

Reading Group Guide

1. How does the first story, “We, Moons,” set the stage for the rest of the collection?
2. The author frequently returns to specific motifs, such as the moon, lip gloss, and summer heat. What other motifs and/or themes do you notice that link the stories together? What moods, emotions, or sensations do they evoke?
3. In “Teenage Dream Time Machine,” a mother observes that: “all the women our age...we were practically living the same life! We’re all connected...like magic.” Do you agree? If so, what bonds do you think tie women together?
4. The story “California, Keep Us” offers a different perspective on “Chateau Marmont, Champagne, Chanel.” How does “California, Keep Us” change your understanding of the characters?
5. What other stories are linked together? Why do you think the author chose to revisit those particular ones?
6. How does the play format of “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” help to deepen or challenge your perception of the complicated relationships between the characters? How else does the author play with format in this collection, and why?
7. How do the forces of obsession and desire impact different women throughout the book?
8. What kinds of love—familial, platonic, romantic, or otherwise—do you see represented in this collection?
9. In what ways do you think certain stories and characters challenge or comply with our expectations of what it means to be a woman?
10. How does setting reflect or affect the characters’ behavior in various stories?
11. How does the final story, “A Girl Has Her Secrets,” wrap up the collection as a whole?
12. Which was your favorite story and why? Were there any that you found particularly moving or relatable?
13. Why do you think the author chose *So We Can Glow* for the title?

A Conversation with Leesa Cross-Smith

What inspired you to write *So We Can Glow*?

I wanted to write a collection focused on girls and women and I wanted to allow those girls and women the space to be imperfect, funny, annoying, weird, beautiful, ugly, sexy, dark, etc.

Whenever something sparks my heart and I can't stop thinking about it re: my writing, I try my best to turn it into a story. My ideas here turned into a lot of stories and those stories became a book.

How did creating this collection differ from your experience writing your previous collection, *Every Kiss a War*, and your novel, *Whiskey and Ribbons*? Do you have a preference between writing short stories and full-length novels?

Creating this collection wasn't so different from putting together *Every Kiss a War* because in both instances, I was writing and gathering short (and sometimes flash) fiction. But writing *So We Can Glow* was vastly different from writing my novel *Whiskey & Ribbons* because when I'm writing short fiction, I can dip in and out of stories and scenes...I can let some of my characters go, come up with new ones for new stories. But when I am writing a novel...I am hanging onto my characters for so much longer and holding their hands for a lot longer. It's hard to explain, but the process of writing a novel is both completely the same and completely different from writing short stories. On one hand, I'm writing...I'm creating and working...that's the same. But

on the other hand, I'm working with a different format, a longer arc, a bigger chunk and in most cases, a longer book. I don't really have a preference between the two of them!

Do you have a favorite story in this collection?

This is always a tough question because of course, I love them all! But "Crepuscular" has a super-special place in my heart because it was one of the first new short stories I wrote after finishing my first short story collection. Also, "Winona Forever" and the linked stories like "Chateau Marmont, Champagne, Chanel" and "California, Keep Us," because those stories came so easily for me and I didn't have to wrestle with them as much as I usually do. "Out of the Strong, Something Sweet" goes in that same category too. And "The Great Barrier Reef is Dying but So Are We." But it also feels very true for me to say I love them all equally!

Were certain characters or storylines influenced by your own life?

I really don't base characters or storylines on my own life very often! Rarely, I do. For example, in "Out of the Strong, Something Sweet" some neighborhood jerk yells something at the girls and I grew up in a country-ish neighborhood where jerks in fast cars would holler things at us, yes. And "Bright" takes place in Seattle while a cougar is loose in Discovery Park and the one time I was in Seattle, a cougar really was loose in Discovery Park. And my girlfriends and I really did camp when we were in Washington and I really did fly from Seattle to Nashville when it was all over, but for the most part, I'm making things up, not using my own life. But,

occasionally I do give a character an odd/secret thought I've had or have them do or say something I'd love to do or say...if I were a completely different person!

The idea of femininity and what it means to be a woman is especially relevant today in the current climate of social change and reflection. Do you want girls and women to take away anything in particular from your stories?

I don't know if I want girls and women to take anything else from my stories than how my stories make them feel. I'll leave that up to them! But if girls and women read my work and feel seen or understood...in any way...I'll count that as a win!

Many of these stories evoke a strong sense of nostalgia for growing up in a certain time period. What are some things—brands, objects, songs, books, movies, etc.—that immediately bring you back to your most formative moments (your own Teenage Dream Time Machine)?

Oh wow, I'm definitely an 80s kid, a 90s teenager. Every little bit of what I've written in "Teenage Dream Time Machine" goes on my list. And so many things in "Girlheart Cake with Glitter Frosting" and my Inspirations list at the end of the book. I was a big fan of *The Babysitters Club* and *New Kids on the Block*. I loved *Full House* and John Hughes movies. I watched *Dirty Dancing* every single time it was on TV. I listened to so much Mariah Carey and Janet Jackson and choreographed dances to those songs with my girlfriends all the time. Fairly sure some Boyz II Men was playing somewhere soon after I kissed a boy for the first time and I went

on one of my first movie dates at the mall. I worked at the Gap in the mall, took my break in the Food Court. Also, people like Winona Ryder and Drew Barrymore and Lisa Bonet...those girls in the movies and magazines I loved so much. And, magazines! I probably subscribed to every possible teen girl magazine and kept them all. They were my Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest before those things existed. It's how I figured out what I wanted to do with my hair and what clothes I wanted for the summer and back to school. Senior year of high school, I got my hair cut like Winona Ryder in *Reality Bites*. I got babydoll dresses from the thrift store because of Courtney Love. I remember leaving my friend's house early to get home in time to watch the first episode of *My So-Called Life*. I listened to *August and Everything After* by Counting Crows so much I practically wore out my tape. I was in college at the same time *Felicity* was in college. So many things, so many emotions. And MTV, wow everything on MTV...that Jeff Buckley "Last Goodbye" Buzz Clip. All of it really! Forever exploding in my teenage dream time machine heart!

Were there any stories in this collection you found particularly challenging to write?

"Get Rowdy" was a bit challenging for me to write because I knew I was going to have to hurt that character a lot before she got better. And I had her doing these awful things for a man who absolutely wasn't worth any of it and couldn't be. She deserved so much better and it takes her too long to realize that.

Some of your stories involve the same characters, such as in “Chateau Marmont, Champagne, Chanel” and “California, Keep Us.” Why did you return to these characters, and why did you decide to present their stories in separate parts?

With those two stories in particular, I knew I wanted one of them to keep a lot hidden...only to be revealed in the other. They're two complete halves of a whole. “Chateau Marmont, Champagne, Chanel” is a little idyllic and exciting, but hints at something darker, and a lot left unsaid. In “California, Keep Us” I bring that darkness to the light, explain things a bit more. I liked the idea of thinking about and circling around how things are so often not what they seem...that people are complicated, relationships are complicated, situations are complicated and sometimes we have to wait for the rest of the story. Sometimes the mysteries are revealed when we're patient, sometimes we have no choice but to take the time...can't rush things. I knew their story wasn't over even when I finished writing about them the first time. I just had to wait a bit to let them write their “ending.”

Do you think it's important for the reader to read the stories consecutively? How did you figure out the order of the stories?

I do think it's important for the reader to read the stories consecutively and I don't usually feel this way about collections unless the author has suggested it! But I've always loved listening to albums the whole way through, like the artist intended. With this collection, I think the reader will get the absolute most from the stories re: emotional impact and my artistic vision by reading the stories in order. And I figured out the order of the stories via a complicated color-coded chart my agent and I came up with! We spent a LOT of time going back and forth about it, trying

things out. We used a lot of highlighters and mildliners and I still have the original hanging on the wall of my bedroom because it's very colorful and pretty to look at! The colors relate to length of stories and connected stories and things like that. It was fun to do and it made so much sense in the end. It worked!

Why did you choose *So We Can Glow* as the title?

So there's a story in this collection called "Knock Out the Heart Lights So We Can Glow" and when I was thinking over titles, the second part of that title was something I kept returning to. When I thought: what do all of these girls and women have in common? What do all of these stories have in common? The answer of: the same idea of all of them trying to do their best...eventually...so they could glow...came to mind. But sometimes we won't know something glows in the dark until we turn out the lights. And sometimes when things get the darkest in our hearts, that's when we see what's glowing, that's when we learn to glow if we haven't learned already. So by choosing *So We Can Glow* as the title of the entire collection I was saying: these stories are written so we can glow, these lives are recorded so we can glow. There can be a benefit to the darkness if it ends in glow. I try my best to inject hope even in the darkest of situations when I'm writing. I like using the title to help me do that work before we even begin.

What's your writing process like? Do you have any rituals that help spark ideas or focus?

I write and write and write and write when I'm working on something. I'm a bit of a workaholic about it. I don't write out in the world, I only write at home. I taught myself not to *have* to be

alone when I'm writing because when I started writing seriously and submitting, I had two small children at home for most of the day. Two small children I had to sometimes bribe with cheese crackers and *PBS Kids* so I could finish my stories. But most of the time I write in my bedroom with my teapot and my window. Sometimes, my cat. I don't really have any rituals besides my teapot. It's easy for me to focus when I'm working on something and I'm never short on ideas/inspiration, luckily. I like watching my favorite movies and period pieces when I'm tired of writing or feeling stuck. I like listening to movie soundtracks and I make locked Pinterest boards for my characters and stories and books and being visually stimulated in that way can help too, when I'm stuck or bored. I do a lot of my writing off the page, meaning I do a lot of the work in my mind before I sit down with my laptop. I love going to gardens, art museums. I have a big fat book of all of Van Gogh's paintings I like to flip through. The switch from being stimulated by text and thinking about books/writing to being stimulated by sounds or painting helps my brain sort things out. And walks. I take long walks.

What authors do you admire? So many! But a quick list is definitely: Jane Austen, the Brontë Sisters, Crystal Wilkinson, Jamie Quatro, Roxane Gay, Sally Rooney, Sylvia Plath, Bonnie Nadzam, Lydia Davis, Dana Johnson, Lauren Groff, Tayari Jones, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, etc.