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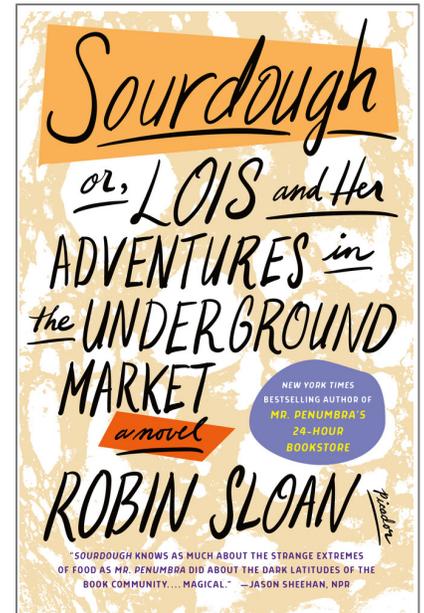
Discussion Guide

SOURDOUGH

or, Lois and Her Adventures in the Underground Market: A Novel

From Robin Sloan, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, comes *Sourdough*, "a perfect parable for our times" (*San Francisco Magazine*): a delicious and funny novel about an overworked and under-socialized software engineer discovering a calling and a community as a baker.

ABOUT THE BOOK



ISBN: 9781250192752

Named One of the Best Books of the Year by NPR, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Southern Living*

Lois Clary is a software engineer at General Dexterity, a San Francisco robotics company with world-changing ambitions. She codes all day and collapses at night, her human contact limited to the two brothers who run the neighborhood hole-in-the-wall from which she orders dinner every evening. Then, disaster! Visa issues. The brothers quickly close up shop. But they have one last delivery for Lois: their culture, the sourdough starter used to bake their bread. She must keep it alive, they tell her—feed it daily, play it music, and learn to bake with it.

Lois is no baker, but she could use a roommate, even if it is a needy colony of microorganisms. Soon, not only is she eating her own homemade bread, she's providing loaves to the General Dexterity cafeteria every day. Then the company chef urges her to take her product to the farmer's market—and a whole new world opens up.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Lois defines proprioception as “the process by which organisms judge the position of their own body parts in space.” (16) She inhabits various and distinct environments in the novel, most significantly General Dexterity, Camillo Street, the Marrow Fair, and the Lois Club. How does her proprioception adapt to or resist these places?
2. After the “fungal party hellscape” at the Fair, Lois is relieved to find that her name is not mentioned in the newspaper (241). The mishap is credited to Lembas Labs. What other examples of ownership and sharing—both of ideas and of commodities—occur in Sourdough? To what degree is working and creating independently useful, both within the novel and hypothetically? What about working and creating collaboratively?
3. The hazy Mr. Marrow is kind of the lovechild between Dumbledore and the Wizard of Oz. It is notable that the Marrow Fair workers assume the creator of the market to be a man; it is also notable that Lois suspects a very specific type of man to be Mr. Marrow (Andrei or Klamath). Think about the powerful women and men in the novel. How do they transgress their stereotypes?
4. Only Beo’s half of the correspondence is relayed in the novel. What do you make of this? Trace this romantic subplot—in what ways do you see it emerge over the course of Sourdough?
5. Discussion of food is highly political within several of the book’s communities, whether on a personal or systematic scale. Lois moves from being, essentially, clueless about food to operating within the highest ranks of food culture. By the end of the novel, how would you say her view on food and the culinary arts inform her view of the world, at large?
6. The members of the Lois Club tack adjectives to their names for ease in conversation, which activates the need for self-identifying. How might being given a certain name influence the course of a lifetime? How much do you think, upon meeting someone, that you signify your name and hold agency over it? How much does your name signify you?
7. General Dexterity’s founder, Andrei, states: “Repetition [is] the enemy of creativity. Repetition belong[s] to robots.” (7) The confluence of technology and the naturally-occurring is neither dystopian nor utopian in Sourdough. What kind of contemporary self-portrait emerges? How do the fantastical-seeming elements of the book portray the world in which we live today?
8. The starter is one of the main characters in the novel. It is somewhat of a stray-turned-domestic dog: unpredictable, devoted, a bit wild. How does Lois’ understanding of the starter shift throughout their relationship? What do you make of the starter’s unexplainable consciousness, for example, the shapes it forms on its crust as a result of listening to certain kinds of music?
9. When Jaina Mitra asks to study the starter and becomes “suddenly sweet and solicitous,” Lois gets uneasy and declines. What kind of mentality is expected at the Marrow Fair? What, aside from a love for food, is the foundation of the workers’ relationships to one another?
10. Horace Portacio’s library is somewhat unexpected in the market. Consider the practices of archiving and collecting within the context of the novel. How is the library both a crucial and revealing tool for recording history while also existing autonomously as a site of creation?

Guide written by Naomi Falk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Sloan grew up in Michigan and now splits his time between San Francisco and the Internet. He is the author of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-hour Bookstore*.



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