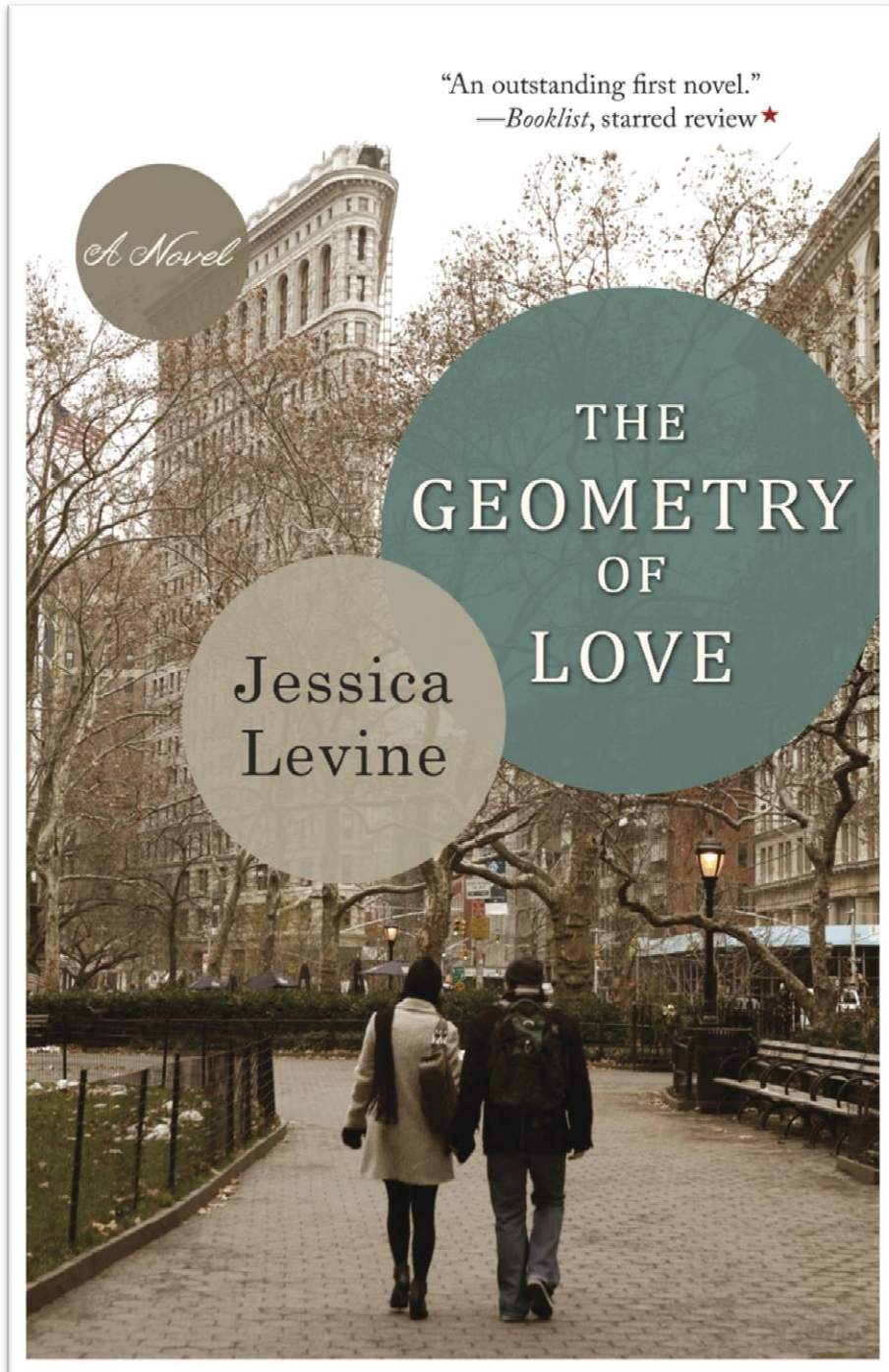


Reading Group Guide



Discussion Questions:

1. Is this a love story about Julia and Michael, or a story about Julia learning to love herself? Or both?
2. How does the author use math in this novel?
3. One of the questions this book asks is why it's easier for a woman to be a muse than to have one. Discuss.
4. In what ways do different kinds of love affect Julia's life—her tie with Ben, her romantic yearning for Michael, her love for her parents, and her love of poetry?
5. Is Julia's ambivalence about children related to her relationship with her mother or her relationship with Ben?
6. Discuss how Julia needs erotic love in order to lead a fulfilling life and, specifically, a fulfilling creative life. What other kinds of inspiration do you think fuel creativity or sustain a sense of meaningfulness?
7. Julia's mother loses her career due to age-ism. Discuss the role her mother's frustrated ambitions may have played in Julia's considerations of her own professional prospects.
8. How do religion and spirituality play a role in this novel?
9. How is family portrayed?
10. Ben is an academic, but he is a writer, too. In what way does Julia react to his writing? Why does she react differently to Michael's composing?
11. Do you think that Julia would have stayed with Ben if she had not reconnected with Michael?
12. Discuss the importance of place in this novel. How is the contrast between New York and California used?
13. Julia feels that, as a young woman, she lacked female role models from both the professional and literary worlds. Does she become a model for Esther and other young girls? How did the time period in which Julia grew up define her?
14. As a middle-aged woman, Julia changes her life. What do you think most inspires her final decision—her age, the new opportunities available for women, her wealth, or Michael's reaching out? How is her decision-making process different at mid-life than it was in her early 30s?
15. Julia works in finance and accounting. In her life, she weighs and measures—wealth, health, love, additions to the family. Discuss.
16. Why do Julia's gynecological problems eventually subside?
17. Do you think that Julia can or should mend her broken relationships with Ben and Anna?
18. The next two books in this series are about the other cousins. Why do you think Jessica Levine wants to write about Anna and Robin?
19. What role does therapy play in this novel? Why does Julia stop seeing her therapist?
20. Do you think Michael and Julia would have succeeded as a couple if they worked in the same creative art?

About the Author:



Photo by Nan Phelps

Jessica Levine's stories, essays, poetry, and translations have appeared in many journals, including *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *North American Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. She earned her Ph.D. in English at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Delicate Pursuit: Literary Discretion in Henry James and Edith Wharton* (Routledge, 2002) and has translated several books from French and Italian into English. She was born in New York City and now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This is her first novel and the first title in a series about the female cousins in the Field family.

Her website is jessicalevine.com.

An Interview with Jessica Levine

1. What compelled you to write this book?

The novel grew out of my own struggles as a writer to "find inspiration." I have always been fascinated by male painters who had women models as their muses. For example, Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) did a series of brilliant paintings featuring his mistress and later wife, Marthe, in the bathtub. In *THE GEOMETRY OF LOVE*, Julia, reflecting on her own block as a poet, says: "To be like Andrew Wyeth and have Christina sit in a field for you or like Pierre Bonnard, whose paintbrush vibrated every single time he stuck his wife in a bathtub. Nice work if you can get it, but I couldn't imagine such good fortune for myself." As Julia looks for a man who can catalyze her creativity, she is also challenging the traditional paradigm of the male artist inspired by the female model. Of course, Erica Jong and other writers, not to mention the mass media, have made popular the idea of the man as an object of desire or even "sex object." But the idea of a man's inner and outer qualities as a source of artistic inspiration for a female artist has remained more elusive.

2. You are also a hypnotherapist. How did your work inform your writing, or did it?

Part of being a hypnotherapist involves helping people go into trance, and in order to do that, I have to practice going into trance myself. It so happens that the trance state itself allows creative "flow," and I believe that my work has helped me move through some of the creative blocks I had when I was younger. More generally, hypnotherapy uses not only trance but also guided imagery to effect healing, and of course being able to visualize a character or a story is a useful ability for a writer. The issues I work on with clients are ones I address in my fiction: how we can break any negative legacies we have received from our families, how we re-parent ourselves, how love works to help us grow and heal, and so forth. In short not only has my work as a hypnotherapist helped my writing, but the reverse is true as well: writing has made me a better hypnotist and therapist.

3. Among other things, *THE GEOMETRY OF LOVE* is a love story, but it's also a story about loving oneself. It's about honoring who one is. Can you discuss that?

In the first half of the book there is an ongoing dialogue about love and self-love that takes place between Julia and her therapist. Julia is desperately seeking the love of a particular man, but the therapist suggests that what she really needs is self-love. In therapeutic circles, the idea is often floated that romantic love, especially in its initial phase, tends to be the result of "projection" —that the joy and enhanced self-esteem we experience falling in love result from a relationship with an ideal lover projected onto an actual person. In the book I use that concept of projection to dismantle the concept of romantic love before I illustrate a different kind of love relationship, one that is based on deep knowledge of self and other.

4. Also, the novel is about how erotic love and passion ignite creativity. Can you talk about your interest in muses, in what inspires writing (or any art)?

I find art and the impulse to make it infinitely mysterious. Freud suggested that art, along with many other achievements of human civilization, is the result of the sublimation of sexual drives. This insight still rings true, though it is probably more accurate to say that art can result from any overwhelming drive or feeling, whether it's sexual desire, grief, anger, or joy. Moreover, there is

another aspect to art-making, which involves a longing for transcendence and spiritual opening. The cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien has written a wonderful book, *The Nine Muses: a Mythological Path to Creativity*, in which she talks about muses as initiating us into the deeper truth of who we are and of the healthy feminine. According to Arrien, muses are particularly needed in the contemporary world because of the way they invite us to celebrate creativity and beauty in the midst of a society that prizes efficiency and mass production.

5. This is the first book in a series, which some readers may not realize, but the additional books are about secondary characters from THE GEOMETRY OF LOVE. Please describe the series and why you wanted to write more stories.

There are three cousins, Julia, Anna, and Robin, and their stories intersect in some ways and diverge in others. The second novel, about Anna, is set mostly in Italy, narrating a youthful love affair and the consequences of reconnecting with that lover twenty-five years later. Anna also knows Michael, and her story is intertwined with her cousin's. The third novel, about Robin, will take place in San Francisco and takes us through the ups and downs of one woman's alternative lifestyle. The three novels look at through three different ways we humans create meaning: Julia finds meaning in the arts and secular humanism, Anna becomes a Buddhist and explores meditation and the idea of reincarnation, Robin is a New Age psychotherapist interested in shamanism and political action. The trilogy parallels my own spiritual development as I moved from New York to California.

6. Your descriptions of landscape and place are so vivid, be they of New York or California. How important is place to you as a writer?

I am hugely influenced by place. In fact, I spent a year of my life doing an in-depth study of classical Feng Shui, which helped me develop a high sensitivity to the way place influences psyche, culture, and spirituality. San Francisco Bay, for example, has a huge tradition of change, innovation and experimentation behind it, a tradition which is connected, in my mind, to its geography. In Chinese energetic terms, the Bay is actually a recipient of cosmic and creative Chi that affects people living here if they are open to it.

7. You write about characters who make difficult, painful decisions that are often painful for others as well, but your characters take responsibility for their actions and choices. How did you manage to write about their complexities without making them seem ugly, or martyrs, or melodramatic?

I hope to create characters whose decisions and actions may sometimes seem counter-intuitive, yet when we understand their woundedness, we also understand the defensive patterns they employ to avoid further pain. So often in love relationships there is a see-sawing between opening up and closing down. I see a deep pathos in the way relationships often fail because of defensive patterns, lack of communication or poor timing. One person is finally ready to take a risk and move closer just at the moment the other is pulling back. Desire can be canceled out by anxiety about the future, but then again, fear can be overcome if there is enough desire or "chemistry." When two people actually open up to each other at the same time, it's nothing short of a small miracle. That's why love stories, both in fiction and in movies, remain so popular.

8. Your book suggests some women struggle in relationships to remember who they are or to continue to pursue their own dreams. Do you agree with this reading? Do you think this struggle is exclusive to romantic relationships?

I do agree with that reading. Women, in spite of changes in social expectations, are still more likely to place their agenda secondary to their partners', especially in cases where the man is the breadwinner—which is to say that the challenges remain practical as well as psychological. If there are children in the picture, a woman's life may feel like an obstacle course. The best thing a mother can do for her daughters is to teach them to pursue and value economic independence. The struggle (to answer your last question) sometimes starts in the tussle between a domineering father and an eager-to-please little girl. That said, some girls are born naturally strong-willed and get where they're going no matter what.

9. You work as a literary translator as well. How did working as a translator influence your own creative work?

I have translated a number of books about the history of art, architecture, and landscaping. Translation makes one very focused on the mechanics of writing: each sentence has to make sense syntactically, you want to be precise in the use of language, etc. When you are translating a book that is three or four hundred pages long, you need a lot of self-discipline. You have to produce a certain number of pages per day, per month, in order to meet a deadline—all of which taught me how to chain myself to my desk and focus in on my fiction writing, whatever my mood on a given day.

I have also done some translation of Italian poetry. If translating a book of prose requires the endurance of the marathon runner, poetry translation requires the quietness and concentration of yoga or tai chi. You have to slow down and dip into language one word, one verse at a time, and take the time to let the right English equivalent form in the mind. Slowing down is a valuable lesson for all writers in this day and age, when the internet is leading people to write as much and as fast as possible, with a minimum of revision.

10. You write both poetry and prose. What is it about each that you enjoy? Which came first? What made you try the other form?

I am more of a fiction writer than a poet, however I do enjoy the linguistic density and brevity of poetry. I go through phases when I write quite a bit of verse and others when I write none. But I am always working on fiction.

11. What is your writing process?

I am very methodical as a writer. I gestate a story, make an outline, write a draft, then rewrite and revise at great length. I have several great readers in a monthly writing group who give me feedback along the way.

12. Would you share your writing journey and path to publication?

There were actually several earlier versions of *GEOMETRY*, two of them written in the third person, one of them with a completely unrequited love story that was guided (albeit unconsciously) by Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. My agent, April Eberhardt, was hugely helpful, pointing me in the right direction as I crafted the final version. She also guided me toward She Writes Press. I attended an information session that the press held in Berkeley in the spring of 2013, at which a dozen women authors, all of them very articulate and impressive, shared their positive experiences with SWP, and I was sold. Having gone to a women's college (Wellesley) and come of age during 1970s feminism, I am very enthusiastic about this press that serves women and adheres to high standards.

13. What do you hope readers will take away from this novel?

That love is a messy business but you should never give up. There's a wonderful line in the movie *Valentine's Day* in which one of the older characters says to one of the younger something like "Love is cruel. It chews you up and spits you out." Ultimately the best you can do is go with the flow of what presents itself. Only if you remain open to what life has to offer will you find happiness. If you allow woundedness to lead you into a defensive attitude, you ruin your own chances of finding love. This is as true in established relationships as it is in new ones.

14. What writers or books inspire you?

French literature of the 19th and 20th centuries was the first major influence on my literary sensibility, as I went to a French lycée as a kid (grades 1 through 11) and went on to be a French major and spend time in France. Flaubert, especially his ironic treatment of the romantic movement in *Madame Bovary*, had a huge impact on me, as did André Gide and Marcel Proust. Ultimately I wrote a doctoral dissertation on two of my heroes, Henry James and Edith Wharton, in which I traced the impact of French literature on them and other American authors. I have also been very influenced by great women writers of the 20th century, from Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin to Doris Lessing and beyond.

15. What's next?

The next novel, with the working title *THE DREAM OF ANOTHER LIFE*, tells the story of Julia's cousin, Anna. It switches back and forth between an affair she has with an Italian in 1979 and her email correspondence with her ex-lover twenty-five years later, when he finds her again living in Berkeley, California. The story dovetails with *GEOMETRY* in that both Julia and Anna know Michael, and both stories reach a climax around 2004 as the two women's paths cross and affect each other.