



OPTIC NERVE: A NOVEL

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READING GROUP GUIDE & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the opening pages, the narrator describes her visceral reaction to seeing Dreux's deer for the first time— heart palpitations, fireworks, “what A.S. Byatt called ‘the kick gavanic.’” Have you ever had this kind of experience in an art museum? What piece(s) inspired it?
2. Throughout the novel, scenes from the narrator's everyday life and her memories are interspersed with the biographies of the artists whose work she views or admires. How do they contribute to your sense of the narrator's character—or distract from it?
3. The narrator has a particular friendship with Alexia, one that becomes more and more enigmatic over the years. How would you describe it? Why do you think she includes it as part of her personal story, and that “a big part of [her]” lives in that friendship, despite the pain it causes?
4. Twice in the novel, the narrator mentions having had problems with her eyes: seeing double as a child, and a twitching nerve as an adult. How do these details accent the narrator's love for seeing and describing art so vividly? How do you think they relate to the novel's title?
5. At several points, the narration shifts to the second person, and the narrator tells us fuller accounts of her life story as though speaking about someone else. This is how we learn about her childhood and, later, her fear of flying. What effect does this shift have as you piece together her backstory?
6. “Carelessly administered, the history of art can be lethal as strychnine” (147). What do you think the narrator means by this, especially given how heavily she relies on art history throughout the novel?
7. On one visit to the museum, the narrator is enamored by a painting of a girl by Augusto Schiavoni who she thinks looks just like her eleven-year-old self; she thinks the girl might even be a distant relative. “...but isn't all artwork—or all decent art—a mirror?” she notes. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?
8. Towards the end of the novel, we learn about the narrator's estranged brother, whom she goes to visit ten years before he dies. In one of their conversations, he tells her, “Stick to your paintings, sis; when it comes to people, you don't have a f—ing clue.” How does this observation clarify your picture of the narrator overall?
9. The novel begins with the narrator's pregnancy, and ends with her cancer diagnosis in middle-age, with a series of sporadic flash-forwards in between. Did the ending surprise you? Why or why not?
10. Did any of the artworks or artists mentioned in *Optic Nerve* pique your curiosity? How has reading the novel affected your impression of art and art history overall?