

# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Which scene or image from *Under Story* was still with you when you closed the book, and where in the novel did you first realize what sort of story you were reading?
2. The novel opens with Laurel as a small child weeding beside her mother, realizing that the tree she has just drawn at school is only half a tree. “What she saw above ground was one part of the story. The second was below.” Where did you see that motif return as you read?
3. Eli is Laurel’s first love, her husband, the father with whom she shares her grief, and, eventually, the man who crosses over with her into the antiuniverse. What did you make of Eli, both as a partner and as a grieving father?
4. The Arc appears on the ice as a “self-made, inner glow akin to bioluminescence.” It is mysterious and beautiful long before it is revealed to be the seam between two universes. Years earlier, Eli had sketched the same idea on a paper napkin over dinner in San Francisco. As Chloe Benjamin takes us from this theory to an actual atmospheric anomaly to the literal portal, what does the novel suggest about the distance, or lack of distance, between an idea and real life?
5. On the day of Silas’s death, Laurel leaves him sleeping briefly to investigate Armillaria in a cave. How did you read her culpability in that moment? Did Eli’s later admission, that he had forgiven her but could not absolve her, change how you understood the original choice, and his own role in it?
6. The antiuniverse is built on inversions: fungi compose rather than decompose, overtakers replace undertakers, parents arrive as elderly newborns to their adult children, coal is a new fuel, and monotheistic religions exist before their prophets. Which inversion most disoriented you, and what did the author gain by literalizing the reverse arrow of time?

UNDER STORY

A  
NOVEL  
BY

CHLOE  
BENJAMIN

PUTNAM



7. Nonhuman intelligence is a crucial part of this book: the slime mold finding its food, the fungi solving Laurel's maze, the octopus with its "infinite degrees of freedom." Gloria once remarks while lecturing that "it is classic human error to disregard what we cannot see." What do you make of this preoccupation with other forms of life as it's juxtaposed with the grief plot?
8. Gloria is both the mentor whose lab gives Laurel her vocation in the first universe, and the brilliant teenage ward of Sunrise whom Laurel takes on in the second. What does it mean that Laurel becomes Gloria's Gloria?
9. Silas Two surfaces from Lake Michigan at the moment Silas One drowns, as an infant in the body of an eight year old. As you watched him age downward across the second half of the novel, did it feel like a second chance, borrowed time, or something else?
10. On Macquarie Island, Laurel watches a pair of albatrosses tenderly press paste around their dying chick, sealing it back into an egg. The parents trade places with the chick. What did you make of this tableau, arriving when it does in the novel?
11. Gloria tells Laurel that self-compassion can be harder than penance. How did you read Laurel's long resistance to her own forgiveness?
12. By the end, Laurel and Eli do return, on the day they first crossed. The novel ends not with the surrender to *Dayenu* (enough) that Olive once urged on Laurel, but with possibility. "There could be another child, half of Laurel and Eli each: a wavy-haired daughter who will ask them to tell her the story, from the beginning." What did you make of that choice to leave the door open rather than closed? After everything Laurel and Eli have lost, learned, and reabsorbed, what did you understand the book to be saying about return?