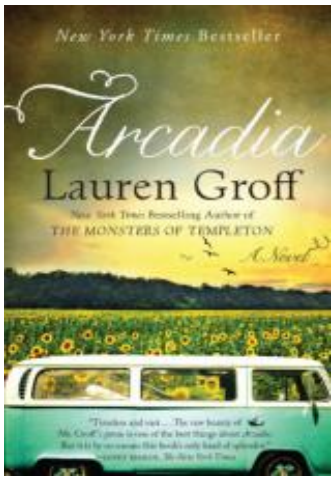
ReadingGroupGuides
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Arcadia

by Lauren Groff



About the Book

In the fields of western New York State in the 1970s, a few dozen idealists set out to live off the land, founding what would become a commune centered on the grounds of a decaying mansion called Arcadia House. ARCADIA follows this romantic and tragic utopian dream from its hopeful start through its heyday and after.

Arcadia?s inhabitants include Handy, the charismatic leader; Astrid, a midwife; Abe, a master carpenter; Hannah, a baker and historian; and Abe and Hannah?s only child, Bit.

While Arcadia rises and falls, Bit, too, ages and changes. If he remains in love with the peaceful agrarian life in Arcadia and deeply attached to its residents, how can he become his own man? How will he make his way through life and the world outside of Arcadia where he must eventually live?

In ARCADIA, Groff establishes herself not only as one of the most gifted young fiction writers at work today but also as one of our most accomplished literary artists.

Discussion Guide

1. Thinking of Arcadia at its best moments, which of its values and tenets seem healthy and important for an individual? For a social group?

2. What are the potential threats --- from within the organization and without --- to such a communal social structure? How might these be guarded against or managed?

3. What?s healthy or not for children being raised in an environment such as Arcadia? Consider the different ways Bit and Helle think about their upbringing.

4. As a young man, Bit quotes George Eliot?s statement ?That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don?t quite know what it is?we are part of the divine power against evil? (121). Where can you find examples of this being put into action in the novel? What might this mean for your own life?

5. Why is private property not allowed in Arcadia? What effect do you think this has on the identities of those living or raised there? How much of your identity comes from things you?ve purchased? What elements of your identity are independent of what you own?

6. Late in the story, there is a confrontation between Handy, Arcadia?s founder, and Abe, one of its leaders (123). How are these two men different? In what ways are they successful or failed leaders? To what extent does someone?s personal or private life affect his or her ability to lead?

7. Consider the long span of Hannah?s life. What have been her strengths and weaknesses as a member of Arcadia? As a wife? Does her admission to Abe that he always gets what he wants, for example, suggest strength or dependency?

8. What has Hannah been like as a mother to Bit? What healthy and positive effects has she had on his growth and development? What qualities does he possess as a man or a father that we can attribute to Hannah? Late in the novel, Bit confronts his mother about the profound difficulties her depression caused him as a boy (250). What were the long-term effects of this on the kind of person Bit becomes?

9. Consider the various uses of pharmaceuticals and other drugs in the novel: the Trippies? permanent damage due to LSD; marijuana as recreation or economic crop; the medication that Hannah is on most of her adult life to adjust the ?brain chemistry? that causes her depression. How do we determine which are healthy and which are not? What do you make of Abe?s statement that growing marijuana to raise money is ?not legal? but not necessarily wrong either (90)?

10. One of Bit?s responses to his mother?s deep depression is to decide he needs a Quest (65). How does that idea serve him? Real or imagined, how might a Quest be psychologically important or effective as a response to emotional difficulty?

11. Verda plays a significant role in Bit?s life, first as the seeming focus of his Quest, as the old, magical witch in the woods who might give the ?curse or antidote? to help his mother (68). Soon, though, she becomes someone Bit visits and needs in a more realistic way. What does she offer him that is so valuable? In what ways is she different from many of the women in the novel?

12. Consider the complex character that is Helle: her precocious behavior when young; the confrontation with Handy, her father (112); her disturbing sexual encounter in the woods (144); her vague, apologetic explanation to Bit, ?I thought you knew who I was? (156); and her return and relationship much later with Bit, the birth of Grete, and her eventual disappearance. What do you understand about her nature and behavior?

13. On the final page of the novel, we?re told that Bit ?has always loved the voices of women? (289). Consider the various women who gather to help when Hannah falls ill: Astrid; Luisa, the nurse; Dr. Ellis Keefe. What valuable

qualities does each of these women possess? In what ways are they different?

14. What effect does Groff?s decision to include the SARI pandemic have on the story?

15. Bit challenges his students to take what he calls a ?digital fast,? going without any electronic communication technology (cell phone, computers, GPS, etc.) for as long as possible. Try it. Go for twelve hours. Keep track and write down the various responses and realizations you have. Afterward, assess the benefits and dangers and what you think a healthy relationship with such technologies might be.

16. On page 193, Bit recalls how, as a boy, he made lists of beautiful things, a ?litany? he would whisper to his mother to try to stir her out of depressive sleep. As an adult, in the midst of his troubles with his mother and wife, he does so again, this time for himself. Read his, and then try to make your own. Be specific to your personal experience. Then consider how such a gesture affects you and what role it might play in our everyday lives.

Author Bio

Lauren Groff is a three-time National Book Award finalist and the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels THE MONSTERS OF TEMPLETON, ARCADIA, FATES AND FURIES, MATRIX and THE VASTER WILDS, and the celebrated short story collections DELICATE EDIBLE BIRDS and FLORIDA. She has won the Story Prize and the Joyce Carol Oates Prize, and has been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2024, she was named one of the ?TIME 100 most influential people.? Groff ?s work regularly appears in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Her work has been translated into 36 languages. She lives in Gainesville, Florida, where she and her husband run an independent bookstore, The Lynx.

Critical Praise

?Richly peopled and ambitious and oh, so lovely, Lauren Groff?s ARCADIA is one of the most moving and satisfying novels I?ve read in a long time. It?s not possible to write any better without showing off.?

?Richard Russo, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of EMPIRE FALLS

?The raw beauty of Ms. Groff?s prose is one of the best things about ARCADIA. But it is by no means this book?s only kind of splendor.?

?Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

?I was constantly torn between wanting to gulp down this book or savor its lines. Even the most incidental details vibrate with life?ARCADIA wends a harrowing path back to a fragile, lovely place you can believe in.?

?Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

?Part STONE DIARIES, part LORD OF THE FLIES, part something out of a Shakespearean tragedy, Lauren Groff?s ARCADIA is so uniquely absorbing that you finish it as if waking from a dream. Groff is one of our most talented writers, and ARCADIA one of the most revelatory, magical, and ambitious novels I?ve read in years.?

?Kate Walbert, author of the *New York Times* bestselling novel A SHORT HISTORY OF WOMEN

?Groff has made [this story] wholly hers. Refusing to deck out her narrative in period tie-dye, Groff uses language at once nuanced, pointed, and gorgeous to vivify her setting?Ambrosia for books clubs; consider multiples.?
?*Library Journal*,?Barbara?s Picks?

?Groff?s beautiful prose make this an unforgettable read.?
?*Publishers Weekly* Starred Review

?An astonishing novel, both in ambition and achievement.?
?*Kirkus Reviews* Starred Review

?[A] beautifully crafted novel...[it] gives full rein to [Groff's] formidable descriptive powers, as she summons both the beauty of striving for perfection and the inevitable devastation of failing so miserably to achieve it.?
?*Booklist* Starred Review

?A moving look at the value of human connection in a scary, chaotic world.?
?*Entertainment Weekly*

?Dazzling?At a moment when so much floating anger struggles for articulation, it's Groff's essential human empathy that gives her work its urgency.?
?*Vogue*

?Groff's prismatic prose style lends itself to the darker currents that run beneath the Arcadian dream?Both poetic and ambitious.?
?*Elle*

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