



Larchfield Polly Clark

Reading group questions for *Larchfield* by Polly Clark

1. *'My identity as a person before motherhood has been obliterated.'* In a piece for the Guardian, Polly Clark wrote about her own experiences of losing her sense of self. How did you relate to Dora's struggles, and do you think it was motherhood or isolation that particularly contributed to her unhappiness?
2. *'There are many ways to be a man, and many ways to be brave.'* (page 173) Wylan does not match up to the ideal of a man in the 1930s. How does Polly Clark challenge notions of masculinity by depicting his contrariness? Do you think that there are any 'ideal men' in the novel?
3. *'Dora, darling, this is a poem about limbo.'* (page 212) Dora's house is called Paradise, her dog called Virgil. How does Polly Clark use the setting of Helensburgh, 'Upper and Lower Hel,' to play with the themes of Dante's Inferno and the idea of limbo – as something that 'may make you desperately unhappy, but ... is where you belong' ?
4. The structure of the novel is in alternate chapters, meaning that Dora and Wylan's lives often mirror each other like a conversation or rhyming couplets. What similarities and recurring images did you notice? Consider the steak, the settings, the English/Scottish tensions and the comparison of war and motherhood.
5. *'It is time for the destruction of error.'* (page 193) Polly Clark depicts Auden at the beginning of his career. Did you sense the burgeoning politics of his poetry, and do you feel that his messages have relevance today?
6. *'Dora had created an escape.'* (page 326) The method in which Polly pulls Dora and Wylan's story together is the kind of literary device that requires a suspension of disbelief. Purely psychological or miraculous – how did you judge the moment of connection between them?
7. *'We're good people!'* (page 80) How does Polly use black humour to characterise Mo and Terrence, and how does this contribute to the impossibility of Dora making anyone understand their behaviour?
8. *'The gentle tidiness that denotes mother-love already slipping away from him, leaving him raw and naked in his clothes.'* (page 43) Jamie Taylor represents, in his absolute vulnerability, the inner pain of both Dora and Wylan. How does Polly Clark examine childhood and those who threaten its innocence, both in the case of Jessop and the more insidious Health Visitors and Social Workers?
9. *'A giant lifting a farmhouse'* (page 1) *'Her breaths ran around like stray dogs'* (page 295) *'The flame bent double and jiggled like a Russian dancer'* (page 284). Polly Clark is a poet as well as a novelist; how does her imagery add colour to characters and create a sensual impression of both Dora's and Wylan's ways of seeing the world?

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