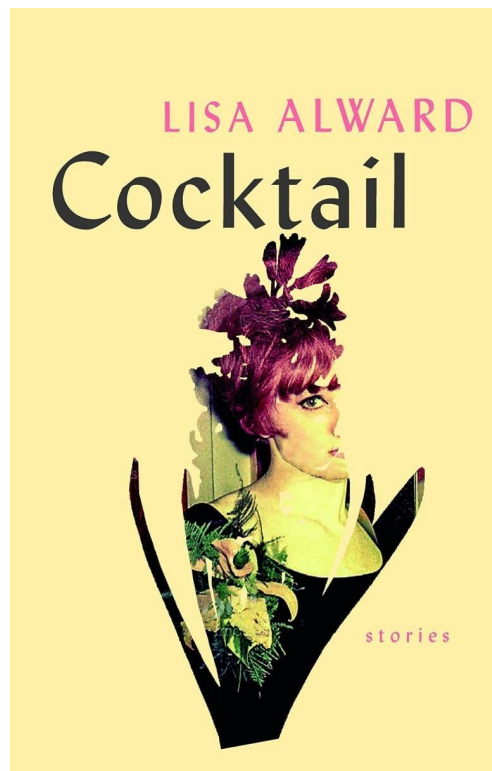


BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE  
*Cocktail* by Lisa Alward



**“With a coolly dispassionate voice, Alward views the small horrors of domesticity, [...] and turns them into stories whose implications reverberate far beyond the walls of any home.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)**

A girl receives a bedtime visit from a drunken party guest, who will haunt her fantasies for years. A young mother discovers underneath the wallpaper a striking portrait that awakens inconvenient desires. A divorced man distracts himself from the mess he’s made by flirting with a stranger. These intimate, immersive stories explore life’s watershed moments, in which seemingly insignificant details—a pot of hyacinths, a freshly painted yellow wall—and the most chance of encounters come to exert a tidal pull. Set in the swinging sixties and each decade since, *Cocktail* reveals the schism between the lives we build up around us and our deepest hidden selves.

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### “Cocktail”

1. In the title story, the narrator says that the “cocktail party world lay at a remove: the grownups put on their party clothes and seemed to forget us.” How has childhood changed since the sixties? What were your own parents’ parties like? Why might the narrator want to stop the seventies from coming?
2. The first time the narrator sees Tom Collins, she’s sleepwalking. Later, in her teens and twenties, she fantasizes about him when she’s drunk. How might these two states be related? What is the significance of the story he tells her about the Tom Collins drink? What about the books mentioned during their conversation?
3. What do you think would have happened if David didn’t come into her bedroom that night?

### “Old Growth” & “Bear Country”

1. Why do you think “Old Growth” is called this?
2. Have you ever known a Ray? Why do you think women fall for men like him? Gwyneth comments how “in the car, on the phone as well, she’d been softening.” Is she still in love with Ray, or are her feelings, especially toward the end of the story, more complicated?
3. “Bear Country” is set several years earlier. Do you find that Ray comes across any differently? He says of the other cottagers that they’re “just starting out, amassing all the protective gear, hoping cars and bikes and fancy boats will keep them safe.” What does he mean by this? Is he, by contrast, more open to risk?
4. There are references throughout to bears. Discuss how the various humans in this “country” behave like the bears. How does the looming climate crisis figure?

### “Hawthorne Yellow”

1. Why do you think Tracey is unable to deal with the guest bedroom on her own? What could her dreams about the house be telling her? Do you think Alex is truly interested in her? What about James and Sara — are they having an affair, and, if so, to what degree is Tracey aware?
2. Tracey reflects that marriage is a “kind of show house where everything had to look just so.” Do you agree with this?
3. Later, remembering how Alex grazed her palm with the wallpaper scrap, she experiences “a booming emptiness, like a dryer going through its cycle with nothing but some dishrags or a lone slipper.” How ultimately does she deal with this feeling of emptiness?
4. Do you think James and Tracey’s marriage will last?

“Orlando, 1974”

1. How does the Orlando setting expose the cracks in the narrator’s nuclear family? Did you visit Disney World as a child? What do you remember? How might Disney World be a microcosm for the problems of North American family life?
2. Alward often describes what characters in this story are wearing. How do these articles of clothing, and also objects like the Hawaiian doll, the 110 camera, the balloons, express what is going on beneath the surface?

“Hyacinth Girl”

1. Is Laura right to suspect Bryony of trying to “woo her only child away from her”? Have you, or anyone you’ve known, ever felt similarly threatened by an ex’s new partner?
2. Bryony is one of several artists in the book. Why does her being an artist intimidate Laura, and how does she inhabit this role differently from Archer in “Little Girl Lost” or the narrator of “How the Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”?
3. The story’s title comes from “The Waste Land.” What other allusions to that poem did you notice, and how else does Alward echo some of Eliot’s themes?
4. Why might Laura want her son to wear the mittens Bryony knitted him? What do you think she is feeling at the end?

“Maeve”

1. Although they’re both at-home moms when the story opens, the narrator and Maeve wage a series of subtle battles. Is there a link between the mommy wars of the nineties and mompetition today? Why do you think young mothers often feel so distrustful of one another?
2. Maeve’s house is one of many unsettling houses in the book. Compare her house with Tracey’s in “Hawthorne Yellow,” Erin’s in “Bundle of Joy,” and Archer’s in “Little Girl Lost.” What might Alward be suggesting about domestic spaces?
3. Fleeing past Maeve’s husband, the narrator becomes momentarily aware of “that other, older war.” What does she mean by this, and what role does this other war play in the story?
4. Which character did you feel more empathetic at the end, and did this surprise you?

“Wise Men Say”

1. When Al stops by her house for the first time, Penny is listening to Elvis Costello’s *My Aim is True*, and Al comments, “That’s not Elvis.” How do the two Elvises, Presley and Costello, figure in, and to some extent shape, the story?

2. Penny likes to get drunk and regards her virginity as “something she should be trying to get rid of.” Discuss the legacy of the cocktail party generation, as well as the sexual revolution, in both this story and “Cocktail.”
3. An early sign that Penny doesn’t really know herself is when she suggests she’s not a snob. How does her snobbishness blind her to Al’s character strengths, and what other blind spots does she exhibit throughout the story, and why?
4. When it comes to love, is it wiser to “rush in” or to take a cautious, reasoned approach? Do you think Penny and Al could have been happy together if their summer romance in 1982 had gone differently?

#### “Pomegranate”

1. “Pomegranate” is narrated by a plural first-person “we.” How effective do you find this device? Are there points in the story when the voices of the individual convent-school girls who make up this “we” strain against it?
2. How does the early-seventies time period contribute to the confusion and fear these girls experience about sexuality — their own and also Tina’s?
3. The title seems to allude to the myth of Persephone. Is adolescence the underworld? Discuss the role of food in both the Greek myth and this story.
4. A pack of young girls, Alward suggests, is capable of acting like a swarm of bees. Have you ever been victimized by a pack of girls? Were you ever part of a pack? Why do these girls seem so irked by the “dancing African girls” and the hippie girls?

#### “Bundle of Joy”

1. How do you think Ruth became so estranged from her daughter, and why does she find it so difficult to connect with Erin now?
2. Erin’s approach to mothering, at first glance, appears very different from Ruth’s. Discuss with reference to the changes in parenting philosophy of the past fifty years. How might these changes have made it harder for mothers and daughters to connect with and support one another?
3. Ruth seems very unhappy. Discuss her relationships with alcohol and with her husband, Joe. Do you find her an empathetic character or merely an unlikeable one?
4. What do you make of the ending and particularly Joe’s final “It’s all good”? Does Ruth learn anything over the course of the story?

#### “Little Girl Lost”

1. The title of this story is also the title of a poem from William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Discuss how Alward uses the themes of innocence and experience to structure the two parts of her story and explore her characters.

2. Archer and Lyca are modelled on the real-life Saint John artist Miller Brittain and his daughter, Jennifer. How does the inclusion of historical figures in a work of fiction affect your reading experience?
3. While Debbie and her mother-in-law are clearly shocked to find Lyca on her own, there's no sense they intend to report Archer for neglect. Should they have?
4. Lyca is not the only lost girl in this story. Discuss the other female characters, including Aline and the unnamed daughter at the end. Would you agree with Deborah in 1977 that she is now more "experienced" in love, or is she still essentially an innocent?

#### "How the Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"

1. The final story in the collection is partly a police procedural. Various hints are dropped as to the identity of the narrator's intruder. Did you guess whom this might be? Why does the narrator decide to protect this person?
2. Both "Smoke" and "Cocktail" feature strangers who are momentarily framed in a bedroom doorway, one who leaves behind a cigarette butt and the other an empty Tom Collins glass. What other similarities and/or differences between these two stories did you notice?
3. Seven of the stories explore marital infidelity. What makes this narrator's perspective, by comparison, unique? What do you think Alward is suggesting here about the nature of love?

#### General Questions

1. Most of these characters are "bundled up" in some way, revealing their inner selves only rarely. Which characters are the most self-protective? Why?
2. The natural world in these stories is often depicted as alien or frightening, but so too are many of the domestic spaces. Consider this in light of the epigraph from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.