



*A Novel*

LEONORA  
IN THE  
MORNING  
LIGHT

MICHAELA CARTER

"Gorgeously written, meticulously researched. . . . A beautifully woven story of love and war and art." —JILLIAN CANTOR, bestselling author of *In Another Time* and *Half Life*

READING GROUP GUIDE

This reading group guide for *Leonora in the Morning Light* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Michaela Carter. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion.

We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.



## INTRODUCTION

**London, 1937:** Leonora Carrington is a twenty-year-old socialite dreaming of independence when she falls into a turbulent, passionate love affair with Max Ernst, an older, married artist. She follows him to Paris and is quickly thrust into the vibrant revolutionary world of studios and cafes where rising visionaries of the Surrealist movement like André Breton, Pablo Picasso, Lee Miller, Man Ray, and Salvador Dalí are challenging conventional approaches to art and life. Inspired by their freedom, Leonora begins to experiment with her own work, translating vivid stories of her youth onto canvas and gaining recognition under her own name—until, suddenly, the shadow of war and occupation begins to spread over Europe, and headlines emerge denouncing Max and his circle as “degenerates.” Forced to flee France, Max and Leonora begin remarkable journeys that will shape them as artists and individuals. On the run from an internment camp, Max seeks the aid of Peggy Guggenheim, who is helping artists escape from the Nazis, while Leonora, once trapped in a Spanish asylum, begins to claim her identity and unleash the quiet, inner power that will eventually make her one of the most influential women of our time. When the three lives collide, nothing will be the same.

Based on true events and historical figures, *Leonora in the Morning Light* is an unforgettable story of love, art, and destiny that restores a twentieth-century heroine to her rightful place in our collective imagination.

# TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How much did you know about Leonora Carrington before picking up *Leonora in the Morning Light*? About the Surrealist movement?
2. From the earliest chapters of the novel, we see that Leonora has complicated relationships with the men in her life. How are her father, Serge, Max, and others similar? Different? How do each impact her own behavior and decisions?
3. What does Leonora find in her female counterparts, particularly Lee and Fini (and even Catherine) that she does not in the men that surround them? How does *Leonora in the Morning Light* explore the dynamics between genders, both in content and in form?
4. It becomes increasingly clear as the story progresses that Max and Leonora—before, during, and after the war—have experienced different levels of trauma, and that it manifests through their work. How does the concept of the “tortured artist” make its way into *Leonora in the Morning Light*? Do you believe that great art can exist without great pain?
5. Since we have insight into both of their viewpoints and thought processes, how do you think Leonora and Max see each other? How do they see themselves? Their art?
6. Captivity and freedom are recurring themes in *Leonora in the Morning Light*. How do they work their way into each narrator’s story?
7. As the book progresses, we see Leonora’s mental state deteriorate, to the point that she is institutionalized. How does her decline and eventual triumph over these struggles affect the reading experience, and your understanding of her as a character?
8. While *Leonora in the Morning Light* is set in World War II, it takes the reader to locations (Lisbon, Marseille, Santander) and focuses on historical moments that might be different than other books focusing on the same period. Did you enjoy being exposed to these new places and experiences?

9. In the third part of the book, we are introduced to Peggy Guggenheim, a patron of the arts who is helping creatives escape from Nazi occupation. She also begins a relationship with Max before Leonora reenters their lives. How does this dynamic affect her? What does she bring to the novel?
10. Was there a perspective—Leonora’s, Max’s, or Peggy’s—that you enjoyed reading most? Related to the most? Found the most interesting?
11. Toward the end of the novel, Peggy and Renato successfully transport Max and Leonora to the United States. How does their life there change, and how does it affect each of their artistic sensibilities—and ultimately their relationship?
12. Though how things end with Leonora and Max is part of the historical record, were you surprised by the story’s ending? After seeing the full course of their relationship, how do you feel about what they meant to each other?
13. What are the key lessons and observations you took away from *Leonora in the Morning Light*? What do you think is Leonora Carrington’s legacy?



## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

- Many pieces of Surrealist artwork are on display at museums across the United States. Find one close to you that may have a visiting or permanent exhibit featuring work by Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, and more. Visit as a group—or do so virtually, if you can’t make it in person.
- *Leonora in the Morning Light* moves through London, Paris, the south of France, Lisbon, and Spain; to celebrate those settings, assign a food item, plate, or drink from each to a member of the group to bring to book club.
- There are a number of other successful historical novels that explore the same time period, settings, and creative generation as *Leonora in the Morning Light*. Select one for your next book club meeting and compare the similarities and differences between the books.

# A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAELA CARTER

## **How did you become interested in Leonora Carrington, Max Ernst, and the Surrealists?**

I've loved the Surrealists for a very long time, and have used their games, like exquisite corpse or stream-of-conscious writing, as exercises when I teach. But other than being familiar with Dalí, I didn't know much about the artists individually until I began to conceive of this novel.

I wanted the story to be set in Paris between the World Wars, in part because Paris during that time was such a creative hub. As I read about the artists who lived there, I soon realized the Surrealists were the most interesting and creative of the lot. Diving deeper into their lives, I found a great deal written about the men, but the women were scarcely more than footnotes, in as much as they were muses for the male artists. I knew I wanted a young woman to be my protagonist, and at first I thought I'd make her up from scratch, but then at the Tate Modern Museum, in London, I happened on a piece by Leonora, and I was so taken with it I had to know more about her. Once I learned about her life, I realized that her story was the one I needed to tell.

## **What was your research process like?**

After the visit to Europe when I discovered Leonora, my research consisted mostly of reading books. All the main characters in my novel, and many of the minor ones, had written about their lives and about one another. There was so much information, it felt overwhelming at times.

Later, when I realized that Leonora's Self-Portrait was essential to the story, I traveled to New York City to see it at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Though I'd looked at it in books, I hadn't noticed the way she'd wiped something out at the edge of the painting, but left its shadow, until I saw the actual painting. The mystery of what might have been there became an essential thread in the novel, and Leonora's connection to the Sidhe, as well as her struggle to have confidence in her own artistic vision, came more sharply into focus.

**When it came time to decide what to focus on, why did you select this specific moment in Leonora's life instead of having the novel span her entire ninety-four years?**

Leonora led such an inspiring life, at first I wasn't sure how much of it I would aim to include. In fact, in a very early draft of the novel, she was near her death, and talking to her friend Remedios, who died so many years earlier. I wondered if the novel might somehow focus on their friendship.

But Leonora's early years seemed to encapsulate her greatest period of growth. In that short, intense time before and during the war, she transformed from a student of art to a fully realized artist, confident in her vision and in the validity of her experience. I wanted to understand how she got there, and why, in the process of becoming empowered, she had to leave Max.

***Leonora in the Morning Light* is populated by a wide-ranging cast of historical figures, some of whom make just brief cameos. How did you go about incorporating those surprise guests into the narrative?**

That was really one of the most fun aspects of writing this! If there were any time and place I'd wished I'd lived it was before World War II in Paris, when the city was teeming with groundbreaking artists. They were bouncing ideas off each other and showing their art together, and then many of them found themselves fleeing Europe in tandem. Since all those historical figures were friends and acquaintances of the novel's main characters, with whom they often had differences of opinion, they easily became an integral part of the story. thread in the novel, and Leonora's connection to the Sidhe, as well as her struggle to have confidence in her own artistic vision, came more sharply into focus.

**How did you come to decide to incorporate Max's perspective into the narrative? Peggy's?**

Max's ordeal of being imprisoned as an enemy alien and the three days he endured on the ghost train were so visceral and harrowing, I knew that they had to be a part of the narrative. We feel his vulnerability and his pain. And since Leonora isn't with him during that time, we need to see things from his point of view to really understand what he's going through.

With Peggy, it was a bit different. I didn't realize how essential she was to the story until I was well into my first draft. I watched the movie *Art Addict*, and I realized what a fascinating, important person she was. Reading her autobiography, I really empathized with her need

to be loved. Also, we have the same birthday, which felt kind of magical. After writing so many pages from Leonora and Max's perspectives, I found her voice refreshing. She had this wonderful sense of humor. And I loved seeing Max and Leonora through her eyes. She was much closer to an ordinary person—though, of course, she wasn't really ordinary at all, but marvelous!

**Did you approach writing Leonora, Max, and Peggy's voices differently? Is it hard to cross character lines in the narrative?**

I suppose you could say I heard their voices differently. They each spoke in their own manner, and didn't sound at all alike. But I also approached each of their characters differently. For Leonora, I did a lot of dreaming upfront. I'd imagine scenes from her childhood and write them out longhand in a stream-of-conscious style. I felt like I was intuiting her world, listening for the glimmering details.

So much of Max's journey had to do with his physical circumstances in custody and running from authorities across France on foot. While Max Ernst wrote some autobiographical sketches, he left out most of the details. It took my finding and reading the memoir of the Jewish German writer Lion Feuchtwanger, who also endured Camp des Milles and the ghost train, to more fully imagine the gritty details and understand the hardships these men experienced.

Peggy had such a distinctive voice and way of looking at the world. She was jaded, accustomed to being left by men, and yet she was so hopefully in love with Max. She was a delightful intrusion into his and Leonora's twosome.

So the characters were very much themselves. But the crossing of narrative lines was much harder. I knew I wanted to start the story with Max on the ghost train, and also with the moment Leonora meets Max. Those different timelines set the narrative arcs into motion. I wasn't at all sure that it would work. But I hoped it would. And thank Goddess for my editor, Julianna Haubner, who was able to look at the whole from a much greater height than I could!

**Is it easier or harder to frame a narrative around real people and events? Does having to confine to historical fact challenge creativity, or offer a space to exercise it?**

This is such a great question! Writing a narrative around real people was a challenge that at times felt so frustrating I berated myself for having taken on the project. I knew I was drawn

to the story, but I had to locate the essence of it to be able to write it. It was kind of like approaching the writing backward. Usually the characters define the plot, but when the events have all happened already, a writer has to approach the story from the outside in. I knew Leonora left Max, but I didn't know why. So finding out why she left became the main thrust of my writing.

The beautiful parts of writing this were the surprises. I'd have questions about why this or that happens—and then I'd do more research and find that perfect detail that was better than I ever could have imagined. It felt like fitting the pieces of a puzzle together, as if the story were there all along and I only had to find it, and to take away what wasn't necessary, which was really the hardest part, because so much of what was not necessary to the plot was also fascinating. in love with Max. She was a delightful intrusion into his and Leonora's twosome.

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**What surprised you most about Leonora's story? What do you hope readers learn about her through *Leonora in the Morning Light*?**

The most surprising thing about Leonora was the intensity of her fear. I'd thought at first that the boldness of her actions meant that she was fearless, and then I discovered that she behaved bravely in spite of her fears, which made her accomplishments and creations even more extraordinary.

I hope readers get a sense of the courage it took for Leonora to leave the comfortable, conventional life into which she was born for the path she felt she must walk. She had this fire burning inside her, and she was going to dedicate her life to tending it. This takes a great amount of conviction, especially when society, and even the men you are a fellow artist among, see you as a muse—someone who can influence great art, but cannot make it herself.

**After researching and writing so much about Leonora's artwork, do you have a favorite painting?**

It's so hard to choose! So many of her paintings are captivating. But the painting I fell deeply in love with when I saw it at her 2018 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, in Mexico City,

was *The Giantess*, which is also called *The Guardian of the Egg*. She painted it in 1946 for the art collector Edward James for the fee of five hundred dollars.

I was first drawn to the size of it, 27 by 47 inches, which is very large for Carrington. I'd seen it before in books, but reproductions don't do it justice. The tempura paint, which she made herself, makes the painting glow. Leonora had just read—and loved—Robert Graves' book *The White Goddess*, which describes the female deities of the early matriarchal societies. Her painting depicts an Earth goddess, with a moonlike face and a wheat field for hair. She's standing on land, with the sea and sky behind her. In the sea there are islands and a whale and men hunting it. On earth there's a white fantastical creature running from a mob with scythes and pitchforks. But all of this turmoil is very small compared with the giantess, who stands still at its center, and holds a speckled egg in her hand.

**As a writer, what about historical fiction appeals to you? What opportunities do you think it gives a reader?**

The best part about writing historical fiction is the ability to time travel! I love spending my days in a different place and time. And writing about real people is a bit like inhabiting them. You get to know them intimately, from the inside out.

I think historical fiction gives readers a glimpse into what it might have been like to live in those different places and times. It also highlights the fact that time is a continuum. When we read nonfiction, which so often describes historical events in a detached manner, we can still believe that historical figures differ from us in fundamental ways. Fiction, on the other hand, conveys a subjective experience, and reading it, we feel the ways those people might have felt, and we understand that we have the same basic human desires at our core. We also recognize that the sort of thing we're reading about might have easily happened to us—which I think helps us view our own times through a wider, more inclusive, and deeply informed lens.

**By day, you're the co-owner and book buyer of the Peregrine Book Company, an independent bookstore in Prescott, Arizona. Do you think your bookselling experience/identity informs your writing experiences/identity?**

I've been buying books for Peregrine since we opened in 2012, but I was a writer long before that. Starting up the bookstore felt like a natural extension of writing and my love for books. In many ways the two jobs can go hand in hand. I love finding new authors, reading books before they hit the shelves, and getting excited about the books I love and passing that excitement on to customers. All of this feels perfectly compatible with being a writer.

But buying books and writing them can be at odds sometimes as well. To dedicate yourself to the craft of writing takes a crazy amount of faith, and a kind of magical way of thinking that the book you are writing will be somehow essential, and that it will become a special and entirely unique object in the world. So it can be hard to see just how many great new books come out every week. And if the writing isn't going well, it can be easy to lose faith, and to think, why bother? Aren't there enough books in the world? On the other hand, seeing just how many books are being published can help give you faith that your vision might also have a chance to make its way to the readers who just might love it.

**Are there any other historical figures you'd love to see books about, either as a writer or a reader and bookseller?**

Yes! I'd love to see more books about women throughout history. As marginalized citizens, our stories haven't been told nearly as much as the men's have. And knowing where we've come from helps us see how we've been held back, and how we might work to change that. I think the world is hungry for women's stories. I could name so many women—the list of those who have led incredible lives is endless.

