



## A READING GROUP GUIDE FOR

# VERA

A NOVEL

## CAROL EDGARIAN

*This reading group guide for Carol Edgarian's VERA includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. 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 novel.*

### INTRODUCTION

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With a personality akin to a force of nature, young Vera Johnson must navigate a complex world at home and in the corrupt city around her—San Francisco in 1906. Vera straddles two worlds: the glamorous life of her mother, the madam of the city's most famed bordello, and a difficult but respectable existence with her adopted mother and sister.

The disaster of the great quake gives Vera the opportunity to forge her own identity as things shatter around her. As she struggles to survive and create a new life, she intrepidly casts aside societal norms, gains surprising allies among a legendary cast of characters that includes tenor Enrico Caruso, indicted mayor Eugene Schmitz, and tabloid celebrity Alma Spreckels. From the rubble, Vera and her cohort of fellow survivors carve a new path forward.

## TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. Edgarian opens *Vera* with two quotes about where to look for information or truth. We soon learn that Vera is named for that very thing: truth. Discuss how truth figures in the novel. Does Vera ultimately find it?
2. In the chapter “Birthday,” Vera describes San Francisco, saying, “My city was young, bold, having burned to the ground five times and five times come back richer and more brazen. To know her was to hold in your heart the up-downness of things. Her curves and hollows, her extremes. . . . Her beauty, her trembling. Her greed.” How else would you describe San Francisco—then and now? What is significant about the parallels between the city of San Francisco and the characters in the novel? How does the character of the city change and how does it stay the same?
3. From the outset, Vera and her sister, Pie, are introduced as distinct contrasts in appearance and personality. Pie is considered graceful and modest while Vera is viewed as brusque and headstrong. In what ways do these traits help and hinder each girl through the chaos? Do the girls transform or largely stay the same?
4. Several characters in the novel are real historical figures: Alma de Bretteville, Mayor Eugene Schmitz, Enrico Caruso. Were you familiar with any of them? What effect do the stories of these real figures serve in the novel as a whole and as supporting characters in the fictional world of Vera, Rose, and Tan?
5. Toward the novel’s beginning, Vera states, “I had made it my secret mission to find one adult—one single adult—who could show me how to behave.” Does Vera ever find that adult? In what ways does she have to grow to become that person?
6. What do you think of Morie as a mother figure? Did her fate in the quake alter your feelings toward her in any way?
7. Throughout the book, we encounter themes of hunger, desire, ambition, and possession. In “The Gold House,” Vera and Pie share an exchange: “V, every day you claim you’re starving,” Pie says. “And every day it’s true,” replies Vera. Discuss what these characters desire. In what way are they denied or fulfilled? Discuss how these experiences transform the girls’ perspectives and change them as individuals.
8. Talk about the Haj and what his presence adds to the story. What function does he have in terms of Vera’s growth?
9. What do you make of Vera’s rapport with Mayor Schmitz? The two share several one-on-one conversations and she learns more about him from eavesdropping on his conversations with Rose. How does her perception of him change throughout the novel?
10. For her first fifteen years, Vera lives within a corrupted world of thieves, gamblers, grifters, and political scammers. When the quake levels the city, there is opportunity for a new beginning. How does Vera seize that opportunity to create her own version of morality, different from the one she’d been given? Does the rest of her world follow suit? How does character determine whom she ultimately chooses as her family?
11. Vera describes the difference between want and desire: “Want is a ripe peach or a new dress; desire is the pang that keeps you awake at night, as if you’re being chased.” Do you agree? How would you define the difference between these terms? How do

some of the other characters—Rose, Tan, Lifang, Alma, Capability, Valentine, Bobby—go about attempting to satisfy their wants and desires? What is the consequence of being left yearning?

12. At first, Tan and Vera are at odds and often take petty jabs at each other, but after the quake, the two become effective business partners and perhaps even friends. Consider how they journey from foes to allies to what we might call “chosen family.” Do you think their relationship would have evolved if there had been no disaster? Why or why not?
13. If we think of Pie as Vera’s opposite, we might consider Lifang her worthy rival. In what ways are the two girls strikingly similar and how does fate treat them differently? Who, ultimately, gets the life she desires? Both girls compete for Rose’s attention, but it seems to Vera that Rose treats Lifang with more open affection. Why might this be the case?
14. In the chapter “Loose Papers,” Vera tells Bobby, “I’m never getting married. . . . But you are.” Why do you think Vera feels this way at this point in the novel? Discuss the relationship between Vera and Bobby.
15. *Vera* is host to a dazzlingly eclectic cast of characters. Out of the secondary characters, who would you consider your favorite, and why?
16. The final chapter of the book shows Vera reflecting on her past. What does she consider most important in the end? What does this say about her as a person?

## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

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1. To learn more about the devastation of the 1906 earthquake, visit the rich trove of archives and witness accounts at [SFMuseum.org](http://SFMuseum.org).
2. Host a version of Rose’s tea party! Try baking a lemon cake and break out the fancy teacups. You are encouraged to make it boozy.
3. Read Carol Edgarian’s prior novel, *Three Stages of Amazement*, a contemporary love story set in San Francisco during the 2008 financial collapse.

# *Vera*-inspired Cocktails for Your Book Club

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## **ROSE'S WHISKEY IN A TEACUP**

A whiskey drink fit for Rose of The Rose

### **INGREDIENTS:**

- Four Roses Bourbon Whiskey
- Rose Water

Pour whiskey into your fanciest teacup and add a drop of rosewater to release aroma. Rose takes it straight, but you might want a cube of ice.

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## **MORIE'S SCANDINAVIAN SOUR**

An aquavit sour that Morie would enjoy

### **INGREDIENTS:**

- 2 oz Aquavit
- 1 oz Aperol
- 1 oz Lime Juice
- 1 Orange

Add all ingredients to a cocktail shaker and fill 3/4 with ice. Shake until well chilled. Strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with an orange peel twist.

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## **VERA'S SAN FRANCISCO**

A non-alcoholic drink that leaves you ready for anything, just like Vera.  
(But substitute 2 oz tequila for the 2 oz pineapple juice if you like!)

### **INGREDIENTS:**

- 1½ oz Orange Juice
- 2 oz Pineapple Juice
- ½ oz Grenadine
- 1 Orange Slice
- 1 Maraschino Cherry

Fill a shaker with ice cubes. Add all ingredients. Shake then pour into glass. Garnish with orange slice and maraschino cherry. Feed the rest of the orange to your favorite parrot.