

Love in the Asylum

by Lisa Carey

William Morrow (an imprint of HarperCollins Publishing)

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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ANNOTATION:

Alba Elliot and Oscar Jameson, patients at an expensive, private hospital for the treatment of mental illness and substance abuse, experience an immediate and intense attraction to each other, but true intimacy proves almost impossible for these two sardonic individuals, imprisoned by their conditions and accustomed to keeping the world at arm's length.

SUMMARY:

Alba Elliot and Oscar Jameson meet when they are both patients at Abenaki Hospital, an expensive private center for the treatment of the mentally ill and substance-addicted. A frequent visitor, courtesy of her well-to-do father, Alba, at 25, has been suffering since adolescence from debilitating bipolar episodes, and hates the muffled feeling she gets from the drugs she depends on. Oscar, on the other hand, is a 30-year-old drug addict in denial, who only reluctantly allows himself to be persuaded into rehab by his financially successful younger brother.

Intensely attracted to each other despite their differences, Alba and Oscar, both clever with words, warily embark on a daily routine of volatile conversations -- usually ending with an exchange of barbed insults or a dropped bombshell disguised as a confidence. Under the watchful gaze of the attendants and hampered by their mental conditions, Alba and Oscar alternately draw close and pull away.

Juxtaposed with Alba and Oscar's tentative journey towards intimacy is a story from the hospital's past as St. Dymrna's Asylum, where troubled wives and mothers were commonly institutionalized by frustrated or angry husbands, despite the women's own protestations of health.

Alba becomes obsessed with a series of letters written by Mary Doherty, a former patient of St. Dymrna's, scribbled in the backs of old books in the Abenaki Hospital library. These letters to her son (never sent), reveal how Mary was torn between using her Native

American gift of spiritual healing and submitting to “cures” for her fits, as her husband saw it, thus giving up her power to help other souls in pain.

When Alba decides that the letters of Mary Doherty (or Mesatawe, her original Abenaki name) must be delivered to her son, Oscar and Alba go AWOL on a trip through New England that changes everything.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think the author emphasizes the word *asylum* by using it in the title and by giving Alba’s definition in the opening sentence? What associations does the word bring to mind? What does Alba’s definition tell us about Alba?
2. At the start of the novel, Alba envies Oscar for experiencing his “first time” at the asylum (p. 8), and Oscar notes how seeing Alba on the asylum lawn that first time struck him so profoundly (p. 14). Both see first times as periods of hope and possibility. How does this relate to the relationship that develops between them? How were their first arrivals at Abenaki the same or different?
3. How do the mentally ill patients and the addicts at Abenaki view each other? How does this subtle tension among the residents at Abenaki affect Oscar and Alba’s relationship?
4. Did you feel more sympathy for Oscar once you knew what his childhood was like? (pp. 98-104) Why did Oscar and his younger brother David turn out so differently? How can abuse and other traumatic events in childhood affect people differently as adults?
5. The author reveals the full story of Alba’s becoming pregnant, giving birth to a son, and having him given up for adoption due to therapist Dr. Miller’s report (p.120). Looking back, was this traumatic event foreshadowed in the story? Why doesn’t Alba talk about it earlier (p. 22-24)?
6. How and why does Alba’s relationship to her father change over the course of the story? Why did Alba’s father handle her pregnancy the way he did?
7. When Oscar and Alba are talking at the fair, she reveals that she is an author of children’s books. Why doesn’t Oscar tell her that he is a failed novelist? (The reader finds out from his “life story” later. (See p. 104.) What else does Alba (and the reader) not know about Oscar at this point?
8. Compare Mary Doherty and Alba, whose stories are juxtaposed in the novel through Alba’s discovery of Mary’s letters. How does the split in Mary’s life between her powerful Native American role as a spiritual healer and her role as wife/mother in a loveless marriage compare with the choice Alba faces between a life off drugs and a life on drugs? Can you think of other situations in which people face similar choices?

9. The author states in a note at the end of the book that her portrayal of the Abenaki tribe is not meant to be historically accurate. Why did the author choose to present the Native American aspects of the story the way she did? How does the asylum's history relate to its present incarnation?
10. Do you think Mary's uncle was right to train Mary in the ways of healing? How would you answer the question Alba asks Mrs. Doherty about Mary and her son Peter: "Do you think they were crazy? Your husband and his mother? Or do you think they were gifted?"
11. Mary's uncle describes "soul-sickness" as occurring when "a part of a person's soul breaks away and becomes lost in the spirit world." Alba confides to Oscar near the end of the book that she thinks her son might be the "missing part" of her soul. How does this explanation compare with modern medical understanding of mental illness, and with Alba's diagnosis in particular?
12. Why does Alba name the orphaned main character of her stories Sam Waban? ("Waban" is the Abenaki word for "dawn".) What does he symbolize for her?
13. Why does Alba feel compelled to bring the photocopies of Mary's letters to Peter and to continue visiting him?
14. Alba sees Oscar first as a "symbol,"--"a reminder that she is face to face with her final chance. She doesn't realize that it is the man himself, and not what he represents, that will change her..." (p.9) How does Oscar change Alba?
15. Near the end of the story, Oscar says to David, about Alba: "Nothing's wrong with her...She's just unlucky." How do Oscar and Alba end up rescuing each other from self-destruction? Was it luck that brought them together?
16. Was the boy in the hospital really Alba's son? Was the novel's ending (Chapters 33-4) satisfying or unsatisfying to you as a reader, and why? How did your perception of the characters change at the end? Was Alba mentally ill or not, and if so, how did she become well?
17. How did the novel make you think differently about mental illness, drug addiction, suicide, therapy, or domestic abuse? Can the concept of a soul coexist with modern medical science theories about the brain?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

From the author's Web site (<http://www.lisacarey.com>):

Lisa Carey was born in 1970 in Boston, Massachusetts to Irish-American parents. She grew up in Brookline, attending Lawrence Grammar School and Brookline High. When she was sixteen, her family moved to Hingham, MA. She graduated in 1988 from Hingham High School. She attended Boston College and received her BA in English and

Philosophy in 1992. As her graduation present, her parents gave her a trip to Ireland, with which she fell instantly in love. While pursuing her MFA in Writing at Vermont College, and working in the independent bookstore Brookline Booksmith, she took a semester off and returned to Ireland for six months. She lived on an island off the west coast of Ireland called Inishbofin, where she began her first novel, *The Mermaids Singing*. She finished this novel as her creative thesis for her MFA, which she received in 1996. For five years, Lisa divided her time between Ireland and New England, where she wrote her second novel, *In the Country of the Young*.

HELPFUL LINKS:

<http://www.lisacarey.com> -- The author's Web site includes an informative interview with the author about *Love in the Asylum*.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/bipolar.cfm#bp3> -- This is an online version of a booklet about bipolar disorder published by National Institute of Mental Health.

<http://www.micmac-nsn.gov/> -- This Web site will interest readers who want to learn about the northeastern tribes called collectively the "Wabanaki", which means "People of the Daybreak", or "Dawn Land People."

<http://www.native-languages.org/abenaki.htm> -- The Abenaki Culture and History links on this site will direct readers to Web sites with additional information on.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Bruchac, Joseph. *Dawn Land*. Fulcrum, 1993. This first novel by a respected Abenaki storyteller combines history and native legends in the compelling tale of how a young Abenaki man responds to an unknown threat.

Day, Gordon M. *In Search of New England's Native Past: Selected Essays*. University of Massachusetts, 1998. Known for groundbreaking research on the history and culture of the Western Abenakis and their Native American neighbors, the author "reconstructs a lost world."

Picoult, Jodi. *Second Glance*. Atria, 2003. As local Abenakis in a Vermont small town claim that a piece of land slated for development is an ancient tribal burial ground, mysterious, paranormal events begin taking place.

Simon, Lizzie. *Detour : my bipolar road trip in 4-D*. A memoir of life with bipolar disorder by a 23-year-old, who took a road trip to interview others with the illness.

If You Liked *Love in the Asylum*:

Berne, Suzanne. *A Perfect Arrangement*. Algonquin, 2001. Mirella and Howard Cook-Goldman are delighted with the ideal nanny for their two-career family until problems start. (New England setting)

Coleman, Carter. *Cage's Bend*. Warner, 2005. Told in alternating voices, "Cage's Bend" is the dramatic story of the unraveling of a tight-knit family after a death. (Southern setting)

OTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Donovan, Deborah. *Love in the Asylum*. *Booklist*, Feb 1, 2004 v100 i11 p948(1)

DeZelar-Tiedman, Christine. *Love in the Asylum*. *Library Journal*, Feb 1, 2004 v129 i2 p120(1)

Maslin, Janet. *Love in the Asylum*. *Kirkus Reviews*, Jan 1, 2004 v72 i1 p4(1)

The awakening of a young ghost and a grown man. *The New York Times*, Nov 16, 2000 v150 pB11(N) pE11(L) col 1.



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