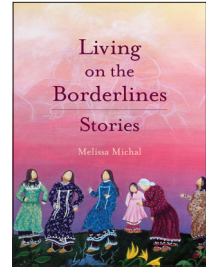


READING GROUP GUIDE

LIVING ON THE BORDERLINES: STORIES by Melissa Michal

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1. In the title story, the unnamed male character sees invisible borderlines at the river, but they disappear in the presence of his wife, who says, “We can cross when we want . . . the lines are not ours” (5). What explains their different perspectives? What does the story suggest about the way society forces limits not only on land, but also on people?
2. Trauma is an overarching theme of this collection. How does Michal intertwine multiple forms of trauma experienced by people with a shared history, without retelling the same story?
3. Michal employs unconventional grammar and punctuation in several stories. For instance, “Living on the Borderlines,” “Calling the Ancestors,” and “Dancing Girl” do not use quotation marks for dialogue, and past events are discussed in present tense in “The Crack in the Bridge.” How do these stylistic choices affect your reading? What do they seem to mean for the individual stories in which they occur?
4. “Towpath Lines” details a physical assault. Carley remembers seeing “feminine features, a small nose, and high cheekbones” (117). What gender did you assign to the attacker when you were reading, and why? What information does the story provide that might help the reader—and Carley herself—understand why and how this attack happened?
5. The stories in this collection range in length, with several under four pages: “Living on the Borderlines,” “Calling the Ancestors,” and “Dancing Girl.” What seems significant about the brevity of these particular stories? What do they contain, and what do they leave out, in comparison to longer stories?
6. Intergenerational relationships formed around food are a recurring motif of these stories. How do these relationships play a role in the way characters connect to family and form their own identities?
7. In “Luck Stone,” when asked if stones held powers, Cam’s father replies, “Some are healing. Some a bit cranky” (160). Considering all that happens to Cam while she holds the stone, do you believe this particular stone is lucky, healing, or something else?
8. “Dancing Girl” details a ritual dance from the perspective of someone moving from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Michal describes it as “learned habits she would remember, her body sometimes when she can’t. Ingrained” (211). How would you describe the character’s evolving relationship to the dance? What does the story suggest about intergenerational memory and cultural tradition?

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