

A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

WOKE UP LONELY

A Novel

Fiona Maazel



Discussion Questions

1. While Esme believes abstractly in Thurlow's ideas, she has a hard time buying the healing powers of the Helix: "Loneliness *was* a pandemic. . . . Thurlow had that right. It was the rest Esme couldn't get behind. Fellowship among strangers as antidote to a life's worth of estrangement?" (page 29). Do you agree or disagree with Esme? Do you think that Thurlow's philosophy is good and it's his practice that's flawed?

2. Ned posts to an online forum that "the thing about Luke is that he's able to do what no other Jedi has so far: he can feel love without turning evil" (page 55). Replace the word "Jedi" with "human being" and think about it. How many characters in *Woke Up Lonely* do terrible and selfish things for someone they claim to love? Do you think self-interest is ultimately the pandemic, not loneliness?

3. When talking to Lynne, who is actually Esme in disguise, Bruce reveals that, "I'm terrified [my job at the Department] marks the end of a period in my life when I tried to do something that mattered. I don't know who I am anymore. I am estranged from myself. Isn't that ridiculous?" (page 88). How are Bruce's thoughts ironic given his feelings towards the Helix?

4. In the midst of his attempts to make a ransom tape, Thurlow Dan says, "I would like . . . the chance to humanize this story so that among those for whom the expiry of my life will come as good news, there are two who might someday know of the sorrow wrought in my heart for them" (page 111). Do you think Thurlow's story humanizes his character? Do you feel sorry for him once you know the truth?

5. During his first speech, delivered at a college lecture hall while Esme is giving birth, Thurlow says: "Everywhere and all the time people are crying out for each other. Your name. Mine. And when you look back on your life, you'll see it's true: woke up lonely, and the missing were on your lips" (page 155). How does this statement thematically represent the book as a whole? Why do you think Maazel chose *Woke Up Lonely* for the title?

6. When Esme passes Ida off to Crystal for an ice skating trip, she realizes that “with love comes expectation” (page 135). What is this realization significant for Esme? Do you think her character changes throughout the novel? If so, how?

7. Though the Helix is a fictional movement, many therapeutic and even religious groups like it exist. Do you think communities of like-minded people can bring relief or do they further estrange us from reality? What aspects of the Helix appeal to you, if any?

8. On one of her notecards Esme writes: “I wanted to escape the fear born of love for you and Ida—the fear that there were feelings in this world that could undo your resolve to live isolated from the trauma and wreckage that come in train of relations with other people” (page 222). Why do you think love breeds fear, especially for Esme? Is it love that causes our self-interest or can love actually cure us?

An Interview with Fiona Maazel by John J. Kelly

First things first. Why did you choose Cincinnati to create the underground city of vice, complete with its brothels, gambling joints, and other devilish temptations for the full-fledged armed standoff that takes place in *Woke Up Lonely*?

I chose it primarily because who would suspect such things are transpiring just below the bedrock of Cincinnati? Who would notice a cult compound in one of the more tony neighborhoods of Cincinnati? That and I'd been reading about the Underground Railroad and about the actual tunnel system under Pyongyang and saw a connection there I could exploit.

From early on Esme believes that, as you write, "people who were dead inside would do most anything." Do you believe that is the root of most cults?

No, I think cults tend to attract people who are very much alive inside. Alive with feeling that has no outlet, no image of itself in the world, and no way to understand itself. So if you are confounded by your inner life and searching for help, a cult can seem more than palatable. I'm sure I'd be vulnerable to a cult insofar as cults are insidious and crafty and very good at finding your weaknesses and using their cure as bait. If someone invited me to a Super Smart Writers Club and said all the Super Smart Writers were in it and *only* the Super Smart Writers, well, I can see myself walking that plank.

What kind of research into cults and cultish activity did you do while writing this novel?

Oh, I read a ton. About Waco and Ruby Ridge for the stand-off stuff, and then mostly about political cults and therapeutic communities like est. I think I've said this elsewhere, but orthodoxy—religious fanaticism, et al—is very hard to write about because it is always and only one thing. It's one dimensional and just can't provide that much of interest for a writer to sustain over the long haul. This is why the Helix is so flexible; it's many things to many people. This is also why it falls apart—because it's *too* many things.

Much of the plot revolves around this hostage crisis, but it seems like this novel is even more about the problems of loneliness, isolation, and divisiveness in America today. What was it that inspired you to write about these topics and what were some of your most surprising discoveries as the book took shape?

I've long been preoccupied with loneliness. It seems central not just to the human experience but to any discussion of our empathic facility—as individuals, a group, a country. Loneliness feels epidemic to me sometimes, though really not because of social media, as so many people like to ask me. Social media cuts both ways in that it can help people who are already isolated and harm people who use it to replace more traditional forms of camaraderie like, for instance, Capture the Flag. Regardless, I wanted to think about what loneliness looks like for people who are actually not solitary creatures. Who have families and friends and employment. What does loneliness feel like for them? How does it manifest? What will they do to fix it? As for surprises, that's a tough question. I'm not sure. I guess I am always somewhat surprised by how my plots unfold. I knew I'd be writing about a cult leader, his ex, and four hostages, but I had no idea what would become of the hostages once they got out. Those sections are, to my mind, the best in the novel, but I hadn't planned them.

So many of the characters seem to be at odds with their true identities and feelings. Doesn't it seem paradoxical that while we can have all sorts of real friends who we communicate with at our jobs or on the Internet, we feel even more alone than ever?

Not to me, no. Your question is based on the idea that friendship can correct loneliness, when, in fact, friendship can correct solitude. Loneliness is all about being unreachable and unknowable *despite* having friends. Often, friends just make things worse because of the very premise you've offered up here, which most people embrace. Why am I so lonely when I have so many friends? It'd be nice to let that question go. To me, it sounds like: why do I have brown hair when I have so many friends? Two totally unrelated things. Sure, there are degrees of loneliness that can be assuaged by friendship or even a chat room, assuming your brand of loneliness actually proceeds from a deficit of friends. That exists; I'm not saying it doesn't. I'm just interested in a more chronic, deep-seated feeling that we are all walking through life utterly alone in body and soul.

The main protagonist, Thurlow Dan, is such an unrelenting enigma. He's literally uncomfortable in his own skin; a fat man in a thin body constantly counting calories. You portray him like such a kind and loving soul, but regardless of his tens of thousands of acolytes and followers, his one true love, Esme, eludes him throughout the novel. His level of self-loathing is phenomenal. Did you originally intend for him to be so completely screwed up?

Yes! That was an easy call for me. You know the old saw about dentists having ugly teeth and therapists being crazy—in this spirit, it made sense to me that a man spearheading a cult that wants to cure loneliness should, himself, be shot through with grief for his errant wife and child, utterly estranged from the world, and, okay, fat in a skinny body.

One of the interesting plot lines is Thurlow Dan's and the Helix's interactions with North Korea and Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, which gets the rapt attention of the CIA and other US investigators. Other than the obvious bizarre and disturbing news flashes regarding North Korea, was there anything else that prompted you to link the Helix and that country?

So many things, really. North Korea is the last black spot on the map. The Hermit Country. A place whose ethos seemed to dovetail nicely with the Helix's mandate. North Korea is itself a cult—it governs like one—while also celebrating the individual and his pioneering spirit, even as it's a communist state. I imagined my cult leader would find many things of interest there. Also, after seeing a spot on *60 Minutes* in 2007, I think, about four American GIs who crossed the DMZ to live in North Korea, I got fixated on these guys and wanted to include them in the novel. I couldn't believe four soldiers were living there unknown to the rest of the world, but very much a presence in Pyongyang. They all became movie stars in propaganda films. I could have written an entire novel just about them.

Obviously, so many people are drawn to this novel because they experience the same contradictory emotions as so many of the characters you've created. Has it ever struck you that simply by writing this novel you are also helping people recognize that they are not alone in their loneliness, just as Thurlow Dan tries to provide hope?

I hadn't thought of the novel as a therapeutic offering beyond knowing that any novel—if done well—can relieve people of the anxiety of feeling alone with themselves. So if that's the case with mine, I am very pleased.

The novel features a lot of spying and surveillance and you've said that the film *The Lives of Others*, which is all about people whose entire existence is closely monitored because of perceived potential political threats, was an early inspiration for this novel. Americans have put up with a slow, but steady increase in the way their privacy is invaded. Do you believe we've allowed this to happen in exchange for a better sense of security?

Ah, now we're getting into it. I think we've relinquished our civil rights in the *name* of better security, but I have no idea if we are actually more secure than we were before the government began its illegal dragnet of our phone conversations and emails. But even so, I guess the real question is: Is it worth it? Would I rather give up certain freedoms if it means staying safe? Well, you can see where that kind of bartering might lead us. So for me, the answer is no. Democracy can never be taken for granted; it has to be kept up like anything else. Give a little here, a little there, and before you know it, we're living in a police state. So I'd rather keep my right to privacy and worry more about Al-Qaeda than less, though I realize I say this from the comfortable position of assuming Al-Qaeda won't be bombing my house.

It seems like most of your characters in *Woke Up Lonely* are fighting or afraid of being empty inside or out of touch with their feelings. Have you experienced this in your life and what kinds of things do you do to be as alive and in the moment as possible?

I'm sure everyone has experienced this in his/her life and that I'm no exception. A version of this question I got on tour a lot was: Are *you* lonely? And my answer varied from night to night. Sometimes yes, sometimes no, it really depends on how I'm thinking about loneliness in the moment. As for being alive, this is not hard for me. I listen, I look, I pay attention to what's happening around me. Done.

This book has received such enormous praise and a number of reviewers have praised your ability to mix pathos with comedy, when appropriate. When you are in the process of writing are you making a conscious effort to incorporate humor and if so why is it important?

Actually, most of the time, I often feel like a bouncer at the door who rejects humor nine out of the ten times she shows up pleading to get in. Humor is a default for me, and can be really destructive. Humor can deflect feeling, resist feeling, guard against feeling in ways that deny your work the very pathos you've tried so hard to generate. Humor can also provide some relief from

gravitas that's verged on the sentimental or melodramatic. So it's a great tool, but something I need to use sparingly. I think I did better with it in this novel than in my first. I think my first novel was a little too antic, though some people said they laughed out loud. But I don't know how many people are doing that as they read *Woke Up Lonely*.

Without giving away the ending, there is a bit of redemption at the end of *Woke Up Lonely*. Did you want to be sure that readers finished with a "reason to believe"?

Yes! Some readers have said the book is unremittingly bleak, which upset me. I thought the novel was shot through with hope, especially by the end. It's bittersweet, but still, I wanted people walking away with a sense that most of us are good and that good things are possible, even likely, if you just stick around.

I'm interested in your process as a writer. Do you ever do any outlining or do you just let the plot and characters take you where they may go? Also, what do you concentrate more on developing, plot or character?

Depends on the project. I didn't outline my first novel, but I planned rather carefully for *Woke Up Lonely*, though I kept having to revise the plans because they weren't working. I couldn't get the book off the ground when it opened with the four hostages. And I couldn't make Thurlow's sections work when his video narration was delivered as just one block instead of being stippled throughout an account of what was happening to him as the siege progressed. So I had to do a lot of revising and rethinking over multiple drafts until I got it where I wanted. But still, I had an outline. As for plot or character—I don't think you can really treat them separately. "Character is fate"—good old Novalis—and I agree. So there're really no point trying to develop plot without thinking about character or vice versa. I do them in tandem.

You've been compared with such great novelists and short story writers as Kurt Vonnegut and George Saunders. What other writers' work do you enjoy or have been influenced by? In particular, are there any writers who make you laugh?

Dorothy Parker makes me laugh. James Thurber. George Saunders absolutely cracks me up. The list is long. As for influence, I really struggle with that question because I just don't know. I've read only one Vonnegut novel, and only because so many people kept saying our fiction is similar. I guess I

just don't understand influence or how to gauge it. I'm sure everything I've ever read has influenced me in some way. I know that sounds like a cop-out, but it's really not; it's just that I don't know. All I know is what I like. For instance, I'm not sure *Crime and Punishment* makes a showing in my aesthetic, though I'd be delighted if it did.

I know (from a video on YouTube) that you work with a card hanging above your typewriter that gives you inspiration to write great prose. Can you tell the story of what's written on that index card?

I've actually had many cards above my desk over the years, but the one that's there now says: *Jim thinks I can*, which dates back to an email correspondence I had with Jim Shepard—who's a great writer and who was my first fiction professor in college. I was really despairing about *Woke Up Lonely*, about being able to revise it well, about being able to turn it into anything other than the mess it was. And I think Jim probably wrote back something like: I think you can do it, just remember that. So I decided to remember it quite literally, and wrote it on a card and put it where I'd need to see it. Incidentally, I love that you think I use a typewriter. But no, just a boring old computer for me.

I can't finish without asking you what you're working on now. Can you give us a preview?

I can! I'm working on a new novel called *What Kind of a Man*. It's about emotional incoherence. About being unknown to yourself. Coming to a bookstore near you in, oh, five years or so.

Portions of this interview first appeared in City Beat Weekly (Cincinnati).

Book Notes: A Playlist for *Woke Up Lonely*

Fiona Maazel

I can't listen to music when I write. If I listen to music, I end up listening, and since I can't even drive a manual vehicle, this requiring of me too many actions at once, imagine me trying to listen and write at the same time. I can, however, listen to music before I work, which is what I generally do. I can put words on paper whenever I want, but if I want them to be any good, I need to be able to lay bare my inner life and to be as vulnerable about it as possible. And since I'm generally a guarded person—someone once told me my defenses were gothic in terms of their rigor and intricacy—finding ways to shed the armor often includes listening to music. Okay, sometimes I just think of whatever painful things have happened to me until I get just upset enough. Sometimes I'll read some short fiction I find especially moving. But mostly I'll listen to music because music is penetrating and immutable insofar as I can't dilute its power of effect.

“Lonelier Than This,” Steve Earle

In the way of research for *Woke Up Lonely*, I read a lot of books on the topic of loneliness and solitude. But I also listened to a lot of music on the subject, which turns out to comprise ninety percent of the music out there. While writing the novel, I listened to this song compulsively and was struck dumb by Earle's notion of people calling out to each other in vain: “Maybe this is as good as it's gonna get and I'll always be this way. I'll just wander this world callin' out your name.” Seemed like a great way to describe what *loneliness* feels like—the hopelessness of it all. The pathos. So it's no coincidence that throughout the novel, references to calling out for each other abound.

“Darker with the Day,” Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

I'm wild about Nick Cave. His nasty phase, his ballad phase, his acutely religious phase—whatever he does, I'm interested. There was a time when I listened to *No More Shall We Part* obsessively. It's moody and even a little

ridiculous, but also so committed to its own affectation that it wins me over every time. In my mind, Nick Cave and Thomas Hardy, who is one of my favorite authors, belong together—both engaged in contrivance and histrionics that still manage to stir me to a contemplation of bigger things.

“Candy Says,” Antony and the Johnsons cover

Not sure there’s a better rendering of self-loathing out there—self-loathing and dread—as “Candy Says,” and when Antony applies his tremolo, his flutter and transgendering aesthetic, he manages to alchemize shame into a kind of aura that lingers in the air well after the song’s over. This was useful for me to think about when trying to write about people who are estranged from themselves and how the shame of that estrangement can become pandemic.

“Always Already Gone,” The Magnetic Fields

I have a close friend in this band, so it’s always a little embarrassing to write about them, but I’m a huge fan! “It seems you were always already gone”—what a way to characterize the pathology of loneliness, of the person who is always already not there, and thus always apart from. We tend to think of loneliness afflicting the person who’s been left behind, but I like to think about the person who leaves compulsively. I am reminded of what Leonard Cohen once told an interviewer in the nineties about his failed romances: “I was unable to reply to their love. Because I was obsessed with some fictional sense of separation, I couldn’t touch the thing that was offered me, and it was offered me everywhere.” When trying to write up one of the characters in my novel—the cult leader, Thurlow Dan—I had this idea in mind, that he be unreachable *both* by choice and birth.

“I Felt Your Shape,” The Microphones

I went through a big Microphones phase in the summer of 2008—which should give you a depressing sense of how long it took me to write this novel. I drove down to North Carolina to visit the astronomical research center featured at the end of the book. I stayed in a lovely cabin and spent a lot of time watching the hummingbirds and listening to this song.

“Woke Up New,” The Mountain Goats

None of this novel is autobiographical, but since it took me five years to write it, I was able to channel various traumas into its pages, among them having to part from someone important to me. I listened to this song during that time,

impressed by what seems so fundamental about loss—the sense that even the little things seem unmanageable now that you are alone with them.

“The Bleeding Heart Show,” The New Pornographers

I wrote a chunk of this novel in Tucson, Arizona. One of the happiest months of my life. I’d get up at four or five in the morning and do some work, go running through the canyons around eight, then back to work until dinner. It was intense, but at the end of every day, I’d jump on my bike and ride around the city listening to the New Pornographers. In terms of unmediated experience, nothing rivals the high of bicycling around a beautiful place listening to “The Bleeding Heart Show,” and telegraphing that joy into the next day’s work. Because it’s not all gloom and doom on the page. Sometimes, exuberance is required. Exuberance has its place.

“All the World Is Green,” Tom Waits

If I could see anyone in concert, it’d be Tom Waits. I’m just waiting for the chance. In the meantime, his music has basically soundtracked multiple years of my life and these last few are no exception. “Pretend that you owe me nothing and all the world is green”—I weep almost every time I hear that line. Pretend all things are equal. Pretend there’s moral equity in the world. Pretend there are no discrepancies between people to resolve. Pretend the world is Edenic. You have only to think about where we are these days—politically, culturally, ethically—to find in these lyrics a much bigger indictment than Waits likely intended.

“Marry Me,” Syd Straw

I probably first heard this song at Fez, in NYC, which has since closed down. And I remember being just devastated by its lyric—its insistence on love as the thing that actually prevails. I happen to believe this, too, despite all evidence to the contrary, which often makes me feel embattled and terrified—of being alone with my faith, of being wrong. Much of *Woke Up Lonely* gathered strength from these twin anxieties. Incidentally, Syd Straw sang this song at a friend’s wedding. Their marriage has since broken up.

“Which Will,” Lucinda Williams cover

This is actually a Nick Drake song, but I like Lucinda Williams’s version better. Blasphemy, I know. But it’s a little more raw. A little more dire. If you won’t love me, who will you love?—again assuming that love is a given; only its object changes.

“Long Gone Lonesome Blues,” Hank Williams Jr.

I cannot stand country music, though you’ll notice a couple of country singers on this list. I nearly named my novel after this song, except I didn’t want to undermine the book’s project by making it too sing-songy, or, you know, yodely. But I think there is an implicit rapport in American culture between the rugged male out there on his own tilling the land and notions of solitude and loneliness.

“True Love Will Find You in the End,” Beck

It will? Beck sounds so haggard on this track, it’s hard to believe him. Though I think that’s the point. I think he’s got a will to believe (via Daniel Johnston) that’s so hard-won—so hard to maintain—that it cost him his voice. Plus the song manages to iterate one of my favorite philosophical arguments on the topic of faith as put forth by the great William James in his lecture “The Will to Believe,” in which he contends (in essence) that it’s not just okay but even a good idea to believe in something without evidence of its existence. For him, belief is a kind of self-fulfilling gesture (something like: build it and they will come) and also a precondition for getting the thing you believe in. By his logic, God will not reveal himself to you unless you have faith. Similarly, romance will not materialize in your life unless you believe in it first, and seek it out first. In short: Go, Beck. Or, more properly, go Daniel Johnston. Which is sad when you think about his life and its troubles, but I digress.

“Get Me,” Everything But The Girl

Tracey Thorn’s got an amazing voice. She’s probably best known for her more electro-pop stuff with Everything But The Girl, but I like their early stuff, too. It’s a little maudlin, but that’s okay. One of the central questions of *Woke Up Lonely* gets reprised in this song: Do you ever get me? Does anyone? Can anyone?

“Fall in Love with Me,” Iggy Pop

Remember that famous scene in *Moonstruck* when Nicholas Cage insists Cher just get in his bed? Wow, I bet no one’s ever grouped Cage, Cher, and Iggy Pop in the same thought, but never mind. When all else fails, when you’re done with the polemics and yawning, prolix deliberations on the topic of loneliness, just get adamant. Fall in love with me! Right now! Do it!

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