

Discussion Guide for *Life Drawing*

CAUTION: Spoilers ahead!

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- 1.** Gus is the voice that guides you through *Life Drawing*. She's in charge of how this story is told, including how you hear about her own missteps and failings. How do you think she feels about having had an extra-marital affair? She obviously regrets hurting Owen, but does she seem to regret what she did, or just that she told him? Does her attitude toward that change over the course of the book?
- 2.** Alison seems to hold an almost mystical power over Gus from the moment of her arrival. What are some of the things that make Gus so susceptible to the lure of a new friend – and not just a friend, but someone to whom she tells her most intimate secrets? Gus has a history of disloyalty. Is it fair to say that she's being disloyal to Owen again by telling Alison so much, or is it understandable that Gus would need a confidante?
- 3.** How would you describe the condition of Owen's and Gus's marriage at the point of Alison's arrival? What do you think would have happened to them if they'd just gone on living in solitude? Were the resentments bound to bubble up without a third person involved, or did they seem settled into a good life? If there were problems that were bound to come up, what were some warning signs?
- 4.** Why do you think the “boys in the walls” ignite Gus's creativity? Why does discovering the accounts of their fates and the photographs she finds feel so instantly meaningful to her?
- 5.** Because Gus has neither a mother nor a child, everything about motherhood is filtered through her guesses at what it might be like – from both sides. How does this lack of personal experience play out in the story? How does it affect her feelings toward Alison? Nora? Laine?
- 6.** As Gus's father Sam loses his memory, Gus seems to feel torn about the loss. There are clearly upsetting aspects, but she also describes the two of them as growing closer. Why do you think this is?
- 7.** How do you feel about Nora? Is she scheming and selfish, or just very young; or maybe a combination of all? Gus herself describes two possibilities: forgiving her for being naïve and just one part of a complex tragedy, and blaming her for everything coming apart? Where do you think she falls on the line between the two?
- 8.** How do Gus's feelings about Laine change in the course of Laine's visit and her critique of Gus's work, and also afterward? What does that visit give Gus beyond a new view of her paintings? And do you think Owen's reaction is fair, or is it time for him to let up a little bit?
- 9.** Gus is surprised by the lengths to which Alison because she's worried about Nora, and also by how much Alison has confided in her daughter. As Gus becomes furious over these things, what

else may be fueling her anger beside the immediate impact? She seems so often to be jealous of that mother-daughter bond. Is that jealousy present all the way through the story or do other angers replace it entirely?

10. What do you think Ida's role is in the story? Why was Gus so afraid of her judgment back when she was painting the shop? What or whom does Ida represent to her?

11. Do you believe Owen in his account of what has gone on between him and Nora? Gus only has his word that there was no sexual relationship, so that's all the reader has too. Would he have told her if there were? Do you believe that she really helped him write? Could he have said that as pay-back to Gus, or does that seem out of character for him?

12. Toward the end, Owen describes their marriage as a "universe." What do you think that means? Does that seem like a good way to describe marriages in general, or is it something more specific about the two of them?

13. Why do you think Gus has so much difficulty painting human beings? Are there any explanations to why she lacks "the life drawing gene" as she calls it? Do you think she has any theories about why that may be?

14. What do you suppose happens in Gus's life a year after the end of this book? Two years? Can you imagine her staying out in the country? Moving back into the city? Falling in love? So much in *Life Drawing* is about the past. What do you suppose the future holds?