

The Center of Things

by Jenny McPhee



About the Book

Nora Mars?glamour girl, star of stage and screen, B-movie goddess?has slowly aged out of mainstream popularity and quickly slipped into a coma. Known as much for her astonishing looks, her five husbands, and her way with words ("I?m all for love at first sight. It saves a lot of time") as for her movie career, Nora Mars has been a tabloid?s dream diva.

Marie Brown, the heroine of Jenny McPhee?s debut novel **The Center of Things**, is everything that Nora is not: too tall, too plain, too unmarried, and always too early. But she also happens to be Nora?s number-one fan and knows enough to use the star?s untimely near-death to advance her own career at the Gotham City Star by insisting on writing her obit. Along the way she meets the charismatic Rex Mars, Nora Mars?s husband number-three, and struggles between reportorial integrity and plain old lust.

But Marie also has a secret life: She spends every free moment at the library, pursuing her fascination with physics. Here she meets the strange, intriguing Marco Trentadue, a "freelance intellectual" who bears a striking resemblance to Peter Lorre. While Marie is drawn more and more to Rex, she gradually finds Marco to be the stranger attractor.

Interweaving vignettes from Marie?s past, movie lore and lines, and metaphorical physics, Jenny McPhee limns the randomness of everyday life, the conflicting pulls of libido and intellect, and the choices?conscious or not?that shape the search for true love.

Discussion Guide

1. What personality traits make Marie an unusual or distinctive protagonist? For example, Marco identifies her "chronic need to anticipate." In what ways does this quality manifest itself in the course of the novel? Do you consider it a strength, a flaw, or both? What other characteristics does Marie identify about herself, or do other characters observe in her (such as her passions for old movies and new science)? Do you personally identify with any aspects of her

personality? Do you find her a likable heroine? Why or why not?

2. Marie says that her job writing for the tabloids is akin to assembling a jigsaw puzzle--a process that involves "taking a few facts, a little filler, and scrambling them around until they fit together into some sort of recognizable whole." In what ways does this process reflect the form of **The Center of Things**? What seemingly random pieces--bits of texts, storylines, genres, quotations, theories, and themes--does the author include? How do they come together to form a cohesive whole? As a specific example, discuss the use of the various quotations by Nora Mars scattered throughout the novel. What do they contribute to the overall narrative? Do they serve to illustrate specific ideas raised in the context of the plot, or do they act as ironic commentaries on the action?

3. Marie also says that the most challenging part of her job is "trying to understand people's motivations for what they did . . . because just when you thought you'd figured someone out, you'd see another possibility for what was driving that person." How is the difficulty of assessing what motivates other people explored in the novel? How does the author show specific characters being motivated by a range of desires, ones that at times might even be considered contradictory? What mistakes in judgment does Marie make in figuring out people's motivations, including her own? How does this relate to the revelations she uncovers in her investigation of Nora Mars and her past?

4. Why does Marie worship Nora Mars? Consider the qualities that Marie admires in Nora in contrast to how she describes herself, particularly in her "litany of self-hatred." What does Marie's veneration of Nora say about the personalities we choose to idolize and the reasons we do so, and about the ways their example can influence us for better and for worse?

5. Discuss Marie's feelings toward Marco. How does she perceive him at the start of the novel, and how does that differ from her description of him at the end? At what point do you, as a reader, figure out that Marie is attracted to him, and that he is attracted to her? How does the author make this attraction clear to readers, even though it is not necessarily clear to Marie herself? What factors do you think prevent Marie from figuring out her feelings for Marco earlier on?

6. Discuss Marie's relationship with her brother, Michael. In what ways does it parallel the relationship--and conflict--between Nora Mars and Maud? In investigating the Mars sisters, what does Marie come to realize about her relationship with Michael? Why, if her relationship with Michael was so important to her, did she risk destroying it by pursuing her interest in Michael's lover? You might also discuss the continuing influence her father has on Marie. Why does she say her struggle to finish her quantum paper is "on some primal level, a distraction--not from her betrayal and loss of her brother but from having caused her father to leave"?

7. Much of the novel consists of Marie and Marco's discussions about science, particularly about physics and quantum mechanics. What do these discussions generally contribute to the narrative? What is it like for you, as a reader, to encounter these ideas in the midst of a work of fiction? What does the author do to make these scientific theories accessible to readers who might not be familiar with them? Did you find any of the scientific principles discussed particularly interesting or intriguing?

8. Marie is particularly interested in making analogies between science and everyday life, and she and Marco frequently attempt to connect scientific theories they are discussing with specific events unfolding in their lives. For example, they discuss Bell's Theorem, which states that "any two particles once in contact will become 'entangled' and continue to influence each other, no matter how far apart they may subsequently move . . ." How does that description apply to

characters in the novel and to their relationships to one another? Also, consider the idea that "a particle can have potential existences in many places at once until we look at it--only when it is measured by an observer does it become 'real' or fixed in one reality." What events in the novel illustrate the idea that "reality depends upon who is looking"?

9. Consider the novel's chapter titles: Time, Truth, Beauty, Jealousy, Money, Science, Love, Reality, Death, Life, Qualia, Fate. What do these headings have in common? How does each chapter investigate or reflect the particular theme or idea that provides it with its title? You also might consider the ordering of the chapters. What does it mean, for example, that Death precedes Life? Or that the novel begins with Time but gives the final word to Fate?

10. In discussing Einstein's theory of relativity, Marie says that "time, like language and meaning, was relative to its context." In what sense is time relative? How does this idea connect with the novel's investigation of such concepts as Beauty, Truth, Reality, and Death? Consider, for example, Marie's distinctions between "absolute truth," "tabloid truth," and "relative truth," and between "pure beauty based on an aesthetic hierarchy recognizable to all humans; and relational beauty . . . based on one's own perceptions." How does the novel illustrate the ways in which things commonly taken to have a single, objective meaning are actually open to varying, subjective points of view?

11. Marco's "theory of mutual good looks" states that "absent mitigating factors like money and power, people inevitably couple with their physical equals, their beauty equivalents . . ." Based on your own observations of couples you know or have seen, is Marco correct? Or do you agree with Marie, that there are always mitigating factors?

12. Midway through the novel, in a central chapter, Marie and Marco discuss scientific theories that place us "at the center of things" versus those that place us at the periphery of the universe or claim that there is no center at all. Why do you think the author chooses to make this term the title of the novel? How does the issue of being "at the center" or "centered" relate to events in the novel, particularly to Marie's experiences and change of heart?

13. Nora Mars is famous for playing the femme fatale role in old noir movies. (If you want to check out classic examples of noir films, take a look at *The Maltese Falcon* or *Double Indemnity*.) Many of these noir films take the form of detective stories, in which the protagonist is somehow set up or undone by a femme fatale. These movies also often feature dark, tortured sexual relations, with stunning revelations, surprise twists, and multiple double-crosses. In what ways does **The Center of Things** borrow and play with conventions of noir films? Why? What other genres does the novel invoke? Is it, like Michael's screenplay, an example of a "sci-fi noir comedy"?

14. Marie, in attempting to account for what makes tabloid journalism and voyeurism such a "turn on," argues that "we look into other people's lives as a way of looking into our own," and we also "look into other people's lives in order to avoid looking into our own." Do you agree with her arguments? How are both of these motivations seen in Marie's investigation of Nora Mars? What do these say about why so many people are fascinated with celebrity gossip and scandal?

15. In science, there are two opposing views that Marie and Marco debate: one is that the universe is ruled by chaos and random events; the other is that everything is predetermined by set physical laws. In philosophy, this debate might be seen as corresponding to a difference between coincidence and fate. How does the novel portray the difference between coincidence and fate? Which one seems to be the preeminent force that determines the direction of the characters' lives? Is it coincidence or fate, for example, that brings Marie and Michael back together-- and leads Marie to Marco?

Author Bio

Jenny McPhee is the coauthor with her sisters Martha and Laura of **Girls: Ordinary Girls and Their Extraordinary Pursuits**. She is the translator of Paolo Maurensig's **Canone Inverso** and co-translator of **Crossing the Threshold of Hope** by Pope John Paul II. Her short stories have been published in many literary reviews including Glimmer Train, Zoetrope, and Brooklyn Review. Her nonfiction has appeared in the *New York Times* Magazine, the *New York Times* Book Review, and Bookforum.

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