READING GROUP GUIDE FOR

The Lace Reader

By

BRUNONIA BARRY

Every gift has a price . . .

Every piece of lace has a secret . . .

My name is Towner Whitney. No, that's not exactly true. My real first name is Sophya. Never believe me. I lie all the time. . . .

Towner Whitney, the self-confessed unreliable narrator of *The Lace Reader,* hails from a family of Salem women who can read the future in the patterns in lace, and who have guarded a history of secrets going back generations, but the disappearance of two women brings Towner home to Salem and the truth about the death of her twin sister to light.

The Lace Reader is a mesmerizing tale that spirals into a world of secrets, confused identities, lies, and half-truths in which the reader quickly finds it's nearly impossible to separate fact from fiction. But as Towner Whitney points out early on in the novel, "There are no accidents."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. For centuries, women have used lace as an adornment for their clothes and as a decoration for their homes. Just a small piece of lace on a sleeve could evoke a sense of luxury, beauty, and

elegance. How does your family use lace today? Is it used every day or only on special occasions?

2. Have any pieces of lace been passed down to you or someone else in your family? If so, what feelings do you associate with these heirloom pieces of lace?

3. The author states that *The Lace Reader* is, at its core, about perception versus reality. How does Rafferty's perception of Towner color his judgment of what she says and does? What about Rafferty's perception of Cal and his actions?

4. At the very start of *The Lace Reader,* Towner Whitney, the protagonist, tells the reader that she's a liar and that she's crazy. By the end of the book, do you agree with her?

5. Eva reveals that she speaks in clichés so that her words do not influence the choices made by the recipients of her lace reading sessions. Do you think that's possible? Can a cliché be so overused that it loses its original meaning?

6. When May comments on the relationship between Rafferty and Towner, she states that they are too alike and predicts that "You won't just break apart. You'll send each other flying." Did you agree with that when you read it? And if so, in what ways are Towner and Rafferty alike?

7. The handmade lace industry of Ipswich quickly vanished when lace-making machines were introduced. At that same moment, the economic freedom of the women making the handmade lace also evaporated. Why do you think that these women didn't

update their business, buy the machines, and own a significant portion of the new lace-making industry?

8. Do you think that May's revival of the craft of handmade lace with the abused women on Yellow Dog Island is purely symbolic or could it be, in some way, very practical?

9. What role does religion play in the novel? Is there a difference between spirituality and religion? Between faith and blind faith?

10. Towner has a special bond with the dogs of Yellow Dog Island—do you agree that people and animals can relate to each other in extraordinary ways?

11. How do the excerpts from *The Lace Reader*'s Guide and Towner's journal function in the novel? Does the written word carry more truth than the spoken? Did you use the clues in the Guide to help you understand the rest of the book?

12. How much does family history influence who a person becomes? Do you believe that certain traits or talents are genetic and can be inherited?

13. Is it possible that twins share a unique bond? How does being a twin affect Towner?

14. Can geography influence personality? For instance, May lives on an island; does this say something about her?

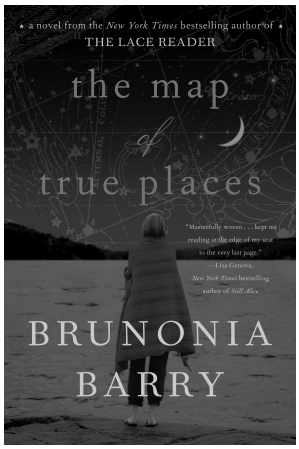
15. If you could learn to read lace and see things about your future, would you?

Read on for an excerpt from Brunonia Barry's next novel, *The Map of True Places*

Brunonia Barry, the New York Times *bestselling author of* The Lace Reader, *offers an emotionally compelling novel about finding your true place in the world.*

Zee Finch has come a long way from a motherless childhood spent stealing boats—a talent that earned her the nickname Trouble. She's now a respected psychotherapist and about to marry one of Boston's most eligible bachelors. But the suicide of one of Zee's patients throws her into emotional chaos and takes her back to places she thought she'd left behind.

Overwhelmed and uncertain about her future, Zee destroys the existing map of her life and begins a new journey, one that will take her not only into her future but into her past as well. Like the sailors of Old Salem who navigated by looking at the stars, Zee has to learn to find her way through uncharted waters to the place she will ultimately call home.



It is not down in any map; true places never are.

—HERMAN MELVILLE

Prologue

In the years when her middle name was Trouble, Zee had a habit of stealing boats. Her father never suspected her of any wrongdoing. He let her run free in those early days after her mother's death. He was busy being a pirate reenactor, an odd leap for a man who'd been a literary scholar all his life. But those were desperate times, and they were both weary from constantly carrying their loss, unable to put it down except in those brief moments when they could throw themselves into something beyond the reach of their memories.

In her fantasy world, the one where she could forgive herself for what happened that year, Zee liked to think that her father, Finch, would have been proud of her skills as a thief. In her wildest dreams, she pictured him joining her adventure, a huge leap for the professor, but not for the pirate he was quickly becoming.

She had a preference for speedboats. Anything that could do over thirty knots was fair game. There was little security back then, and most of the keys (if there were any) were hidden somewhere on the boats themselves, usually in the most obvious place imaginable.

The game was simple. She would pick a boat that looked fast and sleek, give herself exactly five minutes to break in and get the engine started, and head out of the harbor toward the ocean. Once she passed the confines of Salem, she would open up the engine and point the bow straight out toward Baker's Island. Later that night she would return the stolen boat.

There was only one rule. She could never return a boat to the same mooring from which she had stolen it. It was a good rule, not just because it presented an additional challenge but also because it was practical. If she put the boat back on the same mooring, she would be much more likely to get caught. Everyone knows that the last thing any good thief should do is revisit the scene of the crime.

Usually Zee would abandon the boat at one of the public docks that lined Salem's waterfront. Often it was the one at the Willows, the first dock you came to when you entered the harbor. But when the cops started looking for her, she began to leave the boats in other, less obvious places. Sometimes she would jump someone else's mooring. Or she would leave a boat in one of the slips at Derby Wharf, which made it easy to get away, since she lived so close.

Only one time did she mess up and misjudge the fuel level. She was all the way up by Singing Beach in Manchester when the engine died. At first she didn't believe she had run out of gas. But when she checked the fuel again, her mistake was clear. Fighting the panic that was beginning to overtake her, she tried to come up with a plan. She could easily swim to shore, but if she did, the boat would either drift out to sea or smash against the rocks. For the first time, she was afraid of getting caught. In a strange way, she was grateful that there were no other boats around, no one she could signal for help. Not knowing what else to do, she let the boat drift.

She looked up at the moonless sky, the stars brighter than she had ever seen them, their reflections dissolving in the water around her like an effervescent medicine that seemed to dissolve her panic as well. Here, floating along with the current, staring up at the heavens, she knew that everything would be all right.

When she looked back down at the horizon to get her bearings, she found she had drifted toward shore. A dark outline of something appeared in her peripheral vision, and, when she turned to face it, a dock came into focus and, on the hill beyond it, a darkened house. She grabbed an oar and began to steer the boat in toward shore, catching the onsweep of tide that propelled it broadside toward the dock. She grabbed the bowline and jumped, slipping and twisting her ankle a little but keeping the boat from colliding with the dock. She tied up, securing bow and stern, and scrambled over the rocks to the beach. Then she made her way up the road

toward the train station, limping a bit from her aching ankle but not really too bad, all things considered.

Zee wanted to take the train back to Salem, but it was past midnight and the trains had stopped running. She thought about sleeping on the beach. It was a warm night. It would have been safe. But she didn't want to concern her father, who had enough to worry about these days. And she didn't want to be anywhere in the vicinity of Manchester when they found the stolen boat.

So she ended up hitchhiking back to Salem. Not a smart thing to do, she thought as she walked to the Chevy Nova that had stopped about fifty feet ahead of her and was frantically backing up.

It was a woman who picked her up, probably mid-forties, slightly overweight, with long hair and blue eyes that glowed with the light of passing cars. At first the woman said she was only going as far as Beverly. But then she changed her mind and decided to take Zee all the way home, because if she didn't she was afraid that Zee would start hitchhiking again and might be picked up by a murderer or a rapist.

As they rode down Route 127, the woman told Zee every horror story she had ever heard about hitchhiking and then made Zee give her word never to do it again. Zee promised, just to shut her up.

"That's what all the kids say, but they do it anyway," the woman said.

Zee wanted to tell her that she never hitched, that she wasn't the victim type, and that she had only thumbed a ride tonight to cover a crime she'd committed—grand theft boato. But she didn't know what other cautionary tales such a confession might unleash, so she kept her mouth shut.

As she was getting out of the car, Zee turned back to the woman. Instead of saying thank you, she said, in a voice that was straight out of a Saturday morning cartoon show she'd watched when she was a little girl, "Will you be my mommy?"

She had meant it as a joke. But the woman broke down. She just started crying and wouldn't stop.

Zee told the woman that she was kidding. She had her own mother, she said, even though it wasn't true, not anymore.

Nothing she could say would stop the woman's tears, and so finally she said what she should have said all along: "Thank you for the ride."

Of course Zee hadn't given the woman her real address—she didn't

want her getting any ideas, like maybe going into the house and having a word with Finch. She had planned to hide in the shadows until the woman drove away and then cut through the neighboring yards to get home. But in the end she just walked straight down the road. The woman was crying too hard to notice where Zee went or how she got there.

Ten years later, as Zee was training to become a psychotherapist (having outgrown the middle name Trouble), she saw the woman again in one of the panic groups run by her mentor, Dr. Liz Mattei. The woman didn't remember her, but Zee would have known her anywhere—those same translucent blue eyes, still teary. The woman had lost a child, a teenager and a runaway, she said. Her daughter had been diagnosed as bipolar, like Zee's mother, Maureen, but had refused to keep taking lithium because it made her fat. She'd been last seen hitchhiking on Route 95, heading south, holding a hand-lettered sign that read NEW YORK.

It was the winter of 2001 and ten years since the woman had lost her daughter. The Twin Towers had recently come down. The panic group had grown in size, but its original members had become oddly more calm and helpful of each other, as if their free-floating anxiety had finally taken form, and the rest of the country had begun to feel the kind of terror they'd felt every day for years. For the first time Zee could remember, people in the group actually looked at each other. And when the woman talked about her daughter, as she had every week they'd been meeting, the group finally heard her.

The world can change, just like that! the woman said.

In the blink of an eye, someone answered.

Tissues were passed. And the group cried together for the first time, crying for the girl and for her inevitable loss of innocence and, of course, for their own.

Bipolar disorder had recently become a catchall diagnosis. While it had once been believed that the condition occurred after the onset of puberty (as it had with this woman's daughter), now children were being diagnosed as early as three years of age. Zee didn't know what she thought about that. As with many things lately, she was of two minds about it. She hadn't realized her joke until Mattei pointed it out, thinking it was intentional. No,

Zee had told her. She was serious. Certainly it was a disease that needed treatment. Untreated bipolar disorder seldom led to anything but devastation. But medicating too early seemed wrong, something more in line with insurance and drug-company agendas than with the kind of help Zee had trained for years to provide.

The world-famous Dr. Mattei had long since abandoned her panic group, leaving them for Zee or one of the other psychologists to oversee. Mattei had moved on to her latest bestselling-book idea, which proposed the theory that the daughter will always live out the unfulfilled dreams of the mother. Even if she doesn't know what those dreams are, even if those dreams have never been expressed, this will happen, according to Mattei, with alarming regularity. It wasn't a new idea. But it was Mattei's theory that this was more *likely* to happen if those dreams were never expressed, in much the same way that *those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*

Zee had often wondered about the woman with the translucent eyes who came back to the panic group only once after that evening. She wondered about her unfulfilled dreams, expressed or unexpressed, and she wondered if there was something that the daughter was acting out for her mother as she herself had stood on Route 95 and accepted a ride from a stranger heading south.

Zee was glad that the woman had left the group before Mattei had brought up her latest theory. The mother blamed herself enough for her daughter's disappearance, wondering every day if she might have changed the course of events if only she'd given her daughter that one elusive thing she'd failed to provide—something tangible and even ordinary, perhaps, like that red dress in Filene's window. Or the week away at Girl Scout camp that her daughter had begged for years ago.

No one understood the concept of "if only" better than Zee. She lived it every day, though she didn't have to search to find the elusive thing. She thought she knew what her mother had wanted that day so many years ago, what might have helped lift her out of her depression. It was a book of Yeats's poetry given to Maureen by Finch on their wedding day, and it was one of her mother's treasures. Zee's "if only" had worked in reverse. *If only* she hadn't gotten her mother what she wanted that day, *if only* she hadn't left her alone, Zee might have been able to save her.