

PICADOR

Discussion Guide

Evening in Paradise

By Lucia Berlin

A collection of previously uncompiled stories from the short-story master and literary sensation Lucia Berlin.

About the Book

In 2015, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published *A Manuel for Cleaning Women*, a posthumous story collection by a relatively unknown writer, to wild, widespread acclaim. It was a *New York Times* bestseller; the paper's *Book Review* named it one of the Ten best Books of 2015; and NPR, *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other outlets gave the book rave reviews.

The book's author, Lucia Berlin, earned comparisons to Raymond Carver, Grace Paley, Alice Munro, and Anton Chekhov. *Evening in Paradise* is a careful selection from Berlin's remaining stories- twenty-two gems that showcase the gritty glamour that made readers fall in love with her. From Texas to Chile, Mexico to New York City, Berlin finds beauty in the darkest places and darkness in the seemingly pristine. *Evening in Paradise* is an essential piece of Berlin's oeuvre, a jewel-box follow-up for new and old fans.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR EVENING IN PARADISE

1. Do you regularly read short stories, and if so, what in particular do you like about the genre?
2. Which of the stories was your favorite and why? Which was your least favorite, and why?

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3. Did it impact the way you read the stories knowing that the author had died? How about the fact that although not necessarily autobiographical the stories were "close enough for horseshoes"?
4. In the preface, Berlin's son Mark relates that they often "laughed about the first precept of Buddhism: life is suffering. And the Mexican attitude that life is cheap, but it sure can be fun." Did you find this reflected in Berlin's work? Do you agree with either statement, neither statement, or with both?
5. What recurring themes did you find running throughout the stories?
6. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?
7. Based on her stories, how do you think Berlin views the relationships children have with the adults in their lives, including parents, aunts and guardians? Do you agree with her assessment?
8. Throughout the book, many of the men and women depicted are unfaithful to their partners. What do you think the author is saying about romantic relationships and marriage?
9. What element of Berlin's writing style did you enjoy the most? Does her writing recall any other authors to mind?
10. Are there any specific quotes in the novel that you found meaningful?
11. Berlin reuses some names across stories, while other stories use different names for the same woman. For example, in "La Barca del la Ilusion" the heroine is named Maya while in "The Wives" her name is Laura, although it seems the same woman is featured in both; and the children in both "My Life is an Open Book" and "Noel, 1974" are named Keith, Ben, Nathan and Joel, yet their mother is Claire in the former story and Maggie in the latter. Why do you think the author used this technique?
12. Why do you think the entire collection was named after the story, "Evening in Paradise"?
13. The first two stories highlight specific childhood memories. Do these instances call to mind memories from your pre-teen years?
14. In "Sometime in Summer", "Mamie did not trust foreigners and Hope's grandmother hated Americans," yet the girls were friends. Why do you suppose that was? Do you recall any childhood friendships that stretched across racial or ethnic lines?
15. In "Endado", the narrator speaks about children who are forced to move often, such as "army brats and children of diplomats." She goes on to write, "The problem for such children is not being isolated or always new, but that they adapt so quickly and so well." What do you think she means by this? Do you agree with the statement?
16. In "Endado", both Pepe and Xavier are wealthy yet aware of the disparities in the world; they each seek, in their own way, to make a difference. It seems as if

the loudest voices for change are often those of young adults. Why do you suppose this is?

17. In "Itinerary", the narrator talks about making a time capsule with her friends when they were young. Her friends' lives did follow their predictions, while hers did not. Could you have predicted the trajectory of your life? Which aspects were as you imagined they'd be and which weren't?
18. In "Itinerary", why do you think the narrator's parents had someone meet her at each airport transfer? Was this necessary? What did you think of the selection of women who were asked to meet her? Do you recall your first trip away from home without your parents?
19. "Lead Street, Albuquerque" features the marriage of artist Rex and the young woman, Maria. What did you think of their relationship? Do you think Rex ever intended to take her and the baby to Italy with him, even before he knew she was pregnant?
20. What did you think of the story "Noel, Texas, 1956", narrated by a woman named Tiny from her roof? Was she justified in her anger? Did you find the ending, where an errant Christmas toy dropped from an airplane killing an elderly shepherd, funny or tragic?
21. In "Cherry Blossom Time", stay-at-home mom Cassandra begins to fixate on the postman's routine, realizing her life, too, is stuck in a rut. What did you think of her husband's reaction to her frustration? Do you consider yourself someone who sticks to a routine, or are you more of a free spirit?
22. "La Barca de la Ilusion" speaks to the power of addiction; even after Maya's husband Buzz has been clean for a long period of time, the reappearance of his drug dealer brings a relapse. Maya doesn't think things will get better even after the dealer's death. Do you think she should have given the situation another chance or was she right to leave? What do you think you would have done in similar circumstances?
23. In "Noel, 1974", Zelda is upset that her daughter has come out as gay. Maggie tells her, "Seems like I wouldn't care if any of my sons were gay. On the other hand, if one of them became a cop or a Hare Krishna I might blow my brains out." What kinds of expectations do we place on our children, fairly or unfairly? Are there lifestyle choices your children might make that you'd find difficult to accept?
24. In "Our Brother's Keeper", both Sara's best friend and her ex-husband say they knew Sara's lover was bad news, and feel guilty about her death. Do you think we bear responsibility for our inaction, when we know someone we care about is making an error? Do you think Sara would have listened if others had expressed concern?

25. The last three stories are about an older woman traveling the world alone as a tourist. Did you find this adventurous/brave or foolhardy? Have you ever taking a vacation by yourself? Would you, if presented with the opportunity?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucia Berlin (1936–2004) worked brilliantly but sporadically throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Her stories are inspired by her early childhood in various Western mining towns; her glamorous teenage years in Santiago, Chile; three failed marriages; a lifelong problem with alcoholism; her years spent in Berkeley, New Mexico, and Mexico City; and the various jobs she held to support her writing and her four sons. Sober and writing steadily by the 1990s, she took a visiting writer's post at the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1994 and was soon promoted to associate professor. In 2001, in failing health, she moved to Southern California to be near her sons. She died in 2004 in Marina del Rey.

Berlin's books include *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, *Welcome Home*, and *Evening in Paradise*.