

Book Club Kit



PUTNAM

A Conversation with **Lauren McBrayer** *about*

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE



What inspired you to write **LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE?**

The idea for *Like a House on Fire* came to me like a tropical storm—swiftly, and with an intensity I didn't expect. I was on vacation with a group of women of various ages, most of whom I didn't know very well, celebrating a friend's fortieth birthday at a beautiful house on the Pacific Coast of Mexico (a house that makes an appearance in *Like a House on Fire*, when Merit and Jane get away for three nights and everything changes for them). My own trip was four nights, and by the third, we all felt comfortable enough with one another to bare our souls over margaritas and guac. I spent the rest of the trip thinking about the nature of female friendships and the ease with which women seem to be able to “go deep” with one another while struggling (and so often failing) to connect emotionally with their male partners. I remember asking myself the very what-ifs at the center of *Like a House on Fire* as I sat on a stone ledge overlooking the ocean and watched the other girls dance unselfconsciously beside the pool: What if sexual attraction was part of the equation between women? How far could a female friendship go if there weren't a limit on what two women could be for each other? And, over time, these questions would lead to a more personal one for me: What if the dissatisfaction I'm feeling in my marriage isn't an obstacle to overcome but a clue?

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE explores the sensation of friendship as it transforms into romance—something we’ve also seen happen with public figures such as Elizabeth Gilbert and Glennon Doyle. Why do you think this is becoming such a timely and relevant conversation today?

I don’t think friends becoming more is new. I think the idea of a platonic friendship exploding into a hot, fiery romance has always been appealing because it captures our desire for our romantic partners to be “everything” to us. The difference, now, is that we’re finally willing to explore what that might look like for friends of the same gender to cross that line. I think there are a lot of reasons we’re seeing more and more “straight” women coming out and saying that they’ve found romantic love with another woman. Part of the explanation is the fact that women are finally empowered enough culturally to define for themselves what they want out of life beyond being wives and mothers and helpmates to men. As society has given women more and more agency to tell their own stories, to be protagonists instead of just supporting characters, we’re questioning what the heteronormative ideal really offers us. For women seeking deep, sustained intimacy and true equality, a marriage to a man might not be the answer. This is ultimately where I ended up. I stopped lamenting everything my husband wasn’t giving me and allowed myself to wonder whether the woman I was closest to could ever be more than a friend. Once I let myself go there in my head—aided in large part by Merit and Jane, whose story was making space for my own—the floodgates opened and there was no forcing them shut.

The novel is a realistic portrayal of what it feels like to be a like to be a parent, particularly a working mother, and captures that loss of self that comes after children and years of marriage. Are you writing from personal experience?

I am absolutely writing from personal experience—and the experience of so many of my mom friends. For me it wasn’t so much a loss of self as a fracturing of self. I found myself wearing all these different hats and playing all these different roles, with very little overlap. It felt like I was constantly toggling between all these different identities, all these separate modes. Mom mode. Work mom. Wife mode. Nowhere was I integrated into one holistic person. A mom wasn’t supposed to be sexy. A wife wasn’t supposed to act like a lady boss. An ambitious professional wasn’t supposed to get distracted by how much sleep her toddler was getting. A thriving creative (I was trying to write my first novel right after my first baby was born, much like Merit was trying to mount her first gallery show) wasn’t supposed to be scouring the internet for age-appropriate lingerie. It was all very confusing and I never felt like myself anywhere. This is the essence of what I was trying to capture in the early chapters of *Like a House on Fire*.

Merit and Jane are at two different ages and stages in life, and yet they were able to overcome that and be so drawn to each other. Why do you think that is?

Why do we assume that age is such a barrier to intimacy among adults?

This is an excellent question, but my answer is to question the question. Why do we assume that age is such a barrier to intimacy among adults? We've also been sold a lie by the patriarchy that women can only be understood by women who are like them—moms should gravitate toward moms, single women should find single friends, working professionals should network with similarly-minded women. The truth is, many women I know feel alienated and lonely in groups of women “just like them.” I certainly did. It wasn't until I went back to work after having kids and met a diverse group of women with whom I had few life circumstances in common but shared a similar temperament and sense of humor that I began to question the idea that “my people” were thirtysomething women with kids and husbands. The cynical side of me wonders whether we've been programmed to think of ourselves as only the roles that we perform, and that's why we so often gravitate toward women who are also performing those roles. I call bullshit on this. Merit and Jane connect so deeply because neither woman needed the other to be any particular thing other than who they already were. It didn't matter that they seemed so different on paper, because they (like all of us) weren't defined by their life circumstances.

Religion is a topic that comes up throughout the novel in regards to Merit. Was it important to you for that to be included, and why?

Faith has always been an important part of my own identity, and I was interested to explore how being a person of faith would affect Merit's decision-making as her feelings for Jane changed and deepened. I think in some sense, it is because Merit has a relationship with God (albeit not the one her parents wish she had) that

she is able to recognize the uniqueness of what she and Jane find in each other. I wanted to explore how faith intersects with the messiness of life for a person who has left organized religion but hasn't abandoned God. For Merit, the sense of connection to something deeper that she feels when she and Jane are together is reminiscent of other moments in her life when she has felt connected to the Divine, and while their relationship is certainly complicated and morally fraught, she experiences an inherent goodness in her intimacy with Jane, which in her mind keeps it from being completely black and white. I love the nuance of this. While I was working on *Like a House on Fire*, I heard a sermon at church about the verse in Genesis where God says “it is not good for man to be alone,” and it resonated deeply: it isn't good for any of us to be alone! And yet Merit is very alone in her marriage and the opposite of alone when she is with Jane. With Jane, she belongs. Though that may be an oversimplification, it really is the heart of why Merit is willing to do what she does.

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE is a vivid depiction of what many marriages look and feel like. Why do you think so many fall into the same marital unhappiness?

At the risk of over-generalizing, I think that modern marriages—particularly American marriages—have become unsustainably imbalanced. Women who are equal or even main breadwinners are so often expected to be the primary parent, the keeper of the house, the organizer of tasks, and the handlers of all manner of emotional and invisible labor. The lack of partnership so many of us feel is incredibly demoralizing. It's not that women are being asked to take on too much (though we absolutely are), it's that there's an unspoken expectation that childrearing and domestic tasks are either ours to do or ours to manage. This may have made sense when there was a division of labor in married households, with the husband working outside the home and the wife working inside the home, but that's not the typical scenario anymore. And yet, women are still responsible for the domestic



work. Sure, for affluent working women, this means hiring nannies and housekeepers and gardeners to do what the stay-at-home wife once did by herself, but managing these people and keeping the house running smoothly is no small task (which, I imagine, is why so many men have cleverly opted out of it!).

If you could give Merit one piece of advice, what would it be?

To trust herself. When we meet her, she's spent thirty-nine years of her life trying to satisfy everyone else's ideas of who she's supposed to be. And, I think, waiting for someone to believe in her, which her parents never did and ultimately Cory didn't either. At the beginning of the novel, this desire is wrapped up in her art career—she feels let down that her husband didn't truly support her when she quit her job to paint full time. What she comes to understand is that it wasn't actually about whether she could make it as a painter; what she wanted was someone who loved her for who she really was. Not the heteronormative ideal of the competent working-mom-multitasking-wife but a passionate, thoughtful, sexual being with desires and interests outside her role as mother and wife and friend. I want Merit to trust that who she really is underneath—passionate and complicated and unapologetically queer—is exactly who she is supposed to be. I'm learning in my own life that dismantling a false identity is a messy, sometimes painful, but ultimately exhilarating process that requires humility, a sense of humor, and lots of grace.

Did you plan on the events in the epilogue unfolding from the start?

I didn't. The draft of this book that I was prepared to send to publishers didn't have an epilogue at all. The story concluded with Merit ending her relationship with Jane because of her inability to disappoint Cory and her kids and her friends and her mother. But the Friday before we were planning to go out with the book, I had this nagging feeling in my gut that their

story ended a different way, and that I owed them—and, honestly, myself—that ending. So I sat down to write an epilogue, at first just for myself, and typed without stopping until I wrote the last word. After I sold the book, my incomparable editor, Gabriella Mongelli, helped me make the story better, but not a word of the epilogue has changed since that afternoon I wrote it.

What is next for you?

I'm working on a new novel about a woman who comes to the end of herself and journeys into the darkest depths of her soul to find the truest essence of who she is and what she wants. I want to explore the nature of colonization, using California as my backdrop, to ask questions about what it means for each of us—collectively but also as individuals—to assimilate to the dominant (white, male, cisgender, straight) culture, and what happens when we internalize someone else's ideas for what it means to be “good.” I'm also already dreaming about the TV version of *Like a House on Fire* and how I might bring Merit and Jane to life on screen.

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1.

Love, in all its forms, is a major theme in *Like a House on Fire*. How is love—be it romantic, familial, or platonic—expressed differently in the novel?

2.

When Merit returns to her career and takes the job at Jager + Brandt, she suddenly finds herself balancing her professional life and motherhood. Talk about the ways in which working motherhood is represented here. How does Merit navigate it, especially compared with her friends?

3.

As Merit and Jane get closer, their feelings are like an avalanche: slow and then all at once. Discuss the bond between the two women. Did you predict the turn their relationship would take? How does it empower them both?

4.

Discuss Merit's relationship with Cory. Did you think they had a strong marriage? Where does it falter? What do you think would have happened between the two of them if Merit had never met Jane?

5.

Talk about a time you were at a crossroads, whether it was in your career, in a relationship, in a friendship, or elsewhere in your life. How did you handle it? What did you do?

6.

For Merit, Jane is the spark that makes her feel most like herself again. Do you have something or someone in your life that makes you feel this way? If so, what or who is it?

7.

Do you think Cory ever understood the extent of Merit and Jane's relationship? Do you think he was suspicious at any point? Why or why not?

8.

There is a twenty-year age gap between Merit and Jane. Talk about the two stages of life the women find themselves in. How does this impact their perspective on the world and on themselves?

9.

Merit always had dreams of being a painter. What do you think painting means to Merit as an emotional act? Why do you think she can and cannot paint at times? Do you have a similar passion in your life?

10.

How did you interpret the ending? Were you expecting the turn of events that occurred in the epilogue? Explain.

