is to care for someone? Have you had experience with trying to care for someone and not being able to?
17. “We like our lower frequencies, our calmer minds. We like who we are there. . . . Home-home is where the nest can quickly become a black hole, sucking me into the same spot on the couch and back into the same person I used to be when I was fourteen. I don’t love who I am there . . .” (224–25). How much does place determine personhood? Are you a different person in various places or contexts?
18. What’s the most meaningful thing you’ve ever made, even if you’re not a crafter? Why did it matter to you?
19. Do you think this book works better consumed in pieces or all at once? How did you read it (in print or as an eBook, before bed or at the beach, etc.), and how did that affect your experience of reading it?
20. If you had to describe this book in one word, what would that word be? “Funny”? “Philosophical”? What is its overall theme or tone?