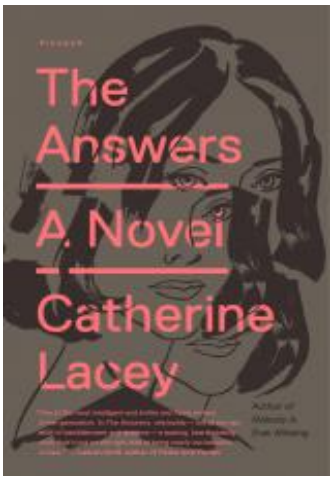
The Answers

by Catherine Lacey



About the Book

In Catherine Lacey?s ambitious second novel, we are introduced to Mary, a young woman living in New York City and struggling to cope with a body that has betrayed her. All but paralyzed with pain, Mary seeks relief from a New Agey treatment called Pneuma Adaptive Kinesthesia, PAKing for short. And, remarkably, it works. But PAKing is prohibitively expensive and Mary is dead broke. So she scours Craigslist for fast-cash jobs and finds herself applying for the ?Girlfriend Experiment,? the brainchild of an eccentric actor, Kurt Sky, who is determined to find the perfect relationship --- even if that means paying different women to fulfill distinctive roles. Mary is hired as the ?Emotional Girlfriend? --- certainly better than the ?Anger Girlfriend? or the ?Maternal Girlfriend? --- and is pulled into Kurt?s ego-driven and messy attempt at human connection.

Told in her signature spiraling prose, THE ANSWERS is full of the singular yet universal insights readers have come to expect from Lacey. It is a gorgeous hybrid of the plot- and the idea-driven novel that will leave you reeling.

Discussion Guide

1. The main character in THE ANSWERS is Mary Parsons, a young woman with a mysterious ailment who accepts a unique job offer in order to pay for the only therapy that helps her feel better. Who is Mary? What are the events that have shaped her life? What does she mean when she says in the opening of the book, ?There was at least one morning I was certain, though only for a few hours, that everything that could ever really happen to me had already happened to me??

2. Many of the characters in THE ANSWERS have experienced trauma that has interfered with their emotional growth and sense of identity. Mary, in particular, bears physical and psychic wounds. What might be the cause of Mary?s pain? Why does PAKing help her? What have other characters experienced and how were they harmed? How have they attempted to heal?

3. What does Mary love about travel? Why, at the end of the book, has she become someone who hardly ever leaves her apartment? How does this change in Mary?s behavior illuminate the themes of identity, anonymity, and celebrity that run through the book?

4. What is the objective of the Girlfriend Experiment (the ?GX?)? Why is Mary hired as the Emotional Girlfriend? What roles do the other Girlfriends play? How is each of them qualified? Why does the Experiment include an Anger Girlfriend?

5. Ironically, there are more questions than answers in THE ANSWERS. Mary says, ?Sometimes it seems all I have are questions, that I will ask the same ones all my life.? What are the big questions posed in the book? How do Mary, Kurt, Chandra, and others attempt to find answers?

6. Mary has had one serious relationship in her life --- with a man named Paul. Shortly before going to work for the GX, she spends a day reflecting on their year together. Does she come to terms with her feelings for him as the GX progresses? Who else does Mary care about? Does she gain deeper insight into her feelings for them?

7. There are many possible reasons why Kurt Sky might be involved with the GX --- to achieve a creative breakthrough, to learn how to love and be loved, to develop a product that will increase his wealth and fame. What is Kurt?s motivation? Does this change as the GX progresses?

8. What is limerence? With their sensors and Relational Experiments, what does the Research Division learn about people in love? What do they miss? Why do they decide Mary is an unsatisfactory subject?

9. After three months on the job, Mary is required to tell Kurt that she loves him (p. 217). He replies, ?I love you, too.? Is there evidence that his feelings are genuine? Chapter 22 of Part Two is made up almost entirely of questions about love. It ends with the speaker wondering, ?How to best love?? What are some of the ways love is defined? By Mary and Paul? By Kurt and Alexi? By Ashley?

10. The Girlfriends are hired to be part of a team. Each woman is assigned a specific role, which combined are meant to simulate all the facets of a romantic relationship. In the onboarding meeting, Matheson informs them that the ultimate objective of the GX is ?to devise a scientifically proven system for making human pair bonding behavior more perfect and satisfying...? (p. 110). Do the roles chosen for the Girlfriends accurately represent interactions between real partners? Are there any roles you would add or remove? If this had been a Boyfriend Experiment, how might the roles have been different?

11. Why has Kurt not been able to finish his film *The Walk*? Why does he want Mary in the editing room? As she sits with Kurt while he works, what is the difference between how she is required to behave and how she really feels? Are his feelings for her genuine or is he under the influence of an Internal Directive from the Research Division?

12. Are the Relational Experiments realistic approximations of how people in love behave? What effect does the Personal History and Opinion Sharing Experiment have on Kurt and Mary? Why does Kurt create an experiment that seems designed to hurt the members of the Intimacy Team?

13. What happens between Kurt and Mary the night they get high and go out to a street fair? Are their behavior and feelings more genuine under the influence of the drug? How does this public appearance compare to the Gala?

14. THE ANSWERS is about love and identity. It is also about escape. Mary?s story can be read as a series of escapes, beginning in adolescence when her aunt Clara removes her from her father?s care and, according to Mary, saves her life. Who and what else does Mary escape from and how is she changed each time? What are other instances of escape or attempted escape? What is Kurt trying to escape?

15. Mary tells Kurt, ?Love is a compromise for only getting to be one person? (p. 228). Why does Kurt make her repeat this so he can record it? What else does Mary do or say that influences the development of Identity Distance Therapy and the final version of *The Walk*? Is she fairly compensated for her contributions? Has she been helped or harmed by her work for the GX?

Author Bio

Catherine Lacey is the author of the novels NOBODY IS EVER MISSING, THE ANSWERS, PEW, BIOGRAPHY OF X and THE MÖBIUS BOOK, and the short story collection CERTAIN AMERICAN STATES. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Award, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award, and a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship. She has been a finalist for the Dylan Thomas Prize and the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award, and was named one of *Granta?*s Best of Young American Novelists. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper?s Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Believer* and elsewhere.

Critical Praise

?Remarkable... Lacey displays an exceptional ability to articulate the elusiveness of knowing others, as well as the desire to find meaning and trust within."

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