



## THE ARCHIVISTS Readers Guide

### Book Group Discussion Starters

Many of these stories have related themes; some have interrelated characters and similar backgrounds or uncanny elements. Discussing these similarities might enrich your experience of the collection. Here are some thoughts to get you started:

- In what ways is the book's epigraph fitting to this story collection?
- Several of these stories focus on a woman in a particular phase of a romantic relationship. In each case, how does this background intersect with the more immediate plot of each story?
- Uncanny events seem to occur in some of the stories – yet are they “actual,” or figments of the protagonists' imagination? How might we interpret them in ways that shed light on the characters' predicaments?
- What makes the title of this collection so apt? In which stories does it particularly resonate?
- A feeling of loss permeates many of the stories. What are some of the different types of losses, and how have they affected these different characters?
- In which of the stories do particular events trigger decisions or a radical change in a character's life or beliefs?
- Is there one story in this collection that you would call your favorite? What makes it so? Conversely, can you choose one that you really did not like, or that disturbed you, and explain why?
- For each story, try answering the question, “What is this story about?”

### Topics for discussion for each story:

#### **Relativity**

1. What makes Rozsa an appealing character—or do you find her a bit hard to like? To what do you attribute the connection she and Robert share? How would you describe their relationship?
2. What effect did the legal necessity of naming their child have on Robert? Do you find the name they choose for her appropriate—and if so, why?
3. Robert struggles with what to say when people ask him if he has children. “Friends and acquaintances, when they learned what had happened, said things that never seemed to him quite right.” Is there a “right” response to such a tragedy? What would you say?

## Heart-Scalded

1. What vivid details contribute to the setting of this story so that it feels uncomfortable, strange, even unfamiliar to Viv, though she has been to Len's house many times before?
2. Viv persuades herself that if she can survive seeing Aziz with his new partner, she can survive anything. What are some of the ways she attempts to hide her illness, and what is the effect of the overheard line, "Len says she has some rare kind of cancer, there's no real treatment, they just try whatever until it stops working, then try something else..."?
3. Viv is "heart-scalded" by her break-up with Aziz. In what ways does this phrase resonate?
4. Viv chides herself for telling Aziz what she really thought about him and his business practices (Remorseless!) and believes she could have "tamped down" these feelings enough for the relationship to have endured. How realistic do you think this belief is?
5. The fellow party-goer who claims to have put a curse on Aziz asks Viv, "If you had the choice of being cured but no longer having Aziz in your life, versus no cure but getting Aziz back, which would you choose?" Which do you think she might choose, and why?
6. How might we understand what Viv thinks she saw and heard at the planter in the garden?

## Awake

1. While the chair that Peter takes for repair is to him "proof of possibility, of transformation," Peter's girlfriend criticizes him for being passive and using the chair as a distraction, and Dez says that he's depressed. Did transformation actually take place? What are some of the clues?
2. What are some of the signs that there is a large swath of time missing from Peter's experience? How might we interpret this lapse and its cause?

## The Archivists

1. How are the main characters in this story interlinked? Who are the archivists in the story?
2. The unnamed choreographer is the direct descendant of a Holocaust survivor. Might his ability to express the pain and anguish of his mother's war experience through movement be a demonstration of his epigenetic inheritance?
3. It seems that the intensity of the movement in *Forced March*, so difficult and so powerful, is somehow transmitted to Brynn; her strength and interpretive skills allow her to capture and express it. What might this say about the human ability to understand the pain of others?

### **A Guide to Lesser Divinities**

1. A tragic event changed the course of Eliana's life. What changed, and why doesn't she tell Luis about it?
2. Why is Eliana so certain that her romantic relationships will fail?
3. This story illustrates many of the weaknesses, oddities, and frustrations of a career in Academia, particularly for women. Do any examples in the story correspond to your own workplace experience?
4. Eliana doesn't want her students to think they are doomed by fate, but instead to "focus on miraculous acts of self-creation, to believe we could alter our circumstances if we chose to." Why does she seem unable to follow her own advice?
5. Behind her passive-aggressive behavior and envy, Eliana seems to admire Alison. What does she admire, and what does she find to emulate?

### **Providence**

1. Like Eliana, Talia fears her fate, trying to make plans to avoid pitfalls. What are the causes of her fears, and is there any other way to respond?
2. What factors contribute to Talia's inability to admit to others that she herself is the jogger?
3. How does Talia treat Gordie regarding his "on the spectrum" traits, and how has this element of their relationship possibly influenced their communication or misunderstanding?
4. Talia seems deeply moved by the signs of caring and love she has been shown by complete strangers who know of her collapse. What circumstances have led to her feeling so surprised?

### **Egg in Aspic**

1. Viv reappears as a key character in this story. At what stage of grief would you describe Laurel?
2. This miniature restaurant is the epitome of intimacy. How does the author build on this sensation? How do the appetizer and the view into the restaurant from the outside relate?
3. Are there signs that Laurel and Max will continue their relationship?

## Vertigo

1. Emil and his father seem to have a close relationship. Why has Emil had not spoken in any meaningful way with him, nor travelled to see him, in the past 15 years?
2. What are the possible motives for Daniel's murder?
3. Emil's vertigo began the day he learned of Daniel's death. Why does he still experience it these many years later, climbing the alleyways after his father's death?
4. Little children were warned to stay away from the alleyways, or witches would turn them into birds and let them fly away. What or who does the little girl represent? Who has been waiting, and is now gone?

## Three Times Two

1. How do you divide a 2-story bunkbed between 3 couples? This story is told in retrospect, and we glimpse the future life of several of the hikers. How does this viewpoint affect your reading of the story?
2. In what ways does Bruno's foreshadowing of events (by talking about the presence of UXO underground in Germany) come to pass?
3. What is the common fatal flaw in Markus and Lynn that dooms their relationship? How might cultural differences also have contributed to their break-up?
4. Markus remembers only two things about the hike years later, one of which is "that he had not been kind." Would the trip have been less of a disaster if he had been kinder?

## Seeing

1. The walk that Kristin takes on most days seems to have some trouble spots. Is she foolhardy to go on that route? Does her choice to *not* stop the cyclist for help make sense to you?
2. Kristin shows amazing strength when she walks past the rapist. How might we understand her experience of PTSD after learning of his attack on another woman? What do you make of the visions Kristin now sees?

## Communicable

1. Do you agree with friend C.J., who tells Marlo that it's too early in the relationship to invite Leland to live with her during the Covid lockdown, or with Pamela, who says, "Listen to your intuition, not your fear.... Let it be *you* deciding - not your fear?"

2. In what tangible ways do we witness Marlo's fear of losing Leland?
3. Marlo is presented as a person with many defects. What do you see as her worst characteristics, and what may have caused them? How do her feelings about Pamela place Marlo's traits in relief?
4. Is Marlo a reliable point-of-view narrator?
5. What are the flickering shadows? Why do you think Marlo sees them?
6. What did Pamela see behind Marlo on the screen that caused her to leave the call? Did that event trigger her decision to leave her job?
7. After Leland walks out, we see Marlo stroking the proliferating shadow-flickers, caressing the tops of their heads, then swatting them away. How do you interpret that closing image?

### **Oblivion**

1. Loss and shame are the prevailing themes in this story. What are the examples of this in Russell's life? In Joan's?
2. "Just as Russell had slid from reason to oblivion, she might, by some trick of time, slide back into childhood, or some murky place between then and now." There are two opposite arcs of development for Joan and Russell in this story. How would you describe them?
3. Was Joan wrong to lie about her age? Do you see this as a detriment or a necessary step to move forward in life? What might she have done to mitigate the pain it caused her?