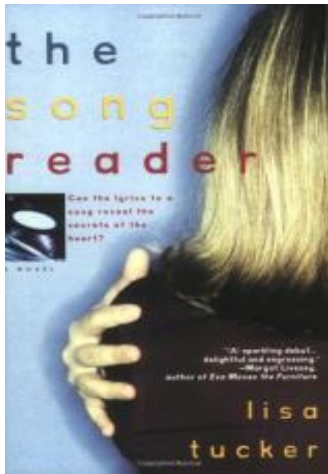


# The Song Reader

by Lisa Tucker

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## About the Book

Leeann's older sister Mary Beth has a gift. When the two sisters are left alone after the death of their mother and the disappearance of their father, Mary Beth becomes the hero of both her younger sister and their entire town. She is a "song reader." She doesn't read palms or tarot cards; she reads people's secrets and desires from the songs they can't get out of their minds. And her customers idolize her. As Leeann tells us, "They took her advice-to marry, to break it off...They swore she could see right into their hearts."

But as Leeann soon learns, every gift has its price. The sisters' bond will be tested when Mary Beth's advice leads to a tragedy that divides their small Missouri town. As Mary Beth retreats into her own world, Leeann must face the truth about their parents and their past, and the flawed humanity of the sister she adores. Lyrical, haunting, with a deeply compelling story, **The Song Reader** is an exploration of what makes a family, what breaks it apart, and how the bonds of love and blood can be both a burden and a blessing.

## Discussion Guide

1. Mary Beth was keenly aware of people's thoughts and feelings, yet she wasn't always able to transfer this knowledge to deal with her own situations with her sister, father, Ben, and even herself. Leeann, a teen with a reputation for being lighthearted and carefree, seems better able to address feelings and memories on a personal level. Mary Beth's secrets haunt her, her inability to deal with her own memories tortures her. How does this shape their lives? Leeann offered Mary Beth several opportunities to reveal the truth about the past. How would things have been different had Mary Beth been honest? Could she have avoided the breakdown?

2. Tommy, like Leeann and Mary Beth's mother, is an orphan. Why is Mary Beth inclined to take in an abandoned child? What void does Tommy fill in Mary Beth's life? Why does Leeann think Tommy will be able to heal and ground Mary

Beth at the end of the book, when he was unable to do so when she first got sick?

3. Leeann's quest to find her father is an important part of the book. Knowing what she does about how ill her father is, why does she call on him for help? Does Leeann ever really find her father? If so, at what point in the story does she find him? Describe what you feel for Leeann's father.

4. Mary Beth is strong and has endured much. Why does the incident with Holly completely break her down? What really caused Mary Beth to shut down? Why do music, Tommy, and her father fail to bring her back? Do you feel differently about Mary Beth before, during and after her breakdown? Explain.

5. What qualities does Mary Beth share with her mother? What qualities does Mary Beth share with her father? What qualities does Leeann share with each of her parents? How do these qualities affect how the sisters relate to each other and how they see their circumstances? How does the sisters' past manifest itself in the relationships they have with Juanita, Ben, Kyle, Mike, Holly and other secondary characters?

6. Early in the book, the author gives the reader some insight about the circumstances surrounding the death of Mary Beth and Leeann's mother. After learning about how unhappy Mom truly was, do you accept the notion that her death was an accident?

7. The '80s have been characterized as a time when people began to talk openly about family problems and examine how their past influenced their present. The author artfully takes us back to the decade through pop culture references-the records, the record players, letters and the popular songs. How would this novel have worked differently had it been set in the today's culture of CDs, MP3s, e-mail, music videos and Oprah?

8. In several instances, walls play an important part in the story-when the sisters discover their dad's lists written on walls, when Mary Beth recreates her surroundings in the apartment after Leeann's accident and when Juanita reveals Mary Beth's first painting project in the basement of the old family home. What message is the author writing on the walls?

9. Where do you see each of the characters in five years? Do they relocate? Does Mary Beth take up song reading again? Does Leeann try to song read? How is Tommy's life influenced by his past? Does Dad leave again? Is Ben in the picture? How does Mary Beth and Leeann's relationship evolve?

10. Do you hope there will be a sequel to **The Song Reader**?

## Author Bio

Lisa Tucker is the author of six novels: THE SONG READER, SHOUT DOWN THE MOON, ONCE UPON A DAY, THE CURE FOR MODERN LIFE, THE PROMISED WORLD and THE WINTERS IN BLOOM. Her books have been published in 12 countries and selected for Borders Original Voices, Book of the Month Club, the Literary Guild, Doubleday Book Club, People magazine Critic's Choice, Redbook Book Club, Amazon Book of the Year, Barnes & Noble Reading Group program, Target ?Breakout? Books, Books A Million Fiction Club, the American Library Association Popular Paperbacks, the Book Sense list and the Book Sense Reading Group Suggestions.

Lisa has been a guest on the "CBS Early Show," the public radio program "To the Best of Our Knowledge," the BBC, the Associated Press show "Between the Lines," and the syndicated cable program "Connie Martinson Talks Books." She has been featured in The Philadelphia Inquirer, St. Louis Post Dispatch, The Los Angeles Times, Albuquerque Journal, and Publishers Weekly, and in a variety of magazines and newspapers around the world.

Lisa grew up in Missouri. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, she went on to receive graduate degrees in English and mathematics and was awarded fellowships in both fields. She has taught creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania, the Taos Writers' Conference and UCLA. Lisa has given readings and talks all over the country, including at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, A Room of Her Own Foundation/Ghost Ranch, the Southern Festival of Books, the Miami Book Fair, and Book Expo America. Her short work has appeared in *Seventeen*, *Pages* and *The Oxford American*. She currently lives in Philadelphia.

## Critical Praise

"A stunning debut by a major new voice for her generation."

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### **The Song Reader**

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**Publication Date:** May 1, 2003

**Genres:** Fiction

**Paperback:** 320 pages

**Publisher:** Downtown Press

**ISBN-10:** 0743464451

**ISBN-13:** 9780743464451