

## Reading Group Guide

### *Three Stages of Amazement*

Carol Edgarian

## INTRODUCTION

Seventeen years after the publication of her acclaimed debut novel, *Rise the Euphrates*, Carol Edgarian returns to fiction with the bracingly intelligent and compassionate *Three Stages of Amazement*. Set in San Francisco as the Great Recession descends upon the country, Edgarian's novel is a thoughtful and riveting 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 the 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 of the book?
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 recent downturn affected America's view of itself? Have you seen this theme appear in other works of literature?
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. Lena and Charlie face many tests and suffer major losses, both as a couple and individually. The reader sees that they have very different ways of grieving. Discuss what impact you think this has on their marriage.
5. Edgarian introduces and describes two couples at different stages of togetherness—we see both of their first dates, and scenes of intimacy in one marriage between the exhausted parents of young children; the other between a couple of 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 their lives.

6. Lena identifies with the woman caught shoplifting in the grocery store, because she too is “a thief stealing time.” Many of the characters act as thieves throughout the book. What are some of the things they steal and what do you think compels them to behave this way?
7. Edgarian skillfully takes readers into the diverse lives of servants and masters, citizens and illegal immigrants, rich and poor. Discuss how the novel looks at American society today, and what you think it says about our class structure. Do you think this is specific to San Francisco?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. Lena’s mother Beverly often seems to take Charlie’s side over her daughter’s. Do you think Lena treats Charlie fairly? Do they have realistic expectations of each other?
11. 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?
12. There are several love triangles in the book: Ivy, Cal, and Beverly; Cal, Beverly, and Ted; Charlie, Lena, and Alessandro. Beverly admits to Lena that she did love both Cal and Ted—do you think Lena and Cal were also in love with two people?
13. With her million dollar engagement party and bad behavior over losing the funding for ArtShop, Paige would seem to be the ultimate spoiled brat. But in the end, she devotes herself to her parents’ care. Do you think Paige is a foil to Lena’s character? Why or why not?
14. At the memorial service for Cal and Ivy, some of the attendees speculate on the devotion of the recently deceased couple. Why do you think Cal and Ivy stuck it out for so long?
15. In the novel, minor characters such as the woman in the grocery store wearing in the fur coat, or Lila Hagopian, or 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 today's paper and cut out the most unusual and interesting story you can find. Then share it with the rest of your book club.
2. Interested in what Charlie and Swanny were working on? Learn more about advances in robotic surgery at [www.howstuffworks.com/robotic-surgery1.htm](http://www.howstuffworks.com/robotic-surgery1.htm).
3. Carol Edgarian and her husband Tom Jenks are the founders of *Narrative* magazine, an online literary magazine featuring the work of both established and emerging writers. Visit [www.narrativemagazine.com](http://www.narrativemagazine.com) to read short stories, poems, and interviews.

## A CONVERSATION WITH CAROL EDGARIAN

### **It's been more than a decade since you published your first novel, *Rise the Euphrates*. What have you been up to since then?**

Let's see. Since finishing *Rise the Euphrates*, I got married, had kids, started *Narrative* magazine, taught innumerable classes, cooked dinners and wrote—often in the middle of the night when those other concerns weren't demanding my attention. Juggling multiple full-time jobs has been my norm. It's been a busy, busy time.

### **What inspired you to write *Three Stages of Amazement*?**

Oh, so many things. For example, a woman I know who's been married five times once said to me, "Listen, a hundred years ago it was a whole lot easier to promise 'Till death do you part' because back then everyone died in their forties." Well, the line made me laugh but it also got me thinking. I actually put it in the book but later cut it. That line had done its work. It made think about how much longer people are living today yet our expectations regarding romantic love, fidelity, parenthood, friendship haven't adapted. Or have they? I wanted to think about the marriages I saw around me. Young, old; certain, struggling. To go behind doors where, of course, no outsider is invited. It seemed to me that most love stories chart the early stages—what I'd call the blush—or they narrow in on a cataclysmic end. But what about the long middle, I wondered. When despite every fine desire to connect, partners miss; they screw up, give up, put up; they abandon themselves and each other. And yet they keep coming back. They keep coming back! What kind of craziness is that? It interests me. Related to that, of course, are the external pressures of life, specifically money, ambition, and the view we have of immigrants today versus when this country started—those subjects interest me greatly. Finally, I wanted to write about this moment in time, as America, post-Great Recession, has been stripped of its persona. America having lost its face. If we're no longer the land of Manifest Destiny, of limitless resources, capital, potential, what are we? Where are we? 2009 was a pivotal moment in time worth capturing. Here we have Lena and Charlie, arriving at middle age, weathering their own hard knocks, at the same time that

America hits the skids—that synchronicity, that frightening imbalance is where the novel begins. Lena’s question, *Where is the grace?*, seems particularly relevant to me.

**Do you see much of yourself in Lena?**

There’s a piece of me in all of the characters. To pull a line from the novel, my heart, like all our hearts, has many rooms. But is there more of me in Lena than the others? I don’t think so. My process is slow and it takes me a very long time until I feel I know a character, and by knowing I mean encompassing their real desires. My job is to be both sympathetic and utterly discriminating. And my job also is to thwart my characters’ desires so that something unexpected happens. Every character in the novel *wants*; they want what they want very badly and they want it *now*. Put two or more people in the same room with that kind of combustible heat and you have the making of drama. That’s when the fun begins. Writing *Three Stages of Amazement* was a whole lot of work, but it was also a whole lot of fun.

**A lot of recent history makes its way into the book, and you have people like Al Gore and Norah Jones mingling amongst your fictional characters. What effect did incorporating these individuals have on the development of the story?**

I can’t imagine working on a story for years that doesn’t strive to take a big bite out of the world. It simply wouldn’t interest me. The characters I write about are *in* the world and *of* the world. They are affected by what happens in the news and on the street. Isn’t everybody? I’ve never met a person, even a very small child, who doesn’t feel they own their particular piece of turf, and given that, have strongly held views on love, music, money, presidents, polar bears, and the weather. They are keepers of their time. I’m no different: I write about what impresses me, worries me, challenges me, inspires me—in short, what keeps me up at night. Call me old-fashioned, but I believe the novel ought to have that kind of urgency, of important news just in from the front. It ought to reward the reader on many levels yet feel as earthy and essential as meat and potatoes. Excellent meat and potatoes, mind you. It ought to enliven the mind and nourish the soul.

***Three Stages of Amazement* is a portrait of present-day San Francisco. What is your connection to the Bay Area?**

When I came west to attend Stanford in 1980, it was with a promise to my family that I’d be returning to New England in four years. Well, that was over thirty years ago. I love San Francisco. I even love it in the summer when I seem to spend an inordinate amount of time complaining about the fog. It’s a remarkable place: beautiful, diverse, quirky as all get out. I admire the city’s can-do scrappiness, it’s ridiculous optimism in the face of uncertainty. And I like that it’s a city where a writer can be left alone.

**How did you come up with the idea of *Nimbus*? Is it based on real technology? How did you go about your research for the medical, business and technological elements of your story?**

I always start out not knowing, with lots of questions. In the beginning, I let my curiosity lead. It gets me into all kinds of trouble. I research widely. I cook up what I think are outlandish schemes and then I find out someone in the world is actually doing that very thing. So, I follow that trail to see what it's about. I was fortunate in this book to find doctors and people in various businesses—generous, wonderfully industrious people—who were willing to share their stories and let me follow them at work and gave me piles of information to read. One of my great joys as a writer is that I get to touch down into all kinds of worlds. Basically, I am overly curious. I fill up pages and pages of notes until I'm a walking factoid, until I've got the phrases, logic and rhythms that would make the scene I want to write plausible in that milieu. And then I forget everything I've learned. I sort of rinse out the mixing bowl and see what sticks to the rim. I use what's on the rim as inspiration for the story.

**Did you always know that Lena and Charlie would be able to work it out? Do you have a future in mind for their family beyond the pages of the book?**

Have Lena and Charlie worked it out? I'm not so sure. Seems to me they've recommitted themselves to trying—trying, if you will, wiser. I suppose that's the best any of us can do. "Happily ever after" exists only in fairy tales. That's all right. Otherwise, life wouldn't be nearly so interesting.

**You have spent the last eight years building *Narrative* magazine. What have you learned about publishing?**

Any writer and any publisher today will tell you that we are in a challenging period of change. My house in San Francisco is filled with bookshelves and many thousands of books, and what's more important than the books themselves is what's inside them. We're seeing new forms of books and publishing and, more than anything, I'm optimistic about the human nature of storytelling and the creative imagination. It's a belief shared among many. It's why I write and why we publish *Narrative*.