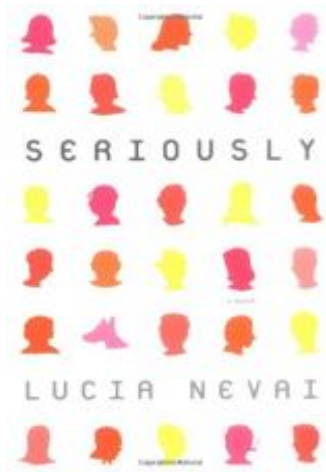


Seriously

by Lucia Nevai



About the Book

Tamara Johanssen is pushing thirty and life has taken an unplanned turn: her successful sister, her only living relative, has banished her from Manhattan to the rural crossroads of Dustin in upstate New York. Put under the watch of an attractive, married attorney, Tamara soon finds love and other salvations.

Buoyed by her romantic affair and her sister's pocketbook, Tamara gains the confidence to establish a modest art gallery that both engages her gifts and enriches her meager surroundings. When she was seventeen, Tamara was orphaned in a shocking way and controlled by a predatory teacher. In Dustin, her liberation from trauma and bad love - and Lucia Nevai's warm and hilarious first novel - begins. Population thirty-nine, the hamlet of Dustin is small in size but large in personalities, including Donna and Iris of the womanart factory, specializing in strawberry potholders; southern transplant Glorine, whose mere voice serves as an anti-depressant to Tamara; and Shirley Girt of Girt Real Estate, who calls Dustin "the up-and-coming arts town."

Tamara cautiously engages with the hamlet's oddballs and eccentrics, eventually learning important personal lessons from their determination, humor, vitality, and heartbreak. These unlikely relationships give her the strength to make peace with her tragic past - and to finally "stay put" in her present.

Discussion Guide

1. In some novels, the place where the story is set functions as a compelling and important character. How does the landscape of the hamlet of Dustin do this in **Seriously**?

2. It is through Tamara's eyes that the reader sees each of the characters in the novel, friends, enemies, neighbors, family, lovers. How do her descriptions shed light on her own nature? Who does she learn the most from? Who learns the most from her?
3. It is through Tamara's eyes that the reader sees each of the characters in the novel, friends, enemies, neighbors, family, lovers. How do her descriptions shed light on her own nature? Who does she learn the most from? Who learns the most from her?
4. There are several types of marriage in the book. Rocky and Helen Shurberry are incompetent, inseparable, mom-and-pop insurance agents. Vinnie and Dolly, mom-and-pop restaurateurs, are hostile and estranged. Dave L. Garson is an artificial inseminator who harasses local wives, while his wife, Flo, collects for charities. How does Tamara's description of these marriages reveal her own feelings about love, hate, infidelity and commitment? Donna and Iris live and work together too, as women artists in a cottage industry. Why does the way they lead their lives give Tamara the security to fall in love? Do Tamara's descriptions reveal a progression in her feelings about marriage? Tim and Terry Thompson make their appearance late in the book. Why is their marriage is an important one for Tamara to see at work?
5. One theme of the novel is how different members of the same family react differently to traumatic events that divide or destroy them. What roles do the sisters, Tamara and Nora, take in dealing with their devastating past? How does each role suit the nature of each sister? In each case, what is the price?
6. The subtext of the novel concerns the gentrification of the potentially quaint, impoverished hamlet. Does this transformation affect the characters of the residents of Dustin? For the better? For the worse?
7. Glorine is an important and vibrant character. Ironies abound in her behavior, not the least of which is demonstrated the night she tries to save a neighbor from domestic violence, but gives her own kid a whack for staying up too late. What important life lessons does Tamara learn from Glorine? Does Glorine learn anything from anyone?
8. To kill time and keep busy during the ending of her love affair, Tamara becomes over involved in compensating for Viola's procrastination as she prepares to address the Historical Society. How does the experience affect Tamara's self-esteem? How does it affect her forthrightness? In what way does it help her deal with the secret history of her own family? How does it change her friendship with Viola?
9. How do the sex lives of the three women in The Slut Club--Glorine, Tamara, and Viola--differ?
10. How does the narrative style of the book, which is a life story told and re-told in overlapping fragments out of chronological order, add to your understanding of Tamara's emotional journey?
11. How does the episodic structure of the book control the pacing of Tamara's self-discovery? Does it sometimes frustrate the reader? How is the frustration rewarded?
12. Images of poverty abound in the book. What are the debilitating effects of poverty on the people of Dustin? What conditions of poverty are irrelevant to leading meaningful lives?
13. The fates of the two dogs in the book are to bring people together. The poisoning of Marshall Jim's dog, Wallace,

causes the hamlet to work together in a common cause. Tamara's hysteria over the injuries of her stray brings her lover's wife, Janice, to her aid. Why does the love people have for their pets help promote their kindness to other people?

14. Detering, the postmaster undergoes a transformation. Tamara regrets having wished him ill because it makes it seem as if her wish came true. She wonders what good things might have happened to her had she wished something wonderful for herself. How would you weigh the difference between the lost opportunity and the valuable life lesson learned?

15. As the book progresses, Tamara's photography progresses too. How do the images of photography telegraph the difference in her inner state and outer situation from beginning to end?

Author Bio

Lucia Nevai's short fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Zoetrope*, the *Iowa Review*, *New England Review*, and other periodicals. She is the author of two collections of stories, **Star Game**, which won the Iowa Short Fiction Award, and **Normal**. Born in Iowa, Nevai now lives in upstate New York.

Critical Praise

"Lucia Nevai has written an eloquent, warm-hearted, often very funny book that concerns a lonely young woman's quest for a home. Tamara Johanssen wants to be sheltered by love, of course, but she'll settle for an affordable rent and some reasonable neighbors. What makes *Seriously* so appealing is that Nevai doesn't give her heroine any of the above, and yet lets her find what she's been searching for anyway."

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