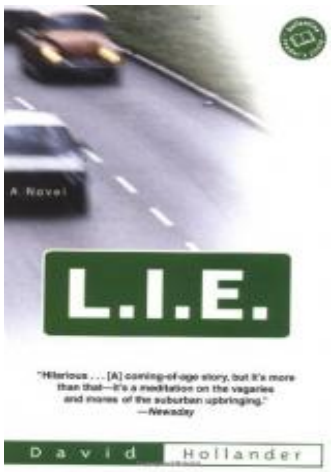
L.I.E.

by David Hollander



About the Book

The Long Island Expressway (L.I.E.) runs through Harlan Kessler's world, permitting passage west to the tony neighborhoods of Nassau County and New York City. But to Harlan, this seems like an impossible journey, something beyond his Long Island birthright. Raised in Medford, a blue collar town, Harlan has just graduated high school. He rarely thinks about the future. His orbit of strip malls and housing developments is at once ordinary and strange, an almost postmodern version of American Graffiti. In L.I.E., David Hollander has created a highly distinctive portrait of the passage to adulthood; and in Harlan Kessler, readers will find elements of their own searches for identity rooted in Hollander's wholly original view of a teenager's first steps into life.

Discussion Guide

1. L.I.E. is Hollander's debut novel, and he writes about an area close to his home and his heart, as many first-time novelists choose to do. Do you often read debut novels? How does this compare with the other first novels you've read? Do you find any similarities--in tone, in subject matter? Why do you think Hollander chose this environment and subject for his first book?

2. Harlan, like most teenagers, is deeply confused and resentful, and considers himself the center of the universe. He displays sarcastic flippancy and even open cowardice at moments. Do you find Harlan sympathetic? What parts of his experience (both physical and emotional) do you identify with? Why does he view his parents with such contempt? What is it about his manner that makes him charismatic to many of the other teens with whom he comes in contact?

3. The immaculately detailed geography of Long Island factors large in Hollander's novelistic landscape. How much did the fine details add to your understanding of the world Harlan and his friends and family inhabit? How distinct do your childhood environs remain in your mind? Have they changed in your memory? Have they changed in reality? If you have children, are you sensitive to how they absorb their environment?

4. In a similar sense, Hollander does a wonderful job of describing how a worldview--particularly an adolescent one--can be circumscribed by overly familiar geography. Why do the characters feel trapped? Why is their longing to escape so visceral? Are there factors other than money that keep the characters perpetually tied to this place? When you were young, did you ever feel trapped or isolated, cut off from a larger world? How did you "escape"?

5. Many of the families in the novel are broken or breaking-- one of the parents is having an affair, the parents no longer speak to each other or to their children. Why does Harlan feel untouched by the disintegration of his parents' marriage? Is his emotion true in any way? Why does he project this indifference? Is it a defense mechanism, a survival instinct? Why have his parents become so disaffected and unhappy?

6. At Todd Slatsky's party, Todd shows home movies he has found in the attic as a backdrop for their music performance. But he never sees the home movie in which his father hits his mother, and Todd continues to call her a "bitch." How does he mean this? Does Todd know why he feels so strongly about his mother? What has he done with his awful memories of being a young boy and watching his parents' abuse? Have you viewed home movies and discovered things about your parents and past that you had missed in the innocence of youth?

7. How do you feel about these teenagers' drug use and sexual encounters? How do the characters' decisions about what they will or won't do define their personalities? How would you react if these were your own children?

8. Hollander discusses frankly the frantic, fumbling, exciting bloom of adolescent sex. Do you think his sex scenes ring true? Do you feel that he gave due to both the male and female feelings in these situations? Did you hear in those scenes echoes of your own youthful sexual meanderings? Did you laugh or cringe? In the larger picture, how does the sexual exploration of our youth presage our adult relationships?

9. A major theme in the novel is movies and the experience of "cinematic moments." And Harlan, in particular, isn't convinced that he's real; he feels as if he's perpetually being watched. Why does Hollander use this particular motif? Is this an effort to find a lens through which teens see the world? How do you think the metaphor of a "bad movie" relates to the views of the teens? Do you have moments in your own life when you seem to be watching the action from a distance, as if a distinct "scene" were unfolding before you? Why do movies loom so large in our lives? In what sense is Harlan not "real"?

10. When Harlan meets Sarah he experiences his first love and the melodramatic rush of emotion that comes with encountering it for the first time. What makes Sarah different from the other girls Harlan has been involved with? What is it in their interaction that forces Harlan into this new realm of the heart? What does she represent for him? Why does Sarah feel the way she does about Harlan?

11. Hollander dedicates L.I.E. to the author Rick Moody. Are you familiar with Moody's novels--The Ice Storm, Purple America, and his first novel, Garden State, specifically? What echoes of Moody's sensibility do you find in Hollander's work? What stylistic tics? What subject matter?

12. Why does Hollander use stylistic flourishes--the italics, the one-act play, the film terminology? Did this enhance your understanding of the characters' emotional turmoil? Why does he choose to italicize the words and sentences he does?

13. What do you make of the absurdist one-act play? The parents' changing costumes echo the early chapter of the grown-up Halloween party. What is Hollander trying to get at here? How does this deepen your understanding of the Kessler family dynamic? Is it funny? Sad? Cruel? Telling? What do the costumes represent for them? Are there other forms of disguise or misdirection used by characters in the novel?

14. At one point, in describing Todd beating on his drum kit, Hollander includes this passage (p. 65): ". . . the present seems to be missing, everything either ugly, gnawing history, or mythic, impossible promise. 'Now' is a kind of negative space . . ." Do you think that the idea of a "missing present" accurately characterizes the teenagers' attitudes? Why is this so for them? How are the characters not living the fullness of such vivid experiences in the "now"? Is this specific to youth, or is this a lifelong phenomenon?

15. How does Harlan change as he grows older, and why? What events have pushed him toward adulthood? Can you pinpoint definitive events in your own adolescence that helped shape your adult self?

16. The Long Island Expressway threads through the novel like, well, like a long highway with many exits. What does the L.I.E. symbolize in terms of the novel? What does it represent for Harlan? Have you ever had the type of driving reverie Harlan has in the title chapter?

17. What do you think happens to Harlan and Sarah as time moves on beyond that covered in the book? Do you care about their futures? Are they destined for greater happiness in the larger world, or deeper sadness and frustration? Why is their relationship important for Harlan even if they don't stay together? For Sarah?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"Hollander displays a keen eye for the ordinary, capturing teenage discontent and suburban malaise without pretense. "

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