

Discussion Guide

Isadora

by Amelia Gray

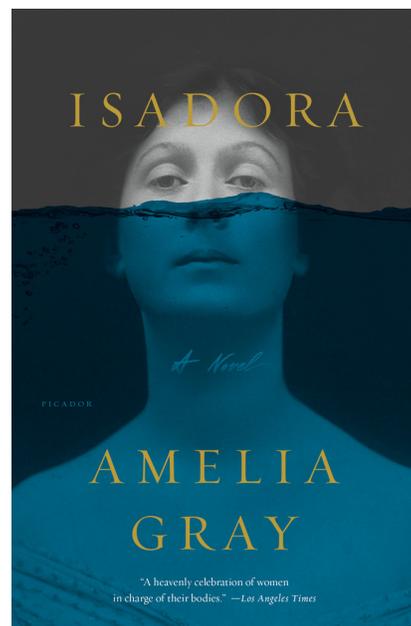
ABOUT THE BOOK

Using the scaffolding of Isadora Duncan’s life and the stuff of her spirit, Amelia Gray’s breakout novel delivers an incredibly imaginative portrait of the artist, resulting in “a stunning meditation on art and grief by one of America’s most exciting young authors” (NPR).

As dynamic, enthralling, and powerful as the visionary artist it captures, Amelia Gray’s *Isadora* is a relentless and living portrayal of a woman who shattered convention, even in the darkest days of her life.

In 1913, Isadora Duncan was known as much for her stunning dance performances as for her eccentric and salacious personal life — her lovers included poets, directors, and the heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune. But when her two children drowned in Paris, she found herself taking on a role she had never dreamed of.

The tragedy brought the gossips out in full force, and the grieving mother wanted nothing more than to escape it all. Fleeing the very life she had worked so hard to build, she left her sister, Elizabeth, holding the reins of the artistic empire along with Elizabeth’s lover, Max, who had his own ideas for greatness. For two years Isadora cast about prewar Europe, living on credit on islands in Greece and in shuttered beachfront dwellings in Italy. She lashed out at her dearest lovers and friends, the very people who held her up. But life had cracked her spirit in two: on one side, the brilliant young talent who captivated audiences the world over; on the other, a heartbroken mother spinning dangerously on the edge of sanity.



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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Isadora* is told from the perspective of several different characters, but Amelia Gray reserves the first-person perspective for Isadora Duncan. Why do you think she made this choice and what effect did it have on your reading?
2. Paris and Isadora have very different reactions to the death of the children. Paris immerses himself in the details of planning the funeral and reveals that he felt “relief” when “the tragedy he knew would ruin him had come at last.” Isadora, on the other hand, retreats into a state of deep grief and obsesses over the macabre details of the accident. What do these two very different reactions reveal about each character?
3. When we are first introduced to Elizabeth, we immediately receive a different perspective on the events and a more critical lens on Isadora and her actions. How does Elizabeth’s perspective enhance and/or change your view of Isadora?

4. Throughout the novel it is mentioned that Isadora was perhaps not the best mother to her children. Do you agree or disagree?
5. Soon into the novel it is revealed that Paris left behind his wife and four daughters to be with Isadora. Does this change your opinion of Paris?
6. The author adds many references and allusions to Greek mythology, literature, and culture throughout the novel. What purpose do these allusions serve and how do they add another layer of depth and meaning?
7. Soon after the cremation of the children, Isadora takes to eating their ashes. Why do you think she does this?
8. Isadora's creation of a new style of dance is another important theme in the novel. She describes a time when Paris came to see her dance, and when he takes off his own shoes she says that, "Though I had done it that way for years, nobody seemed to understand what I was going for until that night, when Paris Singer took off his dress shoes." What was it about this action that suggested Paris understood something integral and important to Isadora's work?
9. When Paris visits the very ill Isadora in Greece, "the shadow man" accompanies him. What do you make of this "apparition" and who or what does "the shadow man" represent?
10. Were you surprised to learn that Elizabeth is very superstitious? Why or why not?
11. Isadora and Elizabeth have a difficult and complicated relationship. What were some key moments and scenes in the novel that illustrated the complexity of their relationship?
12. Much of Max's time is spent developing a nutrition and fitness program for Isadora's students. Knowing what we know now about the development of athletes, do you think he was ahead of his time or do you agree with Isadora's assessment that his program interfered with her method?
13. What do you make of Isadora's teaching methods? Do you think she's a good instructor?
14. During Isadora's performance near the end of the novel, she makes a speech, and in this speech she discusses her children's deaths. She thanks the river "for what it gave [her]." What did the river give to Isadora and do you agree or disagree with Isadora's conclusions?
15. Elizabeth spends much of the novel writing and not sending letters to Romano, but near the end of the novel, she finally writes one that we can infer she actually sent. Why is this letter so important and how does it allude to the death of Isadora?
16. Isadora Duncan was a complicated character in life and is also a complicated character on the page. Did you find her likable or would you go so far as to describe her as an anti-hero? How did reading her sections, particularly the ones that cast her in an unfavorable light, challenge you as a reader?

written by Kianoosh Hashemzadeh

About the Author

Amelia Gray is the author of several books, including *AM/PM*, *Museum of the Weird*, *THREATS*, and *Gutshot*. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Tin House*, and *VICE*. She has been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and for the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, and is the winner of the FC2 Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction Contest. She lives in Los Angeles.



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