



# BORROWED

## STUDY GUIDE

A NOVEL

LUCIA DISTEFANO

Thanks for reading and studying the novel. The below prompts, questions, and activities can be used in any order, and we encourage instructors and book clubs to adapt and make them their own.

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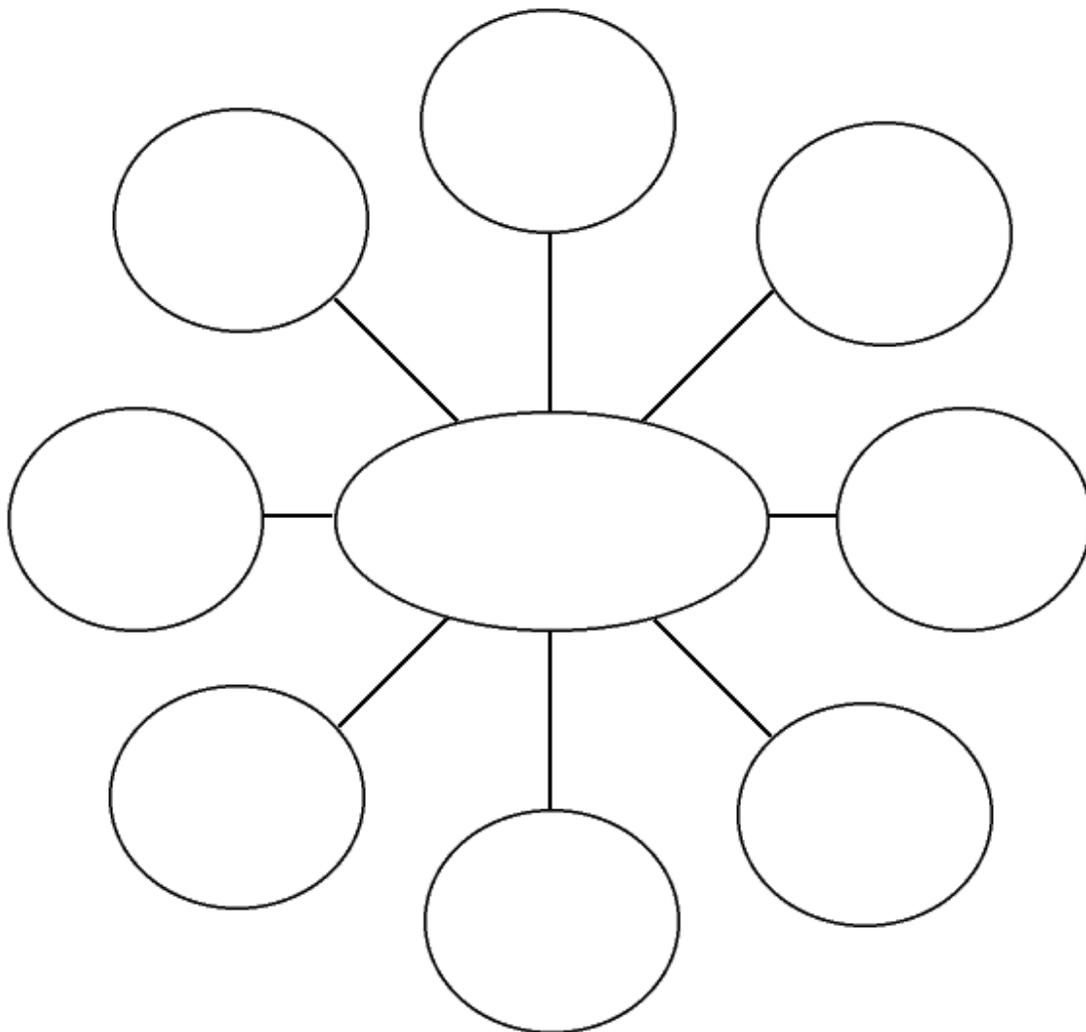
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**TIME TO WRITE: FINDING COMFORT IN OTHERS**

Think of a time where you needed the help and presence of others to get you through a difficult situation. Describe the situation that you were in. How did it make you feel? How did it affect the daily flow of your life? Beyond generalities, try to write a particular scene that you can clearly remember which exemplifies what your life was like during this time. Then think about how others in your life made things better. Did you reach out to them, or did they know something was wrong? Could they tell that something was off about you? Again, try to write a particular scene that you can clearly remember where a friend either tried to talk to you about what was going on or came to help you in some way—even if it was just by spending time with you.

**ACTIVITY: CHARACTER WEBS**

After reading the first chapter of the novel, create a character web like the one below for Linnea. Fill in the bubbles with as much detail as possible about her life, her motivations, her likes and dislikes, her relationships with other characters (especially her friends), etc. Cite page numbers and specific passages to support your conclusions. Add to this web as you continue to read the novel. Make and add to webs for other major characters as they are introduced.



### ACTIVITY: COMPARING THE DRAFTS

Compare and contrast the following drafts of the third chapter of *Borrowed*. We have provided the draft DiStefano first submitted for publication as well as the final draft. As you read, pay attention to setting, pacing, characterization, voice, and point of view. Highlight areas where the author made changes.

#### SUBMITTED DRAFT: 2,378 words

### Three

#### *Linnea*

Dusk.

I'm home alone.

Kara had to go home to babysit her sisters and wanted me to go with her, but I could only think about getting back onto the roof. Julie had to visit her great-grandmother in San Antonio and wanted me to come with her, but, even if I hadn't been thinking about getting back onto the roof, I wouldn't have wanted to go. Her gran looks at me narrow-eyed—not the standard oldie teen-suspicion, but in a way that says she doesn't trust someone who doesn't have all her original parts. She once told me, over peppermint tea and loaded stares, that when the doctor said she'd need a replacement knee, she announced she'd rather have her whole leg sawed off. Nice.

I think my friends were trying to spare me from being alone. An unusual state for me since Mom has stuck so close to home for so long. But I'm kind of liking the sensation. But I didn't blow them off rudely or anything. After all, it's nice to know they care.

I'm sitting on the roof now, my legs stretched in front of me, relishing the lightness of the air on my skin. The tarry shingles retain some of the day's heat, even though the sun is sinking. I have a just-bought pack of cigarettes in my pocket and am trying to talk myself out of smoking them. It is the worst thing for any heart, and I don't have just any heart. I have one that had to be coaxed to work with a circulatory system it just met. It'd be crazy to smoke. And I never wanted

to before today. But suddenly and impossibly, it feels like I've tasted cigarettes before, many times before—the sharp, burned bitterness sitting on the back of my tongue and storing up memory there.

My hair is tied up in a paisley bandana smeared with buttercream frosting. I baked again this afternoon, when I had the house all to myself. Cupcakes were fun with Kara because she wanted to decorate them, but I needed to use the same cake pan I saw in my dream so I could prove it would only contain a cake when the oven timer went off.

Sure enough, that's all it was. A golden brown cake. Disappointingly—or reassuringly—ordinary.

Even though I'm tired, I feel hours away from sleep. I tell myself it's just because I have more to do, not that I'm dreading my dreams. Maybe I should experiment with those Kahlua cheesecake brownies I've been thinking about.

No, for now, it's enough to be still. To be in this spot that would have terrified me once, not all that long ago, but now feels like a return to somewhere I once loved.

A wasp intrudes. And then another. Maybe they're after the sugar residue. I yank the bandana off my head and whip it into my room.

But the bee still hovers around me. And another. Wait...and another?

And then I see where they're coming from. A hive. Tucked under the eaves like a twisted bedtime story. Thrumming with little purposeful bodies.

Damn. I like being out here. *Up* here. So I have to get rid of that.

#

Searching the cobwebby garage shelves, I find a can of wasp spray. It claims to shoot a forty-foot stream of poison. I walk to the side of the house and plant my feet with resolve. I aim the nozzle and press. Nothing.

I shake the can and try again. A weary spit of foam dribbles onto my hand. I run the dispenser under the hose water and try again, but it won't stream like the picture promises. Finally, just about ready to give up, I try again and a gush of chemical rushes out. No way it's forty feet, though. I take my finger off the trigger. I have to get closer.

I go back to the garage and drag the ladder over to the house. Now I'm sweating. As I struggle to hoist the ladder upright against the siding, something furry brushes against my bare leg.

I jump, and I'm pretty sure I yelp too. But after the yelp, I see that it's just a dog. A mid-sized black and white dog, twining itself around my calves. Not a toddler-sized bee.

"Sorry!" I hear from down the street. "He's friendly."

Oh.

*Oh.*

It's Daniel. With his dog posse, coming after the escapee leaning against my legs.

My legs...

When was the last time I shaved? But it's dusky out. Will the hair be noticeable?

Oh. My. God. My hair. The hair on my head. It must look terrifying. It was smashed under a bandana all day. Flat and greasy, I'm sure.

I want to crawl up the ladder and hide in the hive, but I still haven't managed to get the ladder pointing upward.

So I sit on the grass, criss-cross my legs, and pull the dog onto my lap. That'll hide my neglected legs. With one discreet hand, I try to fluff the top of my flattened hair. It's heavy and fluff-resistant.

The dog's whole body wags when I pay attention to him. He's black with white feet and smells faintly of wet dog. When I burrow my fingers into his coat, I feel the cool dampness. Makes me want to learn to swim. Or at least go rafting again.

And Daniel is here. Right in front of me. The scattered stubble along his jaw makes him seem older today. He was clean-shaven that day a couple of weeks ago when I first met him. I had been driving to work and saw the U-Haul truck in the driveway. True, if I hadn't seen Daniel lugging boxes out of it, I would've driven by. It's not like someone was moving in next door. His house is two streets over. But I did see him, so I stopped and introduced myself, even though that is *so* not like me.

"So you live here?" he says now. His energy is relaxed. Attentive.

"No, I'm just trying to break in. I hear the owners are away."

He laughs and I want to grab the sound from the air and wrap it around me, press it tight against my skin. That's how amazing his laugh is.

"You love dogs, huh?" I say, which, in retrospect, is the stupidest thing I could come up with. I try to distract myself with counting the gaggle of canines. There are four. The dog in my lap makes five.

He looks at the escapee and scowls. "Socks, I thought we had an agreement."

Socks looks up at me and stops panting just long enough to whimper. I imagine he's saying, "Save me, save me!"

I quirk an eyebrow. “Socks, huh?” I say, looking at his white paws and legs. “Not the most original name.”

“I know, right? But don’t look at me. He’s not mine.”

“Are any of them yours?”

“Yup.” He stoops to pat a pensive-looking Jack Russell on the head.

“And...,” I say, “his name?”

“Nietzsche.”

I laugh. “Touché. So, you’re a dog-walker?”

“Yeah, but not a very good one at the moment.” He looks around him at the stalled bunch, some of whom are now expressing their displeasure in barks and whines. He shrugs and shoots me a *mea culpa* glance. Maybe he doesn’t mean the gesture to look arresting, but it comes out that way all the same. “I’m Daniel.”

*Oh great. So he doesn’t even remember talking to me.*

He reaches out his hand, and my heart beats in happy terror. Is he trying to shake my hand or help me up? I decide to assume it’s both and manage to gracefully rise, still holding onto his hand. He goes on. “Sorry I was preoccupied when you stopped by the other day.”

*Whew. He does remember.*

“No problem,” I say, “moving does that to people.”

“Yeah, well. It was nice of you to stop. I couldn’t remember if I introduced myself.”

“You did, and I’m Lin—”

“Linnea,” he finishes. “I remember.”

I want to slide into a messy heap, like Kara’s hippie frosting.

I let go of his hand since the shaking/helping up must be officially over by now.

“Do you need any help?” he asks.

Did I get up ungracefully after all? Does he think I’m decrepit? I picture the scar under my T-shirt and tell myself he can’t see it.

“Huh?” That’s me, of course. The queen of natural, compelling convo.

“You’re painting, right?” He gestures toward the still-horizontal ladder.

“Oh, that. No, there’s a bee’s nest up there.”

“Yellow jackets?”

“I don’t know.” I should’ve paid more attention to Julie’s between-pages description.

“You have spray?”

I nod.

“Well, it’s best to wait till dark,” he says, “till they’re all back in the hive.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I can help,” he says.

I don’t want to insult him by turning down his offer, but I also don’t want to appear too damsel-in-distress either. I just leave it at the open-to-interpretation “Thanks.”

He’s hooking Socks back up to the empty leash. Good thing, because when he grabbed my hand, I had let go of the mutt. He might’ve darted into the street for all my distracted self would know. I try to get a good look at his tan, sinewy forearms—Daniel’s, not the dog’s—while he’s distracted.

“I know I seem incompetent” —he looks up at me, grins, and reveals a lone dimple, which now officially makes me unbearably self-conscious about my appearance— “but I’m usually pretty good with them.” Standing straight, he drags his hand through his hair and tugs the

leash of a Basset Hound sacked out on the grass. “I’m just gonna run them all home, and then I’ll be back.”

He doesn’t wait for my response. I watch Daniel and dogs head down the street, the exhausted Basset slowing the pace. Daniel backward-glances once and I’m embarrassed he catches me looking. He lifts a leash-clutching hand in a wave.

Will it look too obvious if I change before he gets back? If I wash my hair? But what if I’m in the shower when he arrives and he thinks I’m avoiding him?

Just be yourself, I tell myself, wondering who exactly ‘myself’ is. The one mom accuses of overcompensating, or the timid, self-conscious one I’d been prior to now? It is true that timid Linnea would’ve just crawled back inside from the roof and waited till the morning to call an exterminator.

Okay, so...

to wait for Daniel, or not to wait? Better to just kill the damn bees on your own, prove that you don’t need a man to get the job done. I check the can and it doesn’t say anything about waiting till dark. Dusk will have to do.

I struggle with the ladder again, but this time, I win. I don’t need to climb all the way up (not that heights bother me any more, apparently...a fledgling fact that is both unsettling and thrilling)—just high enough so the weak sprayer can reach.

I concentrate on climbing, and the sound of my feet on the rungs quiets my thoughts, most of which start with *Daniel*.

Halfway up, I stop. Ducking my mouth and nose into my T-shirt to avoid breathing in toxic backwash, I spray and spray, my jaw clenched in determination, hoping to douse the hive and drench every bee. But the spray gives out before the whole nest is covered, and there are

pissed-off bees careening at me. The can falls out of my hand. My sneakers slide on the rungs as I try to scramble off the ladder.

The first sting is on my cheek. Bummer. That'll leave a mark, one that Daniel will likely mistake as a zit. Lovely.

There's another bee on my wrist. I shake my arm, trying to bounce it off, but it stings me anyway.

"Really?" I say, annoyed. I've of course been stung before. It's not the worst pain, but it's not fun, either. Especially not when you're on a ladder trying to obliterate a whole commune of them.

Then comes a stab on my forehead, another under my shirt. With one crazy arm, I'm trying to swat the bees away from me. With the other, I hold onto the ladder, even as I have the sensation that the house I'm pressed against is receding from me. Fast. I inadvertently squish a bee under my shirt and it stings my stomach as its last word.

Another and another and another, like a spray of bullets from a gun I can't see. The pain is fierce—traveling burns light up my skin. This is different. This is *very* different.

I'm dizzy, nauseous, faint. My body slows, despite the urgent fear inside me. My vision curdles. My breath curls up around the edges.

Toward the base of the ladder my footing gives out and I fall back on the grass, the air knocked out of my lungs. The pain blooms all over me, even on my thighs and calves. I can't tell if the angry hum filling my ears is coming from the bees or my own loosened brain.

The smacking inside my chest scares me. I press a palm against my chest and try to lull my heart into peacefulness.

I want to say the words I always say when my heart is beating too fast—the Rumi quote I found years ago—but I can't speak. I can only think.

*There is a window from one heart to another.*

The swelling comes on viciously and with a fury. My eyes feel like thin slits slashed into a wet sculpture. My throat narrows down to a crimped straw. I try to crawl toward the house, toward a phone, but I can't move.

My chest heaves with the effort of breathing and I want to dive in there to cushion my heart from my struggling lungs.

*My heart.*

*My heart.*

I'm wheezing. I'm afraid.

I'm afraid for me, but most of all, I'm afraid for the fist-sized flesh I carry.

My wheezes slow down further and further until there are no more left.

And then my thoughts disappear too.

**PUBLISHED DRAFT: 2,400**

3

*Linnea*

I'm alone. Finally.

I'm sitting on the roof, relishing the lightness of the air on my skin. The tarry shingles retain the day's heat, even though the sun is sinking. I have a Bic lighter in one pocket of my capris and a pack of Mom's super-secret-stash cigarettes in the other. I'm trying to talk myself out of lighting up.

Mom thinks she's hiding her occasional habit from me, and I wouldn't tell her otherwise. I get it: this year has been über-stressful. There were times in the early months after my surgery where she'd run out for groceries and come back with few items but with more energy and a whiff of ashtray. It didn't take me long to discover her hiding place—a box in the garage marked *2013 tax receipts*. (The giveaway? The top of that box was less dusty than *2016 tax receipts*.)

Smoking is the worst thing for any heart, and I don't have just any heart. Mine had to be coaxed to work with a circulatory system it just met. Before today, I had never even thought about smoking. Before today, I had never craved a cigarette, the sharp, burned bitterness crouched on the back of my tongue like a dare.

Julie was expected at home for Sunday night dinner with her parents, and though that's a standing family-only thing, she called them and asked if I could come too. I think she was worried about leaving me alone. I hated disappointing her, but alone was exactly where I wanted to be. I thought about studying for the GED and got as far as de-flouring the damn book. I couldn't make myself care about the causes of World War I with a war raging in my head.

Alma had to visit her great-grandmother in San Antonio and invited me to come along. That was harder to turn down; I feel more comfortable around Alma's family. Julie's mom and dad treat me like I've got a stress fracture running through me instead of a surgical scar, and any second the fissure will erupt, leaving me to crumble before their eyes.

Alma and I drove down to San Antone last November to celebrate the last two days of Día de los Muertos with her great-grandmother, and though I thought it would be creepy and morbid, it was exactly the opposite. It was this cool space where art and memory and faith intersected and let you feel sadness right alongside joy. When we got there, Señora Gutierrez took one of my hands in both of hers, held my gaze for a long while, and then beamed at me like she had seen my alma (my soul) . . . and had approved.

There were three small altars set up in her home: for her husband, one of her sons, and one granddaughter. After I'd added the biscochitos I'd made to all that she'd already arranged (stuff like photos, handwritten poems, candy, bread . . . you know, the ingredients of a life that seem ordinary when you look at them from one direction, spectacular from another), she asked me to help her light candles for the loved ones she'd lost. I was surprised by all the beauty waiting in the small places: the soft scratch of the wooden match against the box, the wick catching like a sudden bloom, the tremulous quiver of the new flame. Then we lit a candle for the heart donor (her idea), and she said a prayer for the donor's alma in Spanish that was more beautiful to me for not being translated, and then she turned to me, laughed gently, and told me I needed to eat more. And since Alma's grandparents own two restaurants in San Antonio, that's not hard to do when I'm there.

But as fond as I am of Alma's whole family, I get the sense I'm supposed to be on my own today.

My hair is tied up in a paisley bandanna smeared with buttercream. I redid my cupcakes, and they came out perfect. As good as ever, if not better than ever. The bad batch meant nothing.

I lean over the roofline, expecting to feel the familiar plummet in my belly. The clamminess in my palms. The flutter in my throat. They're not there, though. There's just me, relaxed, admiring the red poppies swarming the mailbox post. I'll pick some for the mason jar on the kitchen table.

A wasp crashes my inner peace party. And then another. Maybe they're after the sugar residue on my head. I yank the bandanna off and whip it into my room.

But the damn bug still hovers around me. And another. And another. *Really?*

Scanning the eaves, I locate a papery nest—no bigger than my fist—suspended above my window. If it weren't packed with little insect bodies, I might see it as lovely and delicate, a dark bedtime story or a strange dream catcher. More yellow and black bodies wriggle out and creep in. "You've got to go." For a second, my voice sounds unfamiliar to me. I shake it off and get to work.

Searching the cobwebby garage shelves, I find a rusted can of hornet killer. Should work on wasps, too, right?

The spray claims to shoot a forty-foot stream of poison. The instructions say not to get too close to the nest when you douse it. Poison blowback and the risk of angry hornets exiting before mass extermination. So rather than go back onto the roof, I plan a land-based assault.

I walk to the side yard beneath my window, aim the nozzle, and press. Nothing.

I shake the can and try again. A weary spit of foam dribbles onto my hand. I run the dispenser under water from the outdoor spigot and try again, but it won't stream like the picture

promises. Finally, just about ready to give up, I try again, and a gush of chemical sneezes out. No way it's forty feet, though. I'll have to get closer.

I go back to the garage and drag the ladder over to the house. I'm sweating like it's my job. As I struggle to hoist the ladder upright against the siding, something furry brushes against my bare leg. I jump. The ladder crashes to the ground.

"Sorry!" I hear from down the street. "He's friendly."

Oh.

*Oh.*

It's Daniel. With his dog posse, chasing after the escapee. A midsize black-and-white dog, twining itself around my legs. Not a toddler-size wasp.

My legs! When was the last time I shaved? Why didn't I choose jeans instead of capris? Stupid summer-in-April Texas! But it's dusky out. Will the hair be noticeable? Oh. My. God. My hair. It must look terrifying. It was smashed under a bandanna all day. Flat and greasy.

I want to crawl up the ladder and hide in the wasps' nest, but I still haven't managed to get the ladder pointing upward. So I sit on the grass, crisscross my legs, and pull the dog onto my lap. That'll hide my neglected legs. With one discreet hand, I try to fluff the top of my flattened hair.

Daniel stands over me. He's slightly out of breath, though he seems to be trying to hide it. He unwinds the coil of leashes, leaving a red band of skin over his knuckles. The scattered stubble along his jaw makes him seem older today. He was clean-shaven that day a couple of weeks ago when I first met him. I had been leaving for work and saw the U-Haul truck in the driveway three houses down. I spotted a cute guy, my age-ish, lugging boxes out of the truck and into the garage. So I stopped and introduced myself, even though that is *so* not like me.

“So you live here?” Daniel asks.

“No, I’m just trying to break in. I hear the owners are away.”

He laughs, and I want to grab the sound from the air and wrap it around me.

“You really love dogs, huh?” I say. An old black lab with a gray chin squats and pees on my lawn. She’s one of four on leashes. The dog in my lap makes five.

Daniel points at the escapee and scowls. “Socks, I thought we had an agreement.”

Socks looks up at me and stops panting long enough to whimper. I imagine he’s saying, “Save me, save me!”

“Socks, huh?” I say, sizing up his white legs and paws. “Not the most original name.”

“I know, right? But don’t look at me. He’s not mine.” He clips a leash on Socks, who flips belly-up and rubs his back on the grass christened by the lab.

I scratch Socks’s underside, much to his squirmy delight. “Are any of them yours?”

“Yup.” He stoops to pat a pensive-looking Jack Russell.

“And . . .” I say, “his name?”

“Nietzsche.”

“Touché.” I laugh. “So, you’re a dog-walker?”

“Yeah, but not a very good one at the moment.” He looks around him at the stalled bunch, expressing their displeasure in barks and whines. “I’m Daniel.”

Oh great. So he doesn’t even remember talking to me. I’m *that* memorable.

He reaches out his hand, and my heart beats in happy terror. Is he trying to shake my hand or help me up? I decide to assume it’s both and manage to gracefully rise, still holding onto his hand. “Sorry I was preoccupied when you stopped by the other day,” he says.

“No problem. Moving does that to people.”

“Yeah, well. It was nice of you to say hi. I couldn’t remember if I ever got around to actually introducing myself.”

“You did, and I’m Lin—”

“Linnea,” he finishes. “I remember. You don’t hear that name too often. It’s nice.”

I turn into a heap of frosting sliding off a warm cupcake. I let go of his hand since the shaking / helping up must be officially over by now.

“You’re from Michigan, right?” I say.

“Hey, you remembered.” He seems genuinely pleased.

Come up with something better than *I hear it’s cold up there*. “How are you liking Texas so far?” Marginally better.

“Where I’m from, it’s still cold as hell in April, so I like this.”

“Good deal.”

“Plus y’all are really friendly,” he adds.

A loud motorcycle roars down the street. I let it pass before I speak. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Oh, I think it’s a good thing.”

“And you got the ‘y’all’ down,” I say. “That’ll serve you well here.”

“I’m getting that impression. I studied my Texisms before we moved. The one I don’t think I’ll ever find a use for, though, is—”

A *yipe* cuts him off. We assess the pack. Socks has grown bored and is nipping at the legs of a poodle-looking mutt that yelps again in protest.

“I should get the gang home,” he says. “Do you need any help?”

“Huh?” That’s me, of course. The queen of natural, compelling convo.

He gestures toward the still-horizontal ladder. “You’re painting, right?”

“Oh, that. No, there’s a wasp nest up there.”

“You have spray?”

I nod.

“It’s best to wait ’til it’s darker,” he says, “ ’til they’re all back in the nest for the night.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I can help,” he says.

I don’t want to insult him by turning down his offer, but I don’t want to appear damsel-in-distress either. I leave it open to interpretation. “Thanks.”

“I know I seem incompetent.” He looks up at me, grins, and reveals a lone dimple, which now officially makes me unbearably self-conscious about my appearance. “But I’m usually pretty good with them.” Standing straight, he drags his hand through his hair and tugs the leash of a basset hound sacked out on the grass and chewing on blades. He easily hefts the ladder off the ground and leans it against the house. “I’ll run them all home, and then I’ll be back.”

Daniel twirls around, pulling the pack down the street, the exhausted basset slowing the pace. He backward-glances and catches me looking. He lifts a leash-clutching hand in a wave.

Will it look too obvious if I change before he gets back? Wash my hair? Bake him a cake?

Just be yourself, I tell myself, wondering who exactly “myself” is. The one Mom accuses of overcompensating, or the timid one who would never send back a bad meal because she doesn’t want to stress out the server?

Better to go ahead and kill the damn wasps, prove you don’t need a man to get the job done.

I concentrate on climbing up the ladder, and the sound of my feet on the rungs focuses my thoughts, most of which start with *Daniel*.

Halfway up is close enough. I start my assault. The spray nozzle fires and the stream hits the nest. There's a wasp hovering around my face as if trying to ID me as the assassin. I use my free hand to wave it away. It stings my cheek.

"Ow! Hey!"

My soles start to slip off the rung. Instinctively, I grip the sides of the ladder with both hands, losing the can of poison.

There's another wasp on my wrist. I shake my arm, trying to bounce it off.

"Really?" I need to get off this ladder.

As I descend, I feel one under my shirt. Legs and wings. Ew. I grab the hem of my tee and parachute the fabric so the bee will fly out, but it stings me on the stomach anyway.

And then time goes noodley. Vengeful needles with teeth, more bees sting me: legs, arms, neck. I'm feeling woozy now, not sure whether the house is receding or I am. I'm lower down on the ladder but not on solid ground yet. My footing gives out, and I fall back on the grass, the air knocked out of my lungs in a percussive heave.

I press a palm against my chest to steady the smacking inside. I try to get up, but my body's too heavy to move. Except for the erratic squeak of bats, I'm alone.

My throat closes in on itself. The light filtering into my vision narrows down to the thinnest straw. I'm vibrating with a relentless buzzingbuzzingbuzzing . . . is it my heart?

*Where is my heart?*

**DISCUSS: THE TALE OF TWO DRAFTS**

1. Notice how the character Kara in the original draft has become the character Alma in the final draft. How is Alma characterized in this chapter? What details have been added between the first draft and the final draft to give her character added depth?
2. You'll notice that the dialogue between Linnea and Daniel has remained largely unchanged from the first draft to the final draft. Why do you think the dialogue was left as it was? What about it makes it effective dialogue? What additions have been made? What effect do those additions have?
3. The scene where Linnea is stung by the bees is markedly shorter in the final draft than it is in the first draft. What has been done to the scene to make it shorter? Do you think it is a more effectively written scene in the final draft versus the first draft? Why?
4. Overall, the final draft has a slower pace than does the first draft. Which revisions have made that pace slower? What is the effect of the slower pace? Does the story feel more intimate? Do the characters feel more believable and real?
5. What has comparing these two drafts taught you about the revisionary process? Having read these one after the other, how might you go about revising your own writing—whether it be an essay or a piece of creative writing—differently than you have before?

**DISCUSS: HARPER’S CREATIVE SIDE**

One of the novel’s most prominent motifs is that of Harper’s affinity for music. The epigraphs for all three parts of the book are even quoted song lyrics from John Mellencamp, The Doors, and Miike Snow. One of Linnea’s first “acquired memories” from Harper is the knowledge of how to play the piano, and it is Harper playing the piano in Linnea’s body which marks her first interaction with Maxine in part II. What do you think the significance of music is to the plot and meaning of the novel as a whole? What do you think its significance is to Harper?

**ACTIVITY: EXPLORING A BOOK THROUGH ITS COVER**

Covers are products of collaboration between a designer, publisher, and author. Keeping that in mind, how would you design the cover of this novel? Write about or even draw your plan for a cover. Why did you choose the design you chose? Have textual evidence at hand to support your design decisions.

**TIME TO WRITE: FIRST IMPRESSIONS CAN BE MISLEADING**

Think back to the character web activity you did as you were reading the book. Beyond mapping out Linnea’s character over the course of the story, which other characters did you map out? Choose one of those other characters—perhaps either Chris or Harper—and think about how these characters change as we learn more about them. What sorts of things did Maxine assume about Chris that turned out to be false? What sorts of things might *you* have assumed about Harper that changed once you met her and got to know her? How does *Borrowed* demonstrate the power of first impressions and of assumptions—and how does it explore the potentially problematic consequences of making such assumptions? Use textual evidence to support your reasoning.

**ACTIVITY: GROUP BREAKOUT DISCUSSION**

Review the “Questions and Topics for Discussion” below or in the back of the book. Assign two questions or topics to small groups to discuss amongst themselves. Reconvene and have each group present their thoughts to the class.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

- 1) Maxine is driven, perhaps above all else, by her love for her two younger brothers. What do Race and Will teach Max about love and about family?
- 2) The theme of knowing yourself/others runs throughout the book. Which challenges push Linnea, Max, and Harper to learn more about themselves and what they’re capable of? And how do the assumptions they make about the people in their lives hold up along the way?
- 3) Despite its hopeful message and optimistic ending, *Borrowed* travels to some very dark places. How does the novel balance competing tones of hope and hopelessness during its final act?
- 4) On more than one occasion, Harper feels that she can see past Chris’s monstrousness to the boy he used to be. Why do you think Harper is the only one who seems able to see this side of Chris?
- 5) Max feels an immense amount of guilt over Harper’s death. How does Max wrestle with this guilt throughout the novel? Do you think it’s justified?
- 6) One of the major themes of the novel’s final act is healing. Think about a time when you had to overcome an obstacle. What—or who—helped you see the light?
- 7) The book is written from multiple points of view. How do these alternating voices drive the narrative? And how do each of the voices reflect the narrator’s personality?
- 8) Up until the very end of the story, Max refuses to believe that Harper is really inhabiting Linnea’s body. What do you think ultimately changes her mind?
- 9) Throughout her life, Linnea has had to struggle to survive, and baking has become not only a means of creative expression, but also a therapeutic outlet. How does the symbolic significance of the culinary arts manifest itself throughout the novel?
- 10) By the novel’s end, Max and Linnea have become close friends. Beyond what happened at the campground, what do you think brought these two girls together? What has kept them close?

**TIME TO WRITE: GRIEF IS A POWERFUL THING**

Many of the most powerful conflicts in *Borrowed* are internal rather than external. Maxine, in particular, wrestles with grief throughout the entirety of the story. Think back to a time when you read a fiction or non-fiction piece in which either the narrator or another character was dominated by their grief. Be creative. Write a short fiction or non-fiction piece in which the main character (who may be you) must also wrestle with the heaviness of grief. Make sure to include details and dialogue that give voice and power to the character's grief instead of simply telling the audience that the character is grieving.

**READING: INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR LUCIA DISTEFANO**

Elephant Rock's Christopher Morris discusses the writing of *Borrowed* with author Lucia DiStefano. Learn more about Lucia at [www.LuciaDiStefano.com](http://www.LuciaDiStefano.com).

**Christopher Morris:** *Borrowed* is certainly an unusual brand of YA novel, drawing from multiple genres and keeping readers on their toes with an ever-twisting plot. How did *Borrowed*, in all its nuanced complexity, come to be? What was it that inspired you to tell this story?

**Lucia DiStefano:** The germ of the story infected me many years ago when I watched a young woman ahead of me in the post office queue write something in pen on the palm of her hand. Of course I would have loved to know exactly what she wrote. We've all jotted "note-to-self" reminders on ourselves when we needed to remember something in the absence of paper or device (I trust I'm not alone in that?), so it wasn't that it was strange, but rather, seeing it from the outside made it more memorable.

I started thinking about memory and how fickle and deceptive it can be, how we feel it's important to hold on to certain memories and forget others, so I began a novel about a grieving girl who writes messages on her palms in her sleep and has no memory of putting them there. I wandered, aimlessly, within that story for awhile, and it wasn't until I stumbled upon some anecdotal (but powerful) evidence for cellular memory in heart transplant patients that I landed on the missing element my protagonist needed.

**CM:** While I hesitate to try and define *Borrowed* as belonging to any one genre, your novel might best be described as spec lit—or speculative fiction. Spec lit tends to draw from any number of other genres, including fantasy, science fiction, horror, dystopia . . . Which genres do

you see yourself *borrowing* (get it?) the most heavily from, and how did this evolve in the writing?

**LD:** I wish I could answer this question in an impressive way. But for me, YA is the genre I'm working in, so I didn't consciously think of subcategories while I was writing. I thought more of where I wanted the book to fall on the light-to-dark spectrum. And because the story had a loss at its center, I knew it needed to have a darker tone. So it's cool to hear other people define it in ways I wouldn't. For instance, one of the judges called the novel a "thriller." I read that and thought, "Wow. I wrote a thriller? If you say so!"

One thing I did consciously think about in the writing and in the revision was leaving space for different readers to draw different conclusions. Because scientists can only observe the phenomenon of cellular memory (they can't exactly prove or disprove it), it lends itself to different interpretations and calls upon different sets of beliefs. I like that kind of ambiguity or elasticity. If you are a hard-core scientist, you might look at Linnea's experience through that lens (and yes, I have taken full advantage of my "rights" as a fiction writer to dramatize cellular memory and ask the reader to consider an extreme or even improbable example). And if you're thinking along more mystical lines, you might see what happens as belonging in the realm of the miraculous. Both mind-sets are equally valid. There's lots that science can't explain, but that doesn't mean that those things won't ever be explained by science . . . nor does it mean that they will.

**CM:** One of the most impressive things about *Borrowed* is how well it juggles three points of view—one of which is from a character who is technically, well . . . dead. Walk me through the process of developing the characters and voices of Linnea, Maxine, and Harper.

**LD:** Part of me believes there is no “process,” at least not one that can be distilled in a neat way. Norman Mailer called writing “the spooky art,” and in the sense of a writer imagining the inner workings of characters and then fixing it all on a blank page in the hopes that readers will emotionally connect, writing certainly is one of the spookier things we do as humans. I do hope the voices of the three narrators sound different to readers; I certainly aimed for that, but beyond trying to feel my way into the girls’ heads and stay there as long as they would let me, I don’t know exactly how I did it. And the fact that I just referred to them as hosts to my nosy writer’s brain shows you how I don’t really have a clue about the “process” . . . I just showed up at the desk day after day, even on the days when I knew my task was to cut all of what I’d written in the days or weeks before!

**CM:** You’re a pretty sunny person, and yet *Borrowed* goes to some very dark places—both thematically and in terms of the violence on display during the novel’s final act. How did you decide on what to include—and on how far to go—with those late-game scenes?

**LD:** I don’t necessarily think of myself as “sunny,” but you’re not the first person to have called me that. (I am so not always in a good mood—my husband can attest to that.) I’ve always been drawn to books and movies and pieces of art that push me to the edges of my emotional limits, both the difficult emotions as well as the joyful ones. So it makes sense I’d write the type of

book I like to read. In terms of how far to go, though, I needed help with that. There's an important moment in the story that I had not written but had only alluded to. Jotham, wise story visionary that he is, urged me to write it (and he knew it would be tough, so he apologized for asking). I wrote it, and I went too far.

**CM:** You mean the scene in part 3 between Chris and Harper in the cabin?

**LD:** Correct. Robert Frost said, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader," so once I committed to trying what Jotham suggested, I suppose I was determined not to spare myself. However, we ended up scaling it back and landing somewhere in the middle: not glossing over the event, but not narrating every moment of it either. I couldn't have gotten there on my own.

**CM:** *Borrowed* resonated with our judges in no small part because of how realistically it deals with grief, loss, and guilt. How did you go about portraying these powerful emotions from the points of view of teens?

**LD:** My mother died when I was a high school sophomore, and my father died before I turned 21. And because both succumbed to long illnesses, in a real way my teen years were shaped by grief and loss. Although Maxine's grief is obviously very different, and although her guilt also has a different source than mine (perhaps mine was more survivor's guilt), I can't help but think that my own long season of loss somehow informed Max's. Again, it wasn't something conscious I set out to do as I wrote. As a teen dealing first with the fear of my mother's death, and then struggling to cope with life without her, I took great comfort in books, especially those

that had captured even a shadowy sense of what I was feeling. In that regard, fiction felt like a much more grounding, authentic part of life than “reality” did. And yet, I didn’t start out by deciding to write a book about grief. Rather, since I was so profoundly moved by the novels I read as a teen that did a good job of depicting grief and loss (and I’m still moved by them), I think subconsciously I was motivated to just generally join the literary conversation.

**CM:** Despite their roles as supporting characters, Shelby, Alma, and Julie all play key roles in the story and in the lives of Linnea, Maxine, and Harper. Tell me about how you developed characters who, despite their relatively short “screen time,” are still able to make such a profound impact.

**LD:** I love secondary characters—as a writer and as a reader. Unlike the main characters, who are burdened with carrying the story’s through line, minor characters can have more fun, and, therefore, can be more fun to write. I am thrilled to hear you say that these characters had a strong impact on the story. Of course, despite the fact that I felt freer to let them call the shots, and therefore I enjoyed sketching them, I also did want them to move the story or assist (or foil) the characters along the way.

As far as “how” I achieved what you say I achieved, I think you’d need to ask the characters themselves, since mostly, I’m stumped. I do know that I absolutely love writing dialogue (even though my first attempts at writing fiction contained almost zero dialogue; I just meandered in my characters’ heads). Many times I discover the minor characters’ true “roles” when I get them

talking to the protagonists. I end up having to cut lots of that explorative chatter, but for me, watching the characters interact helps me determine how they can all best add to the whole.

**CM:** It can be difficult to write teen characters that teen readers will find realistic and relatable.

What motivated you to start writing for teens?

**LD:** Well, as I said, I was a serious reader as a teen, not only for the unique and lasting enjoyment that reading can bring, but to reassure myself that emotional pain didn't mean a diminished life. After all, I spent time with characters who survived painful situations and ultimately connected with aspects of life—even the smallest—that made it worth living. And most importantly, they didn't deny or overlook or turn away from their problems, but rather explored them—sometimes with trepidation, sometimes with courage. (John Dufresne calls fiction “the lie that tells a truth.” I think that's exactly right.) So perhaps I've always subconsciously felt like I “owed” something to the books that buoyed my struggling teen self. And what better way to repay that than to add my voice to the conversation?

**CM:** And you're a former teacher, you've spent hundreds of hours with teenagers.

**LD:** Right. Long before I ever tried my hand at writing for teens, I taught high school English. I was lucky enough to be a student of the YA lit pioneer Dr. Don Gallo at Central Connecticut State University when I was working toward my teaching degree, and his legendary course on the YA novel deepened my passion and respect for the genre. (I read over a hundred novels that semester, and that's not hyperbole.) So when I started teaching and found out I was restricted to

teaching whatever was in the book room (the most contemporary being *Fahrenheit 451*, and there was lots and lots of Charles Dickens), I decided to prove to teens that there was a rich and varied body of literature out there written with them in mind. I brought in dozens of YA novels from home and lined my classroom with them, encouraging my students to borrow them by jotting their names down on the checkout sheet I'd provided . . . but only if they'd like to. Needless to say, the books weren't flying off the shelves.

But because I was so frustrated with the school board's insistence that I stick to the "classics" and so frustrated with the result (teens thought reading was boring), I carved out ten minutes at the end of most class periods to read aloud to my students from a bona fide YA novel. They loved it. They started asking for that time and were disappointed if we didn't get to it. The book was *Up Country* by Alden R. Carter, and it dealt with serious subjects like substance addiction, dysfunctional families, criminal activity, and, because it was realistic, it included the occasional curse word. (My students were shocked when they heard me read a swear word for the first time; they thought I added it to hold their attention, and I had to show them where it appeared on the page.)

You can see where this is going, right? One of the students happened to tell her parents that her English teacher was reading something . . . um . . . colorful, and those parents went to the school board, and I was told to knock it off with the "unapproved" reading material or I'd be out of a job. The superintendent remained staunchly unmoved by my assurance that I was devoting the bulk of my classes to the required curriculum; by anecdotes of recalcitrant readers' engagement and absorption during those read-aloud segments; by how animatedly my students were talking

about the characters and wondering what would happen next. (They had never given one whit about Pip or Oliver Twist.)

**CM:** Were you writing during this time?

**LD:** Literary short stories, yes. YA novels, no. I didn't consider writing my own YA until years later, when I was in graduate school. One of my assignments for my class on teaching writing was to complete one of the projects I'd assigned my freshman composition students. I opted for one of the creative, open-ended assignments, rather than the required research papers. And in my piece, I narrated from the point of view of a high school junior who was selling his prescription drugs to his classmates. Unbeknownst to me, my professor gave what I'd written to his teen son, who reportedly liked it so much that he asked his dad for the "rest of the book." My prof shared this with me (thanks, Dr. Riggio), and a goal was born.

**CM:** And *Borrowed* is the result of these years of writing?

**LD:** *Borrowed* is my first published book, but it's not even close to the first novel manuscript I've written.

**CM:** What was the revision process like for *Borrowed*? What did you focus on as you revised?

**LD:** What didn't I focus on! The revision process was intense but rewarding. I feel incredibly lucky to have worked on my first published book with Jotham Burrello (the mastermind behind

Elephant Rock Books; rest assured, people, he uses his powers for good). I bet I would've been overwhelmed with the typical twelve-page, single-spaced revision letter from the editor, probably not knowing where/how to start. So I'm especially grateful for the way Jotham works: systematically, breaking things down into manageable chunks. We spoke by phone each week, and we worked on the manuscript in "passes," having a different focus each round (for instance, deepening characters and character motivations; voice; setting). One of the first things Jotham identified that I needed to zero in on was the story's time line. Basically I had such a squishy time line it was nonexistent. Because time lines feel like math, and math and I are not the best of friends, I'd been avoiding that. Before we could get down to serious story work, we needed to work out the story calendar.

**CM:** When did you know that the book was "capital D Done"?

**LD:** When Jotham told me we had to stop noodling with it! I can't stress enough how important trusted readers are to the revision process. We'll always be too close to our work to read it like an editor. Henry James was famous for that, always wanting to rewrite published work, even when he was only asked to write an introduction to a new edition. Because we're always different people when we revisit our work (even subtly different, even a few months' different), it's impossible not to see words/phrases/details we want to change, regardless of how capital D Done the work felt at the time of publication.

I've put my all into each round of edits. But I know if/when I go back for a reread, I will encounter things I wish I could change! I'll have to devise a distraction to get me through those times. Maybe I'll dust off a volume of Henry James.