

**A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide**

# **FAMILIAR**

A Novel

*J. Robert Lennon*





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that Elisa really shifted into another world? If so, do you think she will ever return to her former life? How do you think her experience of the parallel world might affect her life in the former world?
2. Early in the novel, Elisa asks herself, “Is a breakdown a thing you feel, or a thing that changes your relationship to other people?” Do you think Elisa had a breakdown? If so, how did her breakdown change her, both as an individual and in relation to her family?
3. At one point, Elisa speculates that her shift was like a swap, and that the other Elisa is now living *her* life. Which Elisa do you think would have the harder time adjusting?
4. *Familiar* is just as focused on Elisa’s possible parallel world as it is in the state of her dysfunctional family. In both of her lives, Elisa is deeply flawed and the family suffers because of it. What similarities did you see between the characters and their parallel selves? What differences?
5. Throughout the book, images of “cracked” things (windshields, skylights, elevator doors) appear frequently. What symbolic weight do these images hold? How does the user name “CrackedLisa” connect with these images?
6. There is a strong correlation throughout the book between Elisa’s experience of her parallel world and the parallel world video games create

for us. Are video games a form of mindless entertainment or can they transform players the same way books transform readers? How can video games affect our understanding of and interaction with others in the world around us?

7. Elisa is able to track down Silas's numerous online identities by searching his signature tagline: "He saw himself in a strange city with his friend, except that the face of his friend was different." This is also the closing line of the book's epigraph. Why is this quote meaningful, for Silas and for the book as a whole?

8. By the end of the novel, Elisa's immersion in the parallel worlds online forum is so complete that she identifies with her user name, CrackedLisa. What does this identification suggest about how she acts in new situations, like the forum conference?

9. What do you make of the character of Patricia? Does she know something more than Elisa or is she a fraud? What do you think happens to Patricia and Elisa when they clasp hands in the hotel room?

10. On the last page, Elisa comes to the conclusion that "there was only ever one Lisa. . . . There was only ever one life. It was just larger and more peculiar than she expected." Do you think Elisa is speaking literally or figuratively?

## ON WRITING *FAMILIAR*

*J. Robert Lennon*

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was scheduled to fly from Syracuse, New York, to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, by way of Chicago, for the start of the promotional tour for my third book, *On the Night Plain*. I was supposed to be reading that night at Prairie Lights Books in Iowa City, and then continuing on to another week and a half of travel and readings.

By the time I landed in Chicago, though, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington had already occurred, and every airport in America was closed. I managed to rent a car and make it to Iowa City, where I did indeed deliver a horribly lackluster reading to three depressed people.

Obviously the reading was lackluster—as was the case for most Americans that day, all of my personal preoccupations suddenly felt stupid and pointless in the light of national events, and it would be some time before I managed to write anything at all, let alone pick up the thread of projects I'd begun before the attacks. Clarity was in short supply among writers—none of us seemed to know anymore what was important about our work, or how we might write about the new political, moral, and emotional landscape of our country. I don't think I was alone that week in feeling less inspired than at almost any time in my life. The rest of my book tour was cancelled, of course, and I headed home in my rental car with my suitcase full of free *On the Night Plain* tee shirts.

Yet it was during that lonely drive back to upstate New York that I got the idea for *Familiar*, sort of. If you were on the roads during that time,

you might remember the feeling of unreality that pervaded the country—the skies were clear and blue and free of airplanes, and the faces in the cars around me appeared hard and bewildered. I felt, like many did, I think, as though I were driving through a subtly altered world, one that was still familiar, but eerily so, as though remembered from a dream. It was uncertain, still, what had actually happened, and how things were about to change—a difference could be felt, sure, but when you tried to examine it, it slipped away from you.

I wasn't thinking directly of this experience when, a year later, I tried to write the opening chapters of what would eventually become this book. All I knew was that I wanted to write about a woman in a car who slips into a parallel universe. That's all I had. In those days, I was hoping I might someday be able to write novels without particular forethought—to just sit down and free-associate and come up with brilliant sloppy things that could be molded into shapely, metaphorically rich narratives. But I didn't have the chops. I abandoned the book after forty pages or so, then started taking notes for a different novel, one that I could plan out ahead of time, at least a little.

As it happens, I still don't have the skill to turn garbage into gold—who does? But not long ago, with another decade of experience under my belt, and a couple of novels that attempted, more directly, to address the aftereffects of September 11, I decided to revisit my abortive dramatization of my drive home from Iowa. I printed out the abandoned pages, then deleted the computer file. I opened a new file and rewrote the pages, to see if I could gather some momentum this time. And, lo and behold, I could.

Not that I knew any better what I was doing. But I did know that this book was not going to be about the terrorist attacks. Rather, it was going to be about the cognitive dissonance that traumatic events introduce into our minds—about the connections between the fragile construction of the self and the chaotic world outside.

The crazy thing is, I didn't want to write about parenthood. At all. I had realized early on that in the new world Elisa comes to inhabit, the son she is mourning never died. It seemed like a cool plot twist, that was all. I'd envisioned *Familiar* as an oblique, rather detached, bit of literary sci-fi, something spare and enigmatic. Indeed, the first draft of this book was

brutally short. Everything went unsaid. The reviews, I imagined, would employ the words “restrained,” “taut,” and “edgy.”

Instead, my wife, the writer Rhian Ellis—who, for a couple of decades, has served as my indispensable first-pass editor—called it what it really was: “unfinished.”

It wasn't until draft three that I fully accepted that I was writing a novel about the psychological effects of parenthood—the transformations our personalities undergo in response to the utter impossibility of doing the right thing day in and day out for eighteen years and more. To survive being a parent is to fictionalize memory—to constantly re-create and re-contextualize the past, to invent a narrative that makes sense of the bizarre distortions introduced into one's life under the strain of responsibility, obligation, and love. This is a burden borne by even the happiest parents (and I do count myself among them), but it grows unbearably heavy when tragedy strikes. The death of a child crushes the self. It shatters all the illusions that keep our family lives intact. To the parent who experiences it, the loss of a child is like a bomb going off, a building collapsing, a world vanishing and another taking its place.

Unlike every thus-afflicted parent since the dawn of time, Elisa Brown is given a second chance, and her reaction, at least at first, is to long, terribly, for the tragic life she left behind. We are invested in our illusions—I wanted to explore what might happen if this particular one were stripped away.