The Golden State

by Lydia Kiesling



About the Book

A gorgeous, raw debut novel about a young woman braving the ups and downs of motherhood in a fractured America

In Lydia Kiesling?s razor-sharp debut novel, THE GOLDEN STATE, we accompany Daphne, a young mother on the edge of a breakdown, as she flees her sensible but strained life in San Francisco for the high desert of Altavista with her toddler, Honey. Bucking under the weight of being a single parent --- her Turkish husband is unable to return to the United States because of a ?processing error? --- Daphne takes refuge in a mobile home left to her by her grandparents in hopes that the quiet will bring clarity.

But clarity proves elusive. Over the next 10 days, Daphne is anxious, she behaves a little erratically, she drinks too much. She wanders the town looking for anyone and anything to punctuate the long hours alone with the baby. Among others, she meets Cindy, a neighbor who is active in a secessionist movement, and befriends the elderly Alice, who has traveled to Altavista as she approaches the end of her life. When her relationships with these women culminate in a dangerous standoff, Daphne must reconcile her inner narrative with the reality of a deeply divided world.

Keenly observed, bristling with humor, and set against the beauty of a little-known part of California, THE GOLDEN STATE is about class and cultural breakdowns, and desperate attempts to bridge old and new worlds. But more than anything, it is about motherhood: its voracious worry, frequent tedium, and enthralling, wondrous love.

Discussion Guide

1. What makes Engin and Daphne a good match? What attracted them to each other, and to each other?s worlds? How does their love evolve over the course of THE GOLDEN STATE?

2. Daphne describes pumping milk at work, in a basement closet that houses computer servers. What does this image say about modern American motherhood?

3. As Daphne counts the dollars in her bank account and the minutes of her commute, what is she really measuring? When she returns to her grandparents? house, how is she affected by the new daily rhythm of sleeping and feeding and playing?

4. How would you have reacted in Daphne?s situation after Engin was illegally pressured to relinquish his green card? If you could rewrite America?s immigration laws, what would you decree?

5. What viewpoints do Daphne and Cindy share? What lies at the heart of Cindy?s paranoia? Why is it difficult for her and the State of Jefferson followers to stay rooted in reality?

6. As Alice?s friendship with Daphne unfolds, what forms of caretaking do they provide to each other? If you had the chance to reconnect with a chapter from your past, what special place would you want to return to?

7. The author delivers a highly realistic depiction of workplace bureaucracy. How do Daphne?s co-workers compare to yours? How long could you be gone from the office before anyone would know you were missing?

8. Daphne recalls the tidy world that her grandparents inhabited, down to her grandmother?s immaculate golfing outfit, and the thriving small-town community where they were well-known. What caused the decline of Paiute County?

9. None of the staff at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Societies and Civilizations is a Muslim. What commentary does the novel offer on the limitations of institutions --- and the power of individuals --- to heal society?s fractures?

10. As Daphne comes to terms with the accident that took the life of a student (Ellery Simpson) and injured another (Maryam Khoury), what does she discover about the risks and rewards of her own cross-cultural journeys?

11. What does the novel tell us about the ability of language to connect us, even when language appears to be a barrier?

12. How did Engin and his mother change your perspective on what it means to lead a fulfilling life?

13. What do you predict for Honey?s generation? Are you optimistic that cultural differences will be widely respected and celebrated in the future, in America and abroad?

Guide written by Amy Clements

Author Bio

Lydia Kiesling is the editor of *The Millions*. Her essays and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Slate* and *The New Yorker* online, and they have been recognized in THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 2016. She lives in San Francisco with her family. THE GOLDEN STATE is her first novel.

Critical Praise

?THE GOLDEN STATE is a perfect evocation of the beautiful, strange, frightening, funny territory of new motherhood. Lydia Kiesling writes with great intelligence and candor about the surreal topography of a day with an infant, and toggles skillfully between the landscape of Daphne?s interior and the California desert, her postpartum body and the body politic. A love story for our fractured era.?

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