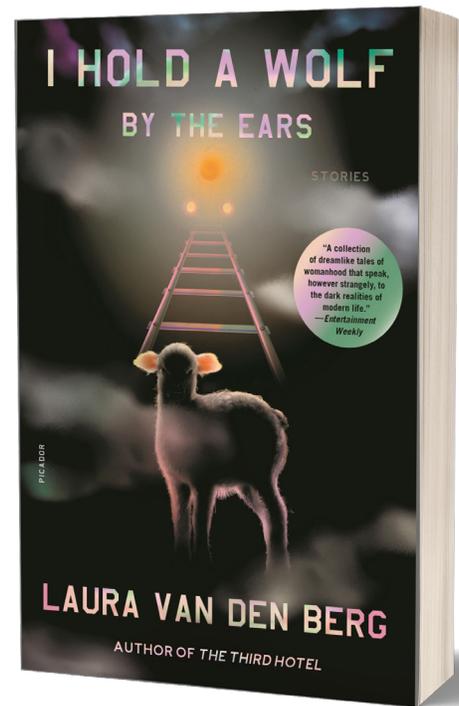


I Hold a Wolf by the Ears Stories

by Laura van den Berg



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INTRODUCTION

By turns beautiful and haunting, *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears* marks a new storytelling triumph from the acclaimed author Laura van den Berg. In clear-eyed, electrifying scenes, the idiosyncratic characters in these eleven stories grapple with fraught relationships and eerie turns of fate, unearthing new possibilities about the nature of fear and the self-deceptions that sustain some of our most fundamental beliefs.

This guide is designed to enhance your reading group's experience of *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears*. We hope the questions and topics that follow will open a profusion of pathways for conversation.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The book's epigraph, from Clarice Lispector's novel *A Breath of Life*, asks "Do you ever suddenly find it strange to be yourself?" What's your answer to this question? Which of the stories in this collection resonated with you the most, especially in terms of the process of self-discovery?
2. As the narrator recounts the course of her psychotherapy in "Last Night," what does she help us understand about perception and reality?

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3. Did you experience Slumberland as a nightmarish locale or a place of catharsis? In this story's closing paragraphs, is the camera better than the telephone as a communication tool?
4. In "Hill of Hell," how does the narrator's understanding of "the big alone" shift over the course of her life as a mother, spanning the years between her daughters' deaths?
5. How do the conflicting Marys in "Cult of Mary" serve as a fitting backdrop for the narrator's travels with her mother? Who has the power over their history?
6. In what way is "Lizards" a portrait of the perhaps primal, often gender-specific distinctions in the ways people satisfy their urges (particularly for sex, love, and dominance)? Why did the characters disagree about whether the judge was guilty? Is the neighbor who supplies the sparkling water guilty?
7. What were your initial theories about the image of the child shimmying up the tree in "The Pitch"? On page 82, as the narrator follows her husband through the woods, she tells him that he knows everything about her except her thoughts. Then she thinks about "the possibility that our thoughts were the most important thing to know, because they made up the stories we told ourselves about the world and our place in it, what was possible and what was sacred and what was forbidden." How does this apply to her husband, and to his fate? What does her fate illustrate about the intersection of artistic expression, commerce, and self-worth?
8. Discuss the strands of abandonment and rescue, mourning and marvel, that are woven into "Volcano House." What techniques, images, and other aspects of craft does the author use to create this singular portrait of entangled, intensely bonded siblings and the aftermath of tragedy?
9. Would you have been able to escape the effects of a bell-ringing mother like Sarah's in "Friends"? Would you have made friends with Holly?
10. How did your opinion of Karolina oscillate as you learned more about her? What makes Karolina alluring? What makes the narrator vulnerable?
11. Which aspects of the storyline in "Your Second Wife" startled you the most? Do you think objectification and role-playing are a facet of most marriages? How do the clients in this story compare to other characters throughout the book who grapple with the loss of a loved one?
12. In the title story, which explains the meaning of the idiom as "There is no easy way out," how do name tags and passports represent Margot's roadblocks? In what ways does her story speak to the quest to find our true selves, and to find our way home?

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13. Discuss the range of anxieties that recur throughout the collection, from travel gone awry to frightening encounters with the surreal. How are the voice and point of view shaped by the fact that the protagonists are women, with first-person narration in most of the stories? How does the collection as a whole shed light on the undercurrent of humanity's emotions?
14. Laura van den Berg has been frequently praised for her highly imaginative storytelling. What is unique about the way she captures the human experience? How did *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears* enhance your appreciation for her previous works that you have read?

Guide written by Amy Root Clement

About the Author



LAURA VAN DEN BERG is the author of the story collections *What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us* and *The Isle of Youth*, and the novels *Find Me* and *The Third Hotel*, the latter of which was a finalist for the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award. She is the recipient of a Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Bard Fiction Prize, a PEN O. Henry Award, and a MacDowell Colony fellowship, and is a two-time finalist for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. In 2021, Laura was awarded both the Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction. Born and raised in Florida, she splits her time between the Boston area and central Florida with her husband and dog.

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