

# *Cloud Cuckoo Land*

By Lisa Borders

River City Publishing

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by the “Booked for Lunch” Reading Group  
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### **SUMMARY:**

*Cloud Cuckoo Land* is a contemporary story of survival, acceptance, and love. Miri Ortiz was abandoned by her mother and left on her grandmother's doorstep at the age of eleven. Gifted with a beautiful voice, Miri finds that singing may help her overcome the stigma of her mother's past and gain her acceptance in the small Texas community. However, this hope is short-lived when her grandmother dies and Miri enters the state's foster care system for children. Miri abruptly runs away from an abusive situation and begins her life on the streets. Her travels eventually lead her to Philadelphia where she meets Jamie, a young gay musician who has turned his back on his classical training to pursue his desire for rock and roll. Miri and Jamie form a duo, Cloud Cuckoo Land, and through their unique friendship learn valuable lessons from each other about life, love, and forgiveness.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Miri's relationship with her mother is very complex. Although Miri claims that she is not like her mother because she didn't do drugs or become pregnant, in what ways *does* Miri take after her mother?
2. Miri spends three years in Prairie Rose, Texas with her grandmother. What does she learn from her grandmother and the community? Which incidents have a significant impact on her life?
3. Discuss Miri's early relationships with men – Annmarie's boyfriends, Wendell, and Troy Wilson. How does Miri's background affect these relationships?
4. Discuss Miri's reaction to her grandmother's death. Was it understandable?
5. The Department of Child Services fails Miri. Discuss some of the weaknesses in the system that contributed to this failure. Is Miri herself partly to blame?

6. Discuss Miri's relationship with Juan. Is his impact on Miri more positive or negative? Could she have survived without him?
7. What does Miri learn from her relationship with Ian Oliver? When Ian leaves her in Pennsylvania, how does Miri's instinct for survival kick in?
8. Miri reads in a pamphlet that Philadelphia is the "City of Brotherly Love". How do Rick and Jamie fit into that phrase?
9. In many ways Jamie has had similar struggles in his life. Compare Jamie's family and background to Miri's.
10. "Cloud Cuckoo Land" is defined as "a fanciful or ideal place". Do you think that is an appropriate name for their band? How does it relate to Miri's life?
11. Although Miri is wise beyond her years in many ways, in what ways is she still immature or naïve?
12. Miri and Jamie are often told "The sound you get from two guitars is amazing." Are there implications to that statement beyond the music?
13. What role does Loretta play in the novel? Is she a significant character?
14. There are several references to shoes in the novel. (Pgs. 189, 204, 272, 284, 447, and 449) What do they signify?
15. Discuss Miri's return to Prairie Rose. Does she receive "closure"?
16. What do you see in the future for Miri? Has she finally found love, acceptance, and purpose in life?
17. Do you think that this novel accurately portrays the life of homeless teens and adolescents? What can society learn from this story? Is there anything that communities can do to improve the situation for these young people?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Reprinted from <http://www.lisaborders.com>. For additional information about Lisa Borders, as well as interviews and reviews of *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, visit <http://www.lisaborders.com>.

Lisa Borders' early years were spent in a limited southward migration: from upstate New York to Westchester County to the central Jersey shore to South Jersey, where she graduated from high school in Millville. She attended college first at Virginia Tech,

which didn't suit her, and then at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Despite having taken her B.A. in biology (she once wanted to be a veterinarian, and in fact, she sometimes still does) she worked as a journalist for four years before realizing she didn't particularly like it. She then moved to Philadelphia for an M.A. in creative writing at Temple University, where, in her first workshop, the very first piece she submitted was a short story called Cloudcuckooland. Her workshop instructor asked if the story's "reality mitigated its banality," and after she realized she'd been insulted, Lisa vowed to show him: she would turn the story into a novel!

After a post-M.A. year of temp jobs and economic desperation, she moved to Burlington, Vermont to dust off her biology degree and study cytology, of all things. She received her certificate in cytology in 1992, and then moved back to Philadelphia to screen pap smears and fine needle aspiration biopsies, and to start working on a novel called Cloudcuckooland. In 1995 she moved to the Boston area, eventually cut her cytology hours to part time, and then really, really started working on a novel called Cloudcuckooland. In 1999, she finally finished a 486-page manuscript; two years and several more drafts later, her manuscript won a River City Publishing contest judged by Pat Conroy and Cassandra King. After many lively discussions with her editor regarding the title of her book, it was published as Cloud Cuckoo Land in October, 2002. She now really likes those spaces in there.

Lisa still lives in the Boston area, still works part-time as a cytotechnologist, and teaches creative writing, primarily at Grub Street Writers but also sometimes at the Boston Center for Adult Education. She used to have the coolest tabby cat in the world, Matthew -- a cat so cool, she found him outside a rock club in 1986 -- but he died in August, 2003 at the ripe old age of 17. For now, she covets her friends' animals.

Lisa has published a number of short stories in a variety of magazines, including *Washington Square*, *Black Warrior Review*, *CrossConnect* and *Painted Bride Quarterly*. She has received grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Somerville Arts Council and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and residencies at Hedgebrook and the Blue Mountain Center. She has a short story collection that is close to completion, and she is also at work on a new novel, set in the Delaware Bay region of southern New Jersey.



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