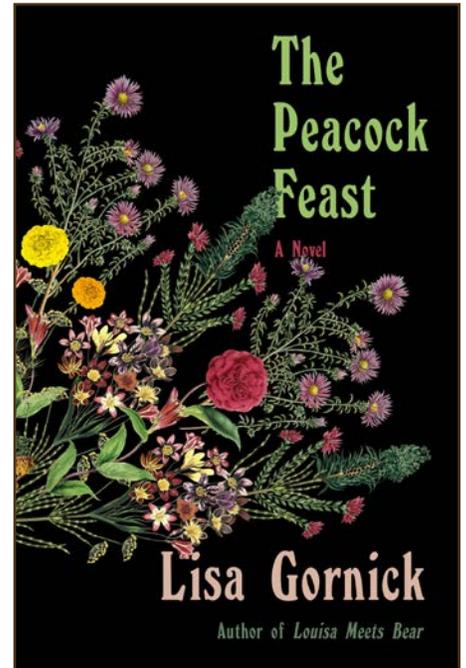


Reading Group Gold

The Peacock Feast

A Novel

by Lisa Gornick



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The Peacock Feast opens on a June day in 1916 when Louis C. Tiffany, the eccentric glass genius, dynamites the breakwater at Laurelton Hall—his fantastical Oyster Bay mansion, with columns capped by brilliant ceramic blossoms and a smokestack hidden in a blue-banded minaret—so as to foil the town’s plan to reclaim the beach for public use. The explosion shakes both the apple crate where four-year-old Prudence, the daughter of Tiffany’s prized gardener, is sleeping and the rocks where Randall, her seven-year-old brother, is playing.

Nearly a century later, Prudence receives an unexpected visit at her New York apartment from Grace, a hospice nurse and the granddaughter of Randall, whom Prudence never saw again after he left at age fourteen for California. The mementos Grace carries from her grandfather’s house stir Prudence’s long-repressed memories and bring her to a new understanding of the choices she made in work and in love, and what she faces now in her final days.

Spanning the twentieth century and three continents, *The Peacock Feast* ricochets from Manhattan to San Francisco, from the decadent mansions of the Tiffany family to the death row of a Texas prison, and from the London consultation room of Anna Freud to a Mendocino commune. With psychological acuity and aching eloquence, Lisa Gornick has written a sweeping family drama, an exploration of the meaning of art and the art of dying, and an illuminating portrait of how our decisions reverberate across time and space.

Reading Group Gold

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Louis C. Tiffany is an acclaimed and wealthy artist and designer. Bridget and Eddie O'Connor are a maid and a gardener who work for him. To the O'Connors and their children, he is Mr. T. What kind of man is the fictional Louis Tiffany? What kind of employer? The O'Connor family suffered a great loss because of Tiffany. Did they also benefit from their connection to him and his family?
2. On May 15, 1914, Louis Tiffany hosted a party for 150 "men of genius" that came to be known as the Peacock Feast. The evening began with a procession of "nubile young ladies," including Tiffany's daughters, costumed in white Grecian gowns and carrying platters of roasted peacocks. The pageant also included small children who carried torches and platters of suckling pig, and sprinkled rose petals on the guests. What impact did this event have on the lives of the story's characters? How does Dorothy Burlingham remember the evening? What does Anna Freud mean when she tells Dorothy, "Your father produced a tableau of the cruelty veined in all beauty." How might a spectacle like the Peacock Feast be viewed today?
3. Prudence O'Connor Theet's earliest memories—of the Peacock Feast and of Dorothy Tiffany's wedding—are from 1914, when Prudence was two years old. What is the significance of these memories? What does Prudence remember of the day two years later when Tiffany dynamited the breakwater at his mansion to keep the town of Oyster Bay from creating a public beach? How are the events of that day connected to Randall O'Connor's leaving home at the age of fourteen?
4. How does Prudence initially feel about meeting her great-niece Grace? What emotions and memories does their first meeting stir? Over the course of their week together in April 2013, how does their relationship develop? What stories do they share? What do they come to understand about each other?
5. How is Eddie O'Connor—the man Dorothy Tiffany Burlingham knew as her father's gardener—different from the father Prudence remembers? Based on Eddie, Louis Tiffany, Randall, Leo, and other men in the book, what picture of fatherhood emerges? What kind of father would Carlton Theet have been?
6. Both Prudence and Randall have successful careers in creative fields and marry into wealth. What are other similarities in their lives even as they live on opposite coasts and never know each other as adults? How are they different? Why do they never try to find each other? What might their relationship have been like if they had?
7. Leo O'Connor, Randall and Carolyn's only son, has a happy and privileged childhood. Why does he rebel against his upbringing, and why can't he reconcile with his father? Who influences his behavior? What is his relationship with Jacie Klein when they first meet? How does Leo change after Grace and Garcia are born? Do Leo and Jacie find what they are seeking when they join Riva Krik?

Reading Group Gold

8. Why does Leo sleep with Kitty? How does he react in the aftermath of Jacie's discovering this? What leads to his leaving his babies with his father?
9. Grace O'Connor's friend Kate describes her as "my death-sentence-protester, vegan, right-to-lifer girl." How does Garcia's guilty plea and execution change Grace's plan for her life? What does her hospice work teach her about people, and what do her patients and their families teach her about hospice work? At the conference that brings her to New York, she delivers a paper titled "Employing a Hospice Model for Families of Death Sentence Recipients." Why does her presentation stir up anger in her audience?
10. Why does Grace decide to visit her mother's parents in Houston? How do she and her grandparents respond to meeting one another? What happens when she sees her mother for the first time since she was one year old?
11. "Love is a constant interrogation" is a line from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Milan Kundera that Grace and Kate each underline as they travel to Paris. What does "a constant interrogation" mean in a relationship? Who are the couples whose love is a "constant interrogation"? Are they happier than other couples in the story? Why does Prudence hesitate to stay with Jean-Christophe? How are Prudence, Dorothy, and Grace alike in their beliefs about committed relationships?
12. What is the source of the rift that grows between Grace and Randall when Garcia is executed? How does each of them deal with his death? What does Prudence realize about her own choices after hearing Grace's story about Garcia?
13. Prudence is born into a time and place of great excess, as evidenced by Louis Tiffany's Peacock Feast at Laurelton Hall. As a girl and an adult, she moves between this world and one of simpler needs and aspirations. What are the defining features of each of these? What is the impact of social class and wealth on Prudence, Randall, Dorothy Burlingham, and other characters? What is Prudence's personal aesthetic, and how did it develop? Why does she become a designer rather than an artist?
14. Toward the end of the book, we learn why Randall wouldn't let his son or grandchildren go near water and why, almost twenty years later, Bridget O'Connor still thinks of June 16, 1916, as "the cursed date." What other questions are answered? How might Prudence's life have been different if Oliver had not been killed? What advice does she give Gloria, who has also lost a twin?
15. As a high school student, Prudence is deeply affected by a poem, "The Graveyard," by Marianne Moore. What feelings does one line in particular—"the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look"—arouse in Prudence? Why does the poem come back to her as she is dying?

Reading Group Gold

16. Although Prudence O'Connor Theet is successful and accomplished, she believes that there is no purpose to life. How would Louis Tiffany, Dorothy Burlingham, or Randall O'Connor have responded to this? Is it more an expression of her own regrets or a broader observation based on her experiences? At the end of her life, is Prudence at peace or disappointed?
17. *The Peacock Feast* is a family history filled with tragedy. What are the causes of the O'Connor family's misfortunes? How is each of them influenced by the times in which they live? Are there instances of love, compassion, or forgiveness that provide redemption?

PRAISE FOR *THE PEACOCK FEAST*

"One of those rare books that feel both grand and intimate." —Meg Wolitzer, author of *The Female Persuasion*

"A dazzling panorama of a novel . . . Readers will be left applauding." —Joan Silber, author of *Improvement*

"Plumbs the connections that transform lives . . . Gripping and elegantly nuanced." —Christina Baker Kline, author of *Orphan Train*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Gornick is the author of *Louisa Meets Bear*, *Tinderbox*, and *A Private Sorcery*. Her stories and essays have appeared widely, including in *The New York Times*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Real Simple*, *Salon*, *Slate*, and *The Sun*. She holds a BA from Princeton and a PhD in clinical psychology from Yale, and is on the faculty of the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. A long-time New Yorker, she lives in Manhattan with her family.

Guide written by Patricia Daneman