

# George and Lizzie

By Nancy Pearl

## Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **George & Lizzie** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Nancy Pearl**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

### Introduction

By the time Lizzie meets George, she has already been through so much heartache in her life that she finds it difficult to believe in love. Lizzie's past has been shaped both by parents who seemed to have use for her only as a psychological case study, by the twenty-three starters on her high school football team that Lizzie slept with as a lark, and by Jack, the love of her life, who went home one summer and never returned or contacted Lizzie again.

In contrast, George is full of optimism about life and happy with his chosen career as a dentist, and he possesses a deep-seated love for his family back in Oklahoma. Despite their differences and Lizzie's uncertainty about her feelings for him, they marry. But for Lizzie, it takes more than marriage to forget her troubled past and believe herself worthy of their relationship. Only when she is faced with tragedy and true loss is Lizzie able to tell George some of the secrets she's kept from him. By doing so she begins to learn what happiness means, and to forgive everyone, including herself.

### Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Revisit the scene in the bowling alley beginning on page 5, when George and Lizzie first meet. How do their very different responses—Lizzie's laughter and George's annoyance—prefigure their very different approaches to life? Does the collision between their bowling balls act as a kind of omen for their future?
2. When Andrea and Lizzie first conceive of the Great Game, Lizzie shares her reasoning behind wanting to follow through on the idea: "When my parents find out about it . . . they'll finally have to realize that I'm not who they think I am. . . . I honestly think they never loved me at all." Do you believe that Lizzie participates in the Great Game only because of her strained relationship with her parents? What reaction was she hoping to elicit from them? Is it the failure to get the attention or reaction she wanted that haunts Lizzie into adulthood?
3. How do George and Lizzie compare to one another? Do you think they live up to the maxim "opposites attract?" If George is "softhearted," how would you describe Lizzie?
4. Discuss Jack and Lizzie's brief relationship. Why do you think it continues to be so important to her? What is it about Jack that so fascinates Lizzie? Do you think it is truly Jack that Lizzie loves—or is it an idea he represents?
5. Consider for a moment the structure of the story. What effect do the interspersed recaps from the Great Game have on the narrative of George and Lizzie's relationship? Like Lizzie, are we as readers meant not to forget the past even as we learn about Lizzie and George's relationship?
6. In many ways Allan and Elaine, George's parents, are meant to represent the "good" parents in the novel, the ones who do things right. How do they compare to Mendel and Lydia? Do you think Lizzie's classification of her parents as terrible human beings is fair?
7. The novel is titled *George & Lizzie*, but much of the story centers on Lizzie's past relationships. Ultimately, is this Lizzie's story only? Is George primarily a supporting actor in the story of Lizzie's self-acceptance?
8. When Marla and Lizzie meet the first day of college, it is obvious they are going to be lifelong friends. It is Marla, after all, who first got George's number at the bowling alley, and it is Marla who pushed Lizzie to accept George's invitation to come to Oklahoma with him for the holidays. Lizzie jokingly even says, "Yes, mother" in response to Marla's ideas about shopping for Chanukah gifts. Is Marla a surrogate mother to Lizzie? Do you think her willingness to step into a mothering role has to do with her earlier abortion?
9. When George first reveals he is in love with Lizzie, he says, "You're probably one of the most self-centered people I've ever met. And, oh yeah, I'm pretty sure that I'm in love with you, although I can't imagine why." Does a version of this scene—where George puts himself in a vulnerable position—happen again in the novel? Does this vulnerability speak to the depth of George's capacity for love, or perhaps to Lizzie's inability to love?
10. Is Lizzie's obsession with her past unusual or unhealthy? Do you think that her past mistakes are the reason she can't accept George's love at face value? In her estimation she is "flawed, imperfect, pretty terrible"—in short, she considers herself a bad person. Do you think Lizzie is unique in her self-loathing?
11. George's philosophy as a dental guru might be summarized by the following words: "We're always writing the narrative of our lives, and when you respond badly you turn the event into a burden, something that you carry forward into the next moment, the next hour, the next day, and the rest of your life. It fills up your narrative." Discuss how this philosophy might be said to serve as a kind of theme for the novel.
12. Respond to Lizzie's belief that "most people have a private self that's often deeply at odds with their public persona." Do you agree? Is Lizzie's private self so different from her public self?
13. Is James's death the catalyst to bring Lizzie peace about her past? If he had lived, might the story have ended differently?

### Enhance Your Book Club

1. Poetry for Lizzie is an escape from her past, from her parents, and from the voices in her head. It is through poetry that she and Jack first begin a relationship, and it is largely poetry that sustains her when she is in the midst of the Great Game. Though Lizzie loves many poets, Edna St. Vincent Millay seems to be Lizzie's favorite. Suggestion: host a poetry reading with your group. Read from Millay's sonnets, such as no. 43 or no. 4. What do you notice about the sonnets? What seems to be a common theme among them? Why do you think the voices in Lizzie's head are quieted when she recites these poems?

2. When George takes Lizzie to visit his grandparents, they sit down a big meal in the Jewish tradition. Suggestion: host a dinner party with your friends, replicating his grandmother's menu. Chicken soup with matzo balls, sweet and sour brisket, knishes and blintzes. For dessert, brownies and cream puffs. Over dinner, talk about your family holiday traditions. What are they? How does the experience at George's family compare to Lizzie's experiences growing up? Do you imagine it was easy for Lizzie to be thrown into a close-knit family?

3. "Lizzie well knows that what you remember and what you forget is surpassingly strange." Most of the novel is devoted to Lizzie's memory, haunting her at every stage of her life. Suggestion: host a movie night with your book club, and watch *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. How do memory and lost love figure into both the movie and the novel? What are their similarities? Their differences? Do you think Lizzie would choose to get her memory erased, as Clementine does? Is forgetting easier than overcoming loss, in your opinion?

4. Despite the fact that Lizzie is disturbed by her own behavior during the Great Game, football remains an important part of her life. In high school, her boyfriend Maverick was a star player; she enjoys going to Michigan games as a student and later as an alum. George shares her love for football, and the two share a bond over the game. Suggestion: attend a football game with your book club, or watch your local NFL team on television. Consider the ramifications of Lizzie's decision to participate in the Great Game. Why is she still interested in the sport? Is there a kind of beauty in the way the players on the field work together to share a common goal? See if your club members can think of how football might be a kind of metaphor for Lizzie's life.

### **A Conversation with Nancy Pearl**

**Though you've written four works of nonfiction describing good books to read, including *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason*, this is your first novel. Can you tell us something about your writing process? How did you decide on the plot? Did you have to do any research? What was it like to tell Lizzie's story?**

The characters of George and Lizzie appeared to me one night while I was lying in bed trying to fall asleep. All I knew at that moment were their names and how they'd met. Everything that follows, the specific events of their lives, their families, their friends, their marriage, all of that came much later, and very gradually. For several years I kept it all in my head, adding details as I thought of them. Eventually I had so much in my head that I felt a need to start writing it down. I didn't, at first, think of what I was doing as "writing a novel."

I had no story arc in mind. I just had two characters that I felt drawn to and wanted to know more about. Writing about them was a way to accomplish it. The process of writing about them felt to me more like one of *discovery* than one of *invention*. I just wrote episodes as they pushed themselves to the surface of my attention, in no particular order and with no particular structural plan. It wasn't until after *George & Lizzie* was accepted for publication that I, with the help and guidance of my wonderful editor at Touchstone, Tara Parsons, really addressed the question of the best order for the sections I'd written. We did some rearrangement, and I wrote some additional sections to make clear that the central story arc is of George and Lizzie's relationship, but the final product is not very dissimilar to how I first wrote it.

I loved writing about Lizzie. I like to say that there's a little bit of me in her, and bits and pieces of other people's lives, but she's definitely her own person, grumpy, guilt-ridden, and miserable. And her life is hers; not mine. I don't, for example, have a best friend like Marla (although I wish I did), my parents were not psychologists, I'm not an only child, nor did I sleep with the twenty-three starters on my high school football team. (I could be misremembering, but I don't think Cass Technical High School in Detroit even had a football team.)

**Are you a lover of poetry like Lizzie? Who is your favorite poet, and why?**

My mother loved poetry and passed her love on to me. It's no surprise that her two favorite poets -- Edna St. Vincent Millay and A. E. Housman, whose books she kept on her bedside table -- are still my favorites, and Lizzie's as well. I love Millay for her unabashedly romantic and mostly sentimental view of life and loss, whether talking about her lovers or in a poem like "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver." In sonnet 5, for example, which begins "If I should learn, in some quite casual way, / That you were gone, not to return again," she's captured the whole dynamic of losing someone you loved, whether to death or the death of love. Some other favorite sonnets of mine are 33, 40, and 26, which ends "When treacherous queens, with death upon the tread / Heedless and willful, took their knights to bed." And even her poems that aren't about romantic love, like "The Goose-Girl" and "An Ancient Gesture" offer interesting ways of thinking about the world. As for Housman, we all -- my mother and I, as well as Lizzie -- share his pessimistic view of the world. Housman and Millay are both out of favor now--it doesn't seem as though anyone is writing their sort of poetry these days, which makes me sad.

**You are a regular commentator on NPR's *Morning Edition* and the host of *Book Lust with Nancy Pearl*, and you were the model for the best-selling Librarian Action Figure! With your pulse on the American literary scene, how would you define this moment in contemporary literature? How do you see *George & Lizzie* partaking in this dialogue?**

This is an exciting time to be a reader, because your choices have never been greater than they are today. No matter what kind of fiction or nonfiction you like to read, from graphic novels to literary fiction, from reader-friendly books on physics to memoirs of dysfunctional lives, there's a book (and most likely more than one) that fits your reading tastes. I'm a voracious and quite eclectic reader and am thankful every day for the variety of books that are available to me.

I think that *George & Lizzie* is one in a large group of character-driven fictions that give readers an opportunity to get to spend time with quirky, complex, and usually somewhat flawed characters. In novels like *George & Lizzie* it's the nature of the characters that drives the plot, rather than the plot directing what the characters do.

Other novels I'd include in this category are Sara Levine's *Treasure Island!!!*, Leah Hager Cohen's *Heart, You Bully, You Punk*, Dylan Hicks's *The Amateurs*, and all of Anne Tyler's novels, but especially *The Clock Winder* and *Searching for Caleb*.

**Do you agree that this novel is Lizzie's story? Did you imagine her as the protagonist as you wrote? Is she the character with whom you can relate most?**

It's Lizzie's story, but Lizzie's story seen in the context of the other people in her life, particularly George. That's why I wrote the novel with a close third person narrator. I think if we were only in Lizzie's head, or saw the world solely from her point of view, it would perhaps get claustrophobic. I always envisioned someone else, not the characters themselves, telling the story. I can really relate to all the characters (except Mendel and Lydia), but it's Lizzie that I still worry about and fervently hope she doesn't make any

more bad decisions (or what I think would be bad decisions) in her life.

**The Great Game is perhaps Lizzie's most reckless behavior. Do you imagine the game represents the antithesis of love for Lizzie? In other words, is her participation in the game a self-fulfilling prophecy to ensure she is never loved?**

I'm not sure that Lizzie fully understands her reasons for taking part in the Great Game—they're pretty convoluted. At the beginning, at least, they don't have anything to do with love at all: she really believes that sleeping her way through the football team would be fun. It's only later, when Andrea refuses to go through with the game, that she realizes what purpose it could serve, that when her parents found out about it, it would force them to finally see her as she believes she really is: "Because when my parents find out about it, and I think everyone's going to find out about it, they'll finally have to realize that I'm not who they think I am. Parents are supposed to love their children even though the kids aren't perfect, but they don't love me like that."

But Lizzie also knows, I think, that many people do love her, even if she doesn't love—or even like—herself. George loves her, Marla loves her, James loves her, Elaine and Allan love her. And Maverick loved her, their junior year in high school.

**Do you have any background in Buddhist philosophy? What made you decide to have George become a kind of Buddhist life coach?**

My husband, Joe, although Jewish by birth and upbringing, has practiced Buddhist insight (or mindfulness) meditation for 34 years, and is deeply steeped in Buddhist philosophy, a central tenet of which is that ordinary human existence is characterized by a kind of existential suffering, but that we can each end our own suffering through our own efforts, and thus every experience we have, every action we take, is, in a very real sense, an opportunity for growth.

Since George's major goal in life is to make Lizzie happy, and he attempts to accomplish this by getting her to look at the world the same way that he does, it was essential that his view of the world be profoundly optimistic, and my husband's Buddhist views perfectly filled the bill in that regard. (There's no question in my mind that George's desire to make Lizzie happy is sincere, but whether his strategy—trying to convince her to see the world as he does, because it works for him—is the best strategy for doing so, is another question entirely, and not one that I attempted to answer in the novel.)

**What is your favorite scene in the novel? What was the most fun scene to write? The most challenging?**

I think my favorite scene in the novel is also the one that was the most fun for me to write: when Lizzie and George meet in the bowling alley. I still smile when I think about it. It's the first scene in the novel and was the first scene that I wrote.

There were several scenes that were really difficult to write, including "Jack Learns about the Great Game," and the last two scenes, "A Difficult Conversation" and "The End of Many Things." I knew about James's death early on, but I didn't know if George and Lizzie's issues could be worked out, or if they'd go their separate ways. Plus, it was somewhat of a toss-up whether or not Lizzie would actually go to the gate at the airport and see for herself if Jack was there. Several readers of early drafts really wanted her to do that, but I was never convinced that it was a good idea, either for Lizzie or for the novel's plot arc. Lizzie wasn't sure what it would accomplish and neither was I.

**Do you agree with Lizzie that Mendel and Lydia never loved her, or do you side with George that they were unable to express their love in a meaningful way?**

I do agree with Lizzie that her parents never loved her; I think they were too caught up with each other to let someone else into the tight circle of their lives together. As the narrator says, "Lydia and Mendel were all and everything to each other." I know that there are marriages where the parents feel closer to each other than to their children, but (fortunately for their children) they don't go as far as Mendel and Lydia do in isolating themselves, emotionally, from their child (which Lizzie perceived as their rejection of her, of not seeing her as a person, let alone as a daughter).

**You must read more books than most writers in a given year. Which writers would you name as your main source of inspiration? Who are you reading now?**

Rather than writers, I'd say there are particular books that I'm drawn to, because of the quality of the writing or the three-dimensionality of the characters or the quirkiness of the way the novel's told. I've already mentioned Leah Hager Cohen's *Heart, You Bully, You Punk* (which, hands down, has the best title, ever) and my two favorite novels of Anne Tyler, but I'd add Laurie Colwin's *Happy All the Time* and her short story collection *The Lone Pilgrim*, especially "The Achieve of, the Mastery of the Thing"; Lorrie Moore's short stories, particularly the collection *Birds of America*; Katherine Heiny's short-story collection *Single, Carefree, Mellow*; Carol Anshaw's *Lucky in the Corner*, to name just a few.

