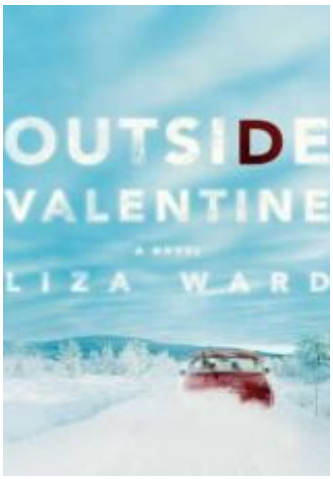
Outside Valentine

by Liza Ward



About the Book

Many long years have passed since the winter of blinding white when Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate drove across the hushed midwestern landscape and left a trail of blood and pain. So why does Lowell, a Manhattan collector of antiquities, still dream of what happened, despite his wife's best attempts to draw him back and offer comfort? And who is Susan, the teenager who appoints herself a detective, piecing together the story of the murders while wondering if she'll ever be loved like Starkweather loved his girl?

And then there's Caril Ann herself, who takes us back to relive the ride she swears she could not control. It began on the day Charlie first saw her, dangling her bare legs off the edge of a tree house. It ended outside Valentine, Nebraska, on that night when she still believed that life could somehow go back to being normal . . . '

Every so often a novel comes along that is capable of redeeming the losses it so devastatingly conveys. Disturbing, bittersweet, and lyrical, Liza Ward's **Outside Valentine** is a story of people torn apart by tragedy and yet, finally, transformed by love.

Discussion Guide

1. Outside Valentine is a novel told in three voices, with three points of view. What are the unifying themes that tie the parts to a whole?

2. When we meet Lowell in 1991 he is a man at the crossroads whose past has caught up with him. Susan insists that he retrieve the safe-deposit box but he avoids doing so. Why has he so totally isolated himself? What prompts Lowell to reevaluate his life at this point?

3. When Susan pores over all the news items she has collected about Charlie and Caril Ann, what strikes her most is the

love they share. She sees a photo where they seem all tangled up in each other. Her response is to wonder if she will ever love like that. Is Susan's search for love rewarded?

4. What propels Lowell toward Susan? Does he think Susan can rescue him, and in what way? What does Susan expect to gain by saving Lowell?

5. Lowell says that he knows the murders changed his life but cannot remember who he was before. What motivates Lowell to marry Susan? He states that at the time she "was just somewhere to go." Is Lowell capable of loving her? Of loving anyone? When Mary almost drowns at Port Saugus, he runs away. Why has he been such an absent father?

6. Like Norman Mailer's Executioner's Song, Ward draws a portrait of a troubled killer bound for death row. Is Charlie at all a sympathetic character? The nation was riveted to the case and seemed in favor of his execution; the warden at York where Caril Ann was confined comments that the public would be happy to see her join Charlie. Was capital punishment the right answer for his crimes?

7. When Charlie and Caril Ann first meet at the treehouse there is an instant connection and understanding. What draws them together so immediately?

8. Susan's mother and Charlie both take so much work to love that they bring the whole world down around them. How are they similar?

9. One of the large issues in the novel is what people do for love. How does each of these characters behave in the face of love? What draws the women to such damaged men? Caril Ann to Charlie; Caril Ann's mother to Roe; Susan's mother Nils? Susan to Lowell?

10. Susan searches the Port Saugus house for clues of her mother-where she might have gone, who she really was. Does she ever find the answers she's seeking?

11. Caril Ann always denies she did anything wrong, claiming it was all Charlie. Why didn't she try to save any of the victims? Was she guilty too? She remarks that the angriness inside her is something more real than anything she ever knew. Why doe she refuse to take any responsibility for the killings? Does she deserve to be forgiven?

12. Susan says that you cannot escape your past; your past becomes your children's past-things you don't deal with become your children's dirty laundry. Each character is traumatized by the events set in motion by Charlie and Caril Ann; how do they go about healing themselves and their pasts?

Author Bio

Liza Ward was born in New York City and holds degrees from Middlebury College and the University of Montana. Her stories have been published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Antioch Review* and *Agni Review*. They have also been selected for the 2004 *O. Henry Prize Stories* and Harcourt's *2004 Best New American Voices* collection. She lives in Massachusetts.

Critical Praise

?Liza Ward runs a tight, thrumming line through her narrative, punching up scenes with a sharp practiced touch and bringing wise compassion to bear on the tragic events that unfold with such dark inevitability.?

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