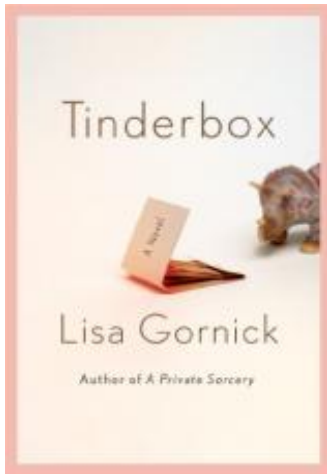


# Tinderbox

by Lisa Gornick

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## About the Book

**From a breakout talent, a gimlet-eyed look at the entanglements of class and family.**

Myra leads a life that, from the outside, many would have cause to envy: An analyst in Manhattan, she enjoys an engaging and prosperous career, seeing patients from the comfort of her brownstone and writing a thoughtful meditation on the teleology of love. Beneath that professional veneer, though, her family is coming apart. When her grown son, his wife, and their young son move in with her, the obligations and latent hostilities of life at home threaten to cause permanent rifts.

Hoping to ease the burden, Myra hires Eva, a Peruvian immigrant newly arrived in New York, as a nanny. But as Eva insinuates herself into the family, becoming ever more invaluable but behaving ever more strangely, what seemed at first like a felicitous arrangement becomes an even greater strain --- and as resentments begin to accrue, the household reaches a disastrous boiling point.

Lisa Gornick is a practicing psychologist and a first-rate novelist, and in *TINDERBOX*, her extraordinary powers of observation are on display as never before. This is a generous, acute, compassionate novel about the inevitable tangle of guilt and bitterness when the bonds of family collide with the complexities of money and privilege.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the title and the way it is echoed in Myra's wisdom regarding forest fires. What emotional tinder has been sparked in your family?
2. What accounts for the personality differences between Caro and Adam? What gives Caro the strength to know what she wants, and to ask for it (particularly from her father)?

3. As Eva describes her commitment to Judaism, what comes to light about her concept of a Jewish identity? From the point of view of Myra's family, what does it mean to be Jewish?
4. How does Myra's home reflect her shifting sense of self and her attempts to create order in an unpredictable world? What phase of her own motherhood does she confront when she makes room for Adam and his family?
5. What is the nature of the evil Eva experienced? Ultimately, what did she need from Myra? Would you have handled Eva's insecurities the same way Myra did? How does the situation illustrate the dilemma of offering good advice to others but struggling to apply it to our own lives?
6. How do Adam and Rachida view love and sexuality? What are the strengths and frailties of their marriage?
7. Discuss the journey to Morocco. How is Rachida affected by loss? What does the amulet come to mean to her, if not to Eva?
8. What motivates Layla when she is pursuing a relationship? What are her most appealing traits, and her most difficult ones?
9. What did you discover about Jewish history by reading about Eva's Peruvian ancestors? How does their immigration to South America compare to the experience of the New Yorkers featured in the book? What is your family's concept of homeland?
10. Discuss the role of doctors and healing in TINDERBOX. What tactics do the novel's psychotherapists share with the other characters who are healers?
11. What is at the root of Adam's insecurities? Do he and Eva share any of the same fears?
12. Discuss the letters between Larry and Myra in part 2, chapter 16. Would you have turned a blind eye to Larry's infidelity? How does their relationship compare to Adam and Rachida's? What accounts for Caro and Talis's ability to "love life its very self," reflecting Myra's philosophy of love?
13. Which childhood memories have the most lasting impact on the characters? For Omar, which memories will have the strongest influence on his sense of self in adulthood?
14. What does Lisa Gornick's fiction show us about the process of finding freedom in difficult truths?

## **Author Bio**

Lisa Gornick is the author of LOUISA MEETS BEAR, TINDERBOX and A PRIVATE SORCERY. Her stories and essays have appeared widely, including in *The New York Times*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Real Simple*, *Salon*, *Slate* and *The Sun*. She holds a BA from Princeton and a PhD in clinical psychology from Yale, and is on the faculty of the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. A long-time New Yorker, she lives in Manhattan with her family.

## Critical Praise

"TINDERBOX is the story of a family undergoing seismic changes brought on by a stranger who unwittingly forces her hosts to face themselves. A masterly and dramatic group portrait, drawn with intelligence, precision, and deep feeling."

? Daniel Menaker, author of THE TREATMENT

"A fiery, tender novel about the smoldering secrets that can destroy a family. Lisa Gornick is a psychoanalyst as well as a novelist, and the training serves her well. She exposes her characters with a skilled therapist's blend of gentility and intensity. She knows just when to hang back --- and when to light the match."

? Lisa Zeidner, author of LOVE BOMB and LAYOVER

"I was gripped from the first line of Lisa Gornick's ingenious novel to the last. Using a polished prose to scratch hard and deep through the surface of a pristine upper-middle-class Upper West Side family's life, Gornick's incisive narrative explores the creepy underbelly of privilege and self-satisfaction."

? Jenny McPhee, author of A MAN OF NO MOON

"I loved this novel --- it is deeply intelligent and shot through with suspense. The light that it shines on family life --- from lethal traumas to daily love to misguided intentions --- has a rare sort of rightness. An extraordinary book, written for adults."

? Joan Silber, author of FOOLS and National Book Award finalist for IDEAS OF HEAVEN

"What a smart, compassionate novel Lisa Gornick has written! In the first line of TINDERBOX, Myra says yes when she should say no, allowing her maternal instincts to trump her wisdom as a therapist. That tension --- the tug of war between the advice we give others and the life we actually live --- pulls the reader through this wonderful book of family turmoil. Getting to know these characters truly, madly, deeply is as gut-wrenching and joyful as life itself."

? Mary Kay Zuravleff, author of MAN ALIVE!

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