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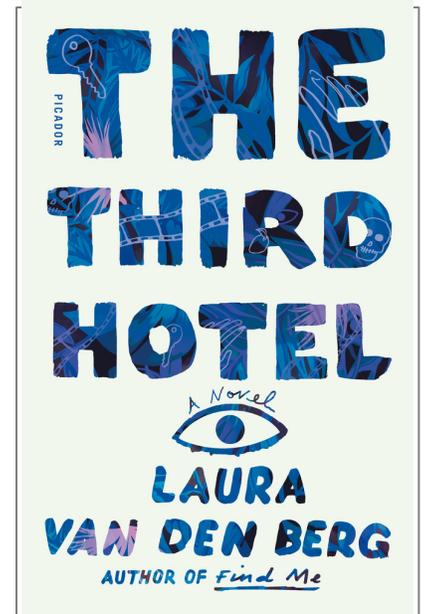
Discussion Guide

The Third Hotel

by Laura van den Berg

"[A] future cult classic." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"There's Borges and Bolaño, Kafka and Cortázar, Modiano and Murakami, and now Laura van den Berg." —*The Washington Post*



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ABOUT THE BOOK

In Havana, Cuba, a widow tries to come to terms with her husband's death—and the truth about their marriage—in Laura van den Berg's surreal, mystifying story of psychological reflection and metaphysical mystery.

Shortly after Clare arrives in Havana, Cuba, to attend the annual Festival of New Latin American Cinema, she finds her husband, Richard, standing outside a museum. He's wearing a white linen suit she's never seen before, and he's supposed to be dead. Grief-stricken and baffled, Clare tails Richard, a horror film scholar, through the newly tourist-filled streets of Havana, clocking his every move. As the distinction between reality and fantasy blurs, Clare finds grounding in memories of her childhood in Florida and of her marriage to Richard, revealing her role in his death and reappearance along the way. *The Third Hotel* is a propulsive, brilliantly shape-shifting novel from an inventive author at the height of her narrative powers.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Clare can't say exactly what happened to her in Cuba. How did you interpret her experiences there and her encounters with Richard?
2. So many aspects of Clare's life are incomplete or unfinished --- her marriage, the Patricia Highsmith novel she's reading, two attempts to return to New York. The film festival is the only thing she sees through. How did you interpret this aspect of her character? Did you think of it as a flaw or as a reflection of something else?
3. Why do you think Richard kept the red notebook from Clare? Did you agree with his decision?
4. The characters in *The Third Hotel* have different ideas about horror and how it affects its audience. According to Mata, "the foundation of horror is a dislocation from reality;" he believes that it "plunges the viewer into a state of terror," whereas Arlo suggests terror is fake, arguing that horror comforts the viewer by insulating them from the actual world. How would you characterize the genre? Whose take resonated with you the most, and how did the novel's experimentation with horror tropes affect your reading of it?
5. Writing about the motif of social upheaval in zombie films, an academic whom Richard admires argues that the undead are uniquely capable of "unmaking power" and that this is part of what makes zombie films so appealing. Do you agree with his assessment? What other kinds of power do the dead and the undead have over the living?
6. *The Third Hotel* is a thoroughly researched novel that's deeply rooted in history and scholarship --- the academic alluded to in Question 4, for instance, is an actual person. Why might an author decide to weave reality into fiction, particularly fiction with speculative elements? How can fiction help us explore important ideas and theories in ways that nonfiction might not?
7. One of the novel's key themes is the threat of violence: it's associated with experiences as ostensibly varied as grief, travel, and masculinity. Discuss Clare's understanding of violence and how it's perpetrated. Why do you think the threat of violence is so pervasive?
8. Richard believed that "screens were vehicles for the subjective" that "revealed the viewer as much as they revealed to the viewer." Would you agree, or do you think that it's possible for screens and images to be objective? What about books? How does each --- literature and film --- affect its subject?

9. Clare describes herself as someone who is “suspicious of too much honesty, too much openness,” noting that “[it] could splinter a person” --- or a marriage. She seems to associate honesty with the loss of privacy. Do you think it’s possible to be too honest? Are honesty and openness the same thing?

10. Clare often thinks about “the traveling self” and whether or not people become a temporary version of themselves when they’re away or more authentic. How do you feel about the traveling self, and in what ways did Clare transform while she was in Cuba? Do you think that she became more herself or less?

11. The incident in Death Valley reminds Clare of the ways in which silence can facilitate blame: she realizes that “in the absence of another person’s account, the story you invented for yourself went unchallenged.” How did her conversation with Richard at the Cure Hotel change your understanding of their relationship? When the reel of film got destroyed, did you think that it was for the best?

12. Toward the end of the novel, Clare reflects on “the lure of found footage” and the dangers of surveillance. Yet she does a lot of surveilling herself, and these observations are juxtaposed with Clare’s discovery of a viral video that secretly captured the abusive and predatory behavior of one of *Revolucion Zombi*’s producers. What kind of stance does the novel take on the ethics of surveillance and the various ways we watch and expose one another?

13. At one point, Clare notes that “behind every death [lies] a set of unanswered questions;” for her, “moving on” amounts to an agreement not to disturb them. Discuss the extent to which Clare is able to “move on” from Richard’s death and how we see her process her father’s decline. Does her thinking changed over the course of the novel? What does moving on mean to you?

14. Clare has to make several difficult choices when it comes to caring for her father, including her decision to return to Florida. How did you feel about the choices she made, and what would you have done if you were in her position?

15. Early on, Clare recalls a series of arguments that she and Richard had about how much her work required her to travel, which hinted at a larger question: why they never separated. Why do you think Clare and Richard stayed together? Was their marriage as radical as Clare suggests? If Richard hadn’t died, do you think their marriage would have strengthened or dissolved?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura van den Berg is the author of two story collections, *What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us* and *The Isle of Youth*, and the novel *Find Me*. She is the recipient of a Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Bard Fiction Prize, an O. Henry Award, and a MacDowell Colony fellowship. Born and raised in Florida, she lives in Cambridge, MA, with her husband and dog.



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