

## Reading Group Guide

1. Bourland never names the narrator of *Fake Like Me*. Why do you think she made that choice? How would the book have been different if she had?
2. The prologue mentions “dramatic rumors of an as-yet-unseen final work” by Carey Logan, the artistic prodigy who committed suicide. In those early chapters, did you have a guess as to what that posthumous piece might be? Were you right?
3. When the narrator meets Carey in the first chapter, Carey warns her, “These people will make not only your work, but *you yourself* into a commodity. They’ll buy you and sell you. Let them. But make sure you always do it on your own terms.” What did Carey mean by this? Would you say that the narrator took her advice, or not? In your own professional or personal life, did you ever get any advice that shifted your trajectory, or that you carried with you for years afterward? Did your understanding of that advice change over time?
4. When the narrator’s loft catches on fire and her massive paintings burn just months before they are set to be exhibited in Paris, she loses two years’ worth of work. Rather than admit that she has nothing for the gallery, she resolves to re-create the paintings in secret in the time she has left, terrified of being revealed as a fraud. Yet she is still the creator of the work. Is it possible to falsify your own creations? Discuss what this means in the context of the book’s larger questions around authenticity and commodification.
5. In chapter two, the narrator observes that “art has a way of putting everyone at their most transactional. I’m invisible until someone calculates my value.” What do you think she means by this? Do you agree? Do you think this applies only to the art world, or do you see parallels in other parts of life?
6. Discuss the following description of painting: “One of my professors once told me that she started all of her paintings with a photocopied picture of her parents and the words **FUCK YOU** scrawled across their faces... All artists are of course doing that same thing: We are burying our past selves within the work, pieces of which rise to the surface without our permission like bodies in a flood.”
7. What do you think of our narrator’s friendship with Max de Lacy? Is it an “authentic” friendship? Why or why not? Do you have any friends like Max in your own life? Have you ever been someone’s Max?

8. Jes seems set up to be the villain in the book, the possessive girlfriend who knows more of Tyler's secrets than anyone. How does your feeling about Jes change over the course of the book? Is our narrator's wariness of her well founded?
9. Why do you think our narrator identifies so fully with Carey Logan? Is she right to have done so?
10. How did the twist—the multiple twists—in the book shape your feelings about the characters? Did you find yourself having to recalibrate your impressions of any of them?
11. Do you feel the narrator made the right choice in the end? Why or why not? Would you have made a different decision?

## **A Conversation with Barbara Bourland**

1. **While both of your novels share your incisive wit and flair for vivid detail, *Fake Like Me* is a very different book from your debut, *I'll Eat When I'm Dead*. What brought you to this particular story? Are there ways in which you see this as a continued exploration of a certain theme in your work, or are you just following your creative instincts wherever they take you?**

The tones are of course quite different, as each book matches [its] tone to the subject material. Personally, I see more similarities than differences: Both books are about women's work; women's bodies; women's selves *as self*. My work focuses on women as we stand, not in terms of our relationships to others (mother, wife, daughter, etc.). Both novels focus extensively on the costs of our lives. In terms of IEWID, I don't want to know what makes a beautiful woman "feel beautiful"; I want to know how much it costs her. It's the same with *Fake Like Me*: I don't want to hear some lyrical romantic fairy tale about women's artwork. I want to know how hard it was. How much does making a painting as big as Joan Mitchell's or Helen Frankenthaler's cost a person, exactly? What does it cost to be ourselves?

2. **One of the most unforgettably immersive parts of this book is the way the narrator abandons herself to the creative process; the descriptions of oil painting are so real as to put the reader inside the work herself. Do you have a background as a painter? If not, how did you make this part of the artistic process come so alive?**

Well, I love painting. I absolutely love painting, though I'm personally not very good at it. I minored in studio art in college and have an ongoing studio practice

(drawing and ceramics) that is personally satisfying, although definitively noncommercial. Beyond my own base knowledge, much of the research for this book was conducted by going into artists' studios, often tagging along with my husband, Ian Bourland, for his magazine writing (he teaches art history at Georgetown, and writes extensive history and criticism, though mostly about photography, not painting). I thanked the artists whose techniques and material habits I stole from most egregiously in the acknowledgments. As for how I made it come alive—I think the key is *materiality*. I tried to avoid compositional description because I don't find it to be imaginatively connective; it's boring and almost surgical to say, "It was a painting of a horse." That's all fine and good for catalogs and wall text, but for a novel I think it's far more evocative to focus on materials. I.e., instead of, "It was a painting of a horse," you write, "It was a painting, two inches thick, made from beeswax and pine sap." With the latter, I think your imagination can really *go* somewhere.

- 3. Your characters operate on a plane beyond simple "likability," where the idea of their needing our approval, as readers, feels beyond the point. Yet these are also very real people who crave acceptance, love, and acclaim. Can you talk a little bit about what your process is for writing such deep humanity into such complex people?**

I love this question because it's a compliment, and I really wish I had a better answer for you! To be honest, it's neither choice nor process. All I do, as a writer, is sit down and throw out line and see what comes back. If I catch something real enough, I keep it.

- 4. This is a literary novel about the New York art scene that reads like a thriller. Did you start out intending to write one kind of book, or the other? How did the novel come together?**

From the beginning, I hoped to follow the creation of a body of work alongside the narrative pursuit of an actual human body, without being too clumsy in one way or the other. The edit process was fairly long, but I think it was for the best—we shaved each chapter down, bit by bit.

- 5. Has there ever been a Carey Logan–like figure in your own life?**

Nearly. The circumstances surrounding the death of Emma Bee Bernstein, a photographer who committed suicide inside the Peggy Guggenheim museum in Venice, [have] haunted me since it took place in 2008. Emma was barely an acquaintance—we met only twice, and she was several years younger than I—but the death itself was shocking. I have wondered since it happened if any action so tragic can ever be interpreted or validated as anything other than suicide. In greater contemporary art history, I've always been fascinated by the atmosphere surrounding Francesca Woodman and Ana Mendieta, both of

whose postmortem hyperglorification struck me as both hopelessly romantic and wildly unfair. Woodman and Mendieta had, like every other female artist, to die in order to be taken seriously. Lee Lozano, too, who made a commitment to leave the art world and die in an unmarked grave (which she did), is hugely fascinating to me, and I genuinely think her Wave paintings are a window to the divine. They're shockingly, absolutely arrestingly, good. Yet she got pushed out—or pushed herself out—somehow.