

CAROL EDGARIAN

A Scribner Reading Group Guide
Three Stages of Amazement

INTRODUCTION

Set in San Francisco as the Great Recession descends on the country, Carol Edgarian's *Three Stages of Amazement* is a bracingly intelligent and compassionate look at modern marriage, with an unforgettable cast of characters. She describes the promises we struggle to keep, the secrets that everyone knows and lives with and the thousands of small compromises we make to remain a family.

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Three Stages of Amazement* is divided into sections: Silence, Disbelief, and Talk. Discuss what you think Edgarian means by these concepts. How do the characters deal with amazement (in all its forms), and how does that drive much of the plot?
2. In an early scene between Charlie and Swanson, we come across this line: "They were, after all, part of a generation of winners, and as such possessed a certainty, hardly imaginable now, that given their education, connections and ambition, they had every reason to expect that with a little luck and a whole lot of push, they would have everything." Discuss how the promise/myth of limitless potential affects all the characters over the course of the book. In what ways did their experiences mirror yours? Likewise, how has the downturn affected America's view of itself?
3. The first line of the novel reads, "The modern marriage has two states, plateau and precipice." Discuss the types of marriages and unions forged and tested in the novel, and how this sentence applies to them.
4. Edgarian introduces and describes two couples at different stages of togetherness—one relationship between the exhausted parents of young children, the other between a couple who have been together for nearly fifty years. We also see the affairs that threaten both relationships. Examine the nature of desire as it plays out at these varying points in the characters' lives.
5. Edgarian skillfully takes readers into the diverse lives of servants and their employers, citizens and illegal immigrants, rich and poor. Discuss how the novel looks at all levels of American society today.
6. Much of this novel is about Lena's quest for "a bit of grace." What does this mean to you? How do you strive for grace in your own life?
7. Many readers remark on Edgarian's ability to inhabit a wide range of characters. Theo is a particularly impressive example of this. Did seeing this world from a child's perspective enhance your understanding of the Pepper family dynamic?
8. What did you think of the revelation about Cal and Lena's connection? Discuss Lena's reaction. Do you think she suspected this? Did you?
9. In the novel, minor characters such as the woman in the grocery store wearing the fur coat, or Lila Hagopian, of the bum at Ivy's door appear seemingly out of nowhere, surprising and startling our main characters and forcing them to look at life and themselves in a new way. Discuss.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Lena always seems to have news stories on her mind. Take a look through the newspaper and bring the most unusual and interesting story you find to your book club.
2. Carol Edgarian and her husband, Tom Jenks, are the founders of Narrative magazine, a leading digital source for storytelling, featuring the work of both established and emerging writers. Visit www.narrativemagazine.com to read thousands of stories, essays, poems, and interviews.