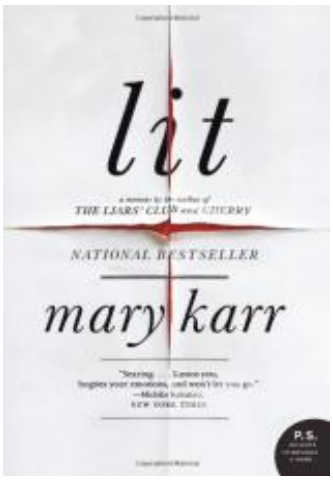
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Lit

by Mary Karr



About the Book

Mary Karr?s bestselling, unforgettable sequel to her beloved memoirs **The Liars? Club** and **Cherry** --- and one of the most critically acclaimed books of the year --- **Lit** is about getting drunk and getting sober; becoming a mother by letting go of a mother; learning to write by learning to live.

The *Boston Globe* calls **Lit** a book that ?reminds us not only how compelling personal stories can be, but how, in the hands of a master, they can transmute into the highest art." The *New York Times* Book Review calls it ?a master class on the art of the memoir? in its Top 10 Books of 2009 Citation. Michiko Kakutani calls it ?a book that lassos you, hogties your emotions and won?t let you go? in her *New York Times* review. And Susan Cheever states, simply, that Lit is ?the best book about being a woman in America I have read in years."

In addition to the *New York Times*, **Lit** was named a Best Book of 2009 by the *New Yorker* (Reviewer Favorite), *Entertainment Weekly* (Top 10), *Time* (Top 10), the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune* , the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Slate*, *the St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *the Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and the *Seattle Times*.

Discussion Guide

1. The first sentence of **Lit** is ?Any way I tell this story is a lie.? What does Mary mean by this? Is she a reliable storyteller? Is there a story in your family famous for its different versions? Is there a story you can?t tell without ?feeling? like it?s partially untrue?

2. Mary refers to her mother as ?a shadow stitched? to her feet, and to herself and her mother as ?dovetailing drunks? and as facing off ?like a pair of mirrors?. What does this say about Mary?s relationship with her mother? Do all women feel this way about their moms? At what age is it most painful? At what age --- if any --- does it end?

3. Mary writes, ?I sense the oppressive weight of my old self inside me pressing to run wild again. My old mother I?m trying to keep in.? Have you ever found yourself wincing at how you resemble your mother?

4. How is Mary?s trip to college with Mother the ?hairpin?, as she describes it, in her early life? This trip marks her introduction to real drinking, but it?s also the point at which Mary would ?start furnishing [Mother] with reading instead of the other way around.? What does Mary mean by this, and what?s the significance of this transition? Was there an ?official? transition to adulthood in your life? Was it marked by college, marriage, parenthood, career success, or something else?

5. ?Words shape our realities,? Mary concludes when she registers the meaning of the Ernst Cassirer quote: ?The same function which the image of God performs, the same tendency to permanent existence, may be ascribed to the uttered sound of language?. How does this realization frame Mary?s determination to become a poet? At what times do religion and poetry seem to do the same things for her?

6. Mary calls poetry ?one of the sole spiritual acts in our mostly godless household? and poets ?the gods I worshipped all my life? Has literature ever substituted for spirituality with you? In what ways has it done so?

7. Mary describes Daddy as a silent fixture of her adolescence. How does her father?s silence emerge, later, as a threatening force? How does her father?s silence compare to the silence of the Whitbread?s, and to Warren?s characteristic reserve? If Mary understood early on that ?words would define me, govern and determine me?, then in what way is ?wordlessness? her enemy?

8. Why does Mary call her time in recovery a ?nervous breakthrough?? Have the darker times in your own life preceded or manifested similar changes or moments of clarity?

9. Mary has ?mysterious blanks? in her memory of fights with Warren. What are the glaring blanks in your own memory? Do you think these are genuine blanks of memories or memories that you have chosen to block out?

10. In what ways does Mary?s son Dev save her? If she had lost custody of him in a divorce, would she still have gotten sober? How have your children made you better, at time, or ground you to a nub in others?

Author Bio

Mary Karr is the author of three award-winning, bestselling memoirs: THE LIARS? CLUB, which kick-started a memoir revolution and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; CHERRY, which was excerpted in *The New Yorker* and hit ?notable book? lists nationwide; and LIT, which was a ?Top Ten? *New York Times Book Review* pick (and hit virtually every other Best of the Year list) and also a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. A Guggenheim Fellow in poetry, Karr has won Pushcart Prizes for both verse and essays. Other grants include the Whiting Award and Radcliffe?s Bunting Fellowship. She is the Peck Professor of Literature at Syracuse University.

Critical Praise

"[Karr] seems to have been born with the inability to write a dishonest-or boring-sentence."

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