



THE TRUTH ABOUT ME: STORIES by Louise Marburg

\$15.95 | 160 pages

ISBN: 9780998801407 | Trade Paperback

Ebook: 9780998801421

Publication date: September 2017

CONVERSATION STARTERS

The Truth About Me

- Harold asks Mun, “Do you think you have to know everything about your spouse?” Do *you* think you have to know everything about your spouse or partner?
- What is the importance of class and money in this story, and how people talk about them? “He made me tell him what I paid for my house. “You never told me what you do for a living.”
- What do you think of the psychiatrist’s advice? *Is* Harold really in love?
- Harold tells Mun about his mental illness instead of telling Aggie directly. Does this mean he’s giving up on the possibility of a relationship with Aggie, or is it his way of letting her know?
- What do you think of the ending? Do you think it can work out between Harold and Aggie, or is it already over?
- Harold looks at himself in a mirror and is reassured that “I looked fine, normal.” At the end Mun tells him “That’s not something anyone normal would do.” Does one need to be “normal” to have a satisfying relationship, and what does that mean? Can Aggie accept having an abnormal boyfriend?

Vacationland

- As in the previous story, what role do class and money have? “Why was it okay for Jerry to smoke week upstairs but no okay for him to smoke a cigarette within ten feet of the house? Because you don’t make four million dollars a year, he told himself. Jerry could do anything he wanted.”
- Is Maisie wary of Karen because she’s looking out for her little brother, or because she’s jealous of Henry and Karen’s relationship, or another reason?
- Will Karen leave Jerry? What’s his appeal? His power? His money?

- Is Karen a shallow person to be attracted to Jerry, or is it human nature?
- Henry and Maisie seem more self-aware than Jerry and Karen, or are they?

Anything Can Happen

- How does the story of the marriage related to the story of the mass murder?
- What do the digressions in the narrator's thoughts contribute to the story? For example, "Tai Chi is surprisingly difficult, as anyone who does it will tell you."
- What effect does the mass murder have on the overall story? Is it melodramatic?
- Characters in many of the stories make ethical judgments and distinctions that aren't typically made by society, as in, in this story, "It's one thing to have a girlfriend on the side and another to leave your wife." What is the effect?

Myrna Athena

- What is this story really about? The suicide seems to remind the protagonist of how dissatisfied he is with his own life, especially his job, where justice does not reign ("That isn't the way things work").
- Why is the story titled "Myrna Athena"? What role does she play in the narrator's life? Why does it shock him to find out so many people in the office feel close enough to her to have called her too?
- Assuming you find this story compelling, what makes you want to keep turning the pages? Is it to find out what happens? Is it because the narrator's voice interests or entertains you? What makes a character interesting?

Mrs. Temple

- As in other stories, the characters make subtle distinctions. When Helena tells Daniel that he's nice, "Understanding," he said. "Polite. I'm not really all that nice." Is he accurate here? Do we see him as "nice" at the story's end?
- How does the Iraq War affect this story?
- In many of the stories, one person in a relationship (often a man) has left the other (often a woman) alone. In this story Helena's husband has left her, and Daniel's wife left him. They both seem understanding of the actions of their ex-spouses, but Helena judges Daniel's ex-wife harshly, and Daniel judges Helena's ex-husband harshly. Is Daniel's judgment of Helena too harsh?

The Narrow Rim

- "Thought was a precipice, the narrow rim of the act." Why is the narrow rim between thought and

action given to the title of the story?

- “Tell me the weirdest thing you ever did.” The need to not fall into the trap of boring, clichéd conversation on a date seems similar to the need to not fall into boring, clichéd language in writing. What the trick to avoiding the trap?

Indoor Voice

- What do you make of the story’s title? Does it work? If so, how?
- “Lying about the vacation had been more entertaining than talking about herself.” This theme that fiction is more interesting than truth seems to run through the book, including the title story. Do you think that’s true?
- Does Jenna change by the end of the story? The ending says she knows it’s her illness talking when she says she wants to kill herself. Is that a sign that her medications are working, that she is finding her way back to health?

Stick Shift

- Maddy says, “I had no idea about myself, whether I was pretty or different or what” and “I sat for a moment, trying to figure out what I wanted, or rather, who I wanted to be.” The theme of identity runs through this and other stories. Who *does* Maddy want to be, and is it the same person as who she is?
- The story raises the theme of class again: the class difference between Maddy and Lance, and between Maddy and Wendy: “I had never told her what my mother once said, that Wendy’s family was *déclassé*.” Which characters are most aware of their own class? Are those most aware the most prejudiced or the least prejudiced? Are people trapped in their class or can they escape it?
- What do you think of this story’s ending? Effective? Is there a sense of closure?

The Other Rachel Hersch

- “The story had been intriguing until it became clear that the hippopotamus was never going to attack anyone.” Does the hippopotamus ever attack anyone in this story? How do you think Rachel Hersch the editor would view this story?
- Have you ever tried to transform yourself, through your appearance or in other ways, into a new person the way Rachel does—get a make-over?
- What do you fear other people would say about you if you could observe them talking about you without their knowing you were listening?

Last thoughts

- This collection features a variety of neglectful or abusive parents. Who do you judge most harshly? Are there any for whom you feel a degree of compassion?
- We've also seen several mysterious strangers in this collection. What do you suppose their purpose is? Where there any you wished to know more about?
- Mental health and mental illness are themes in many of these stories. How do you think Marburg would define mental health based on evidence in the collection? How would you define it?
- Notions of objective reality are challenged or complicated by many of the stories in this book. Do these stories seem to reflect a belief that such a thing exists? Why or why not?
- "The Truth About Me" is the title of one story and also the title of the book. Do you think it's a fitting title for the collection? Why or why not? Can you think of a better title, if not?