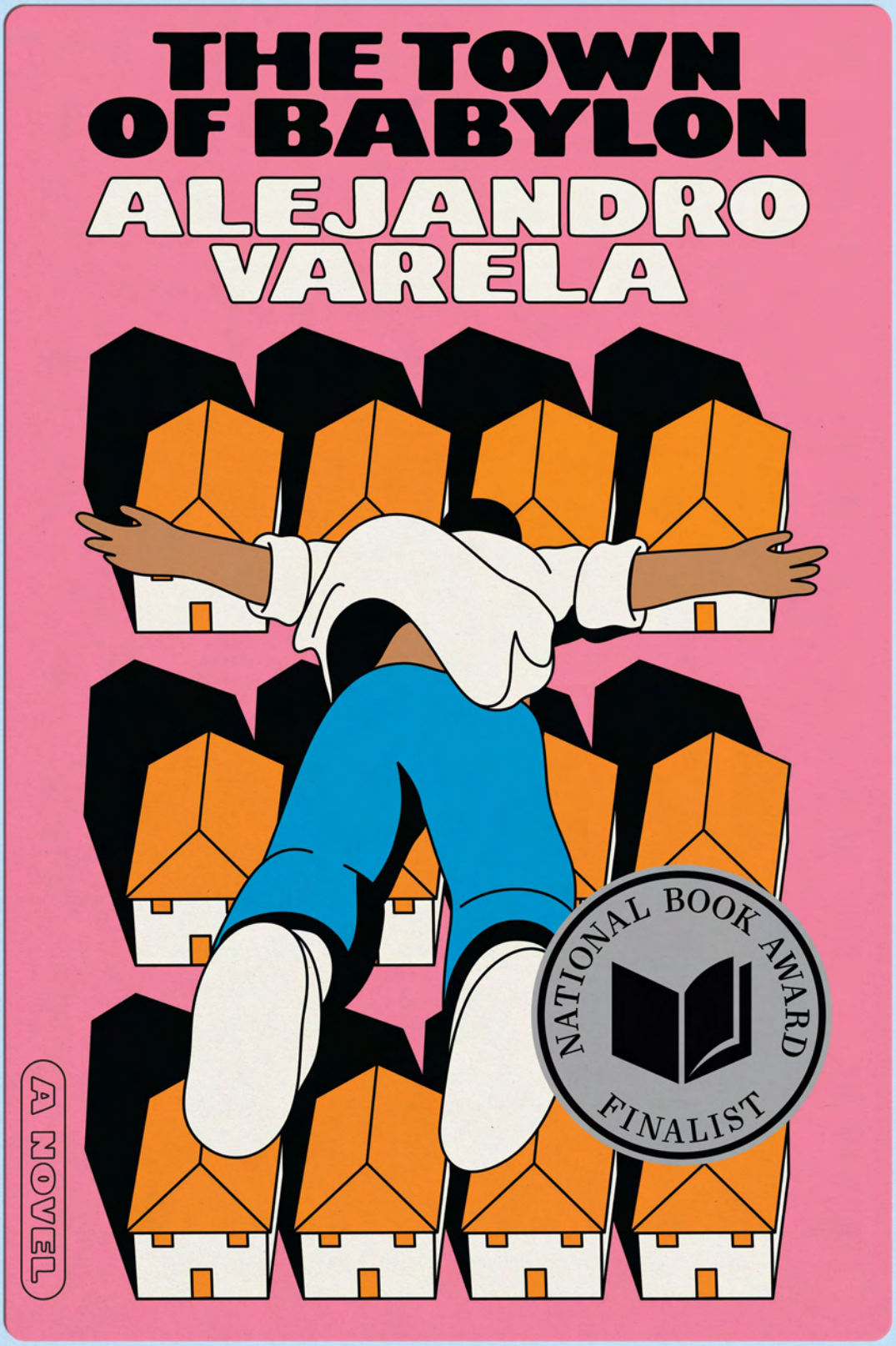

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READING GROUP GUIDE

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1 *The Town of Babylon* is set in a suburb whose existence and population is criticized and analyzed in detail throughout. Why does Andrés disdain the suburbs? Is his reasoning correct? And what motivates migration away from cities and into suburbs?

2 What sets Andrés, Simone, and Paul apart from others in the town? And how have these differences shaped their lives?

3 Jeremy and Andrés have traveled two distinct paths since high school, but their love has, in some ways, endured. Their first dissolution is owed to Jeremy; their second is a choice made by Andrés. Why don't they end up together? And do you believe Andrés has made the right decision?

4 At the start of Chapter 3 ("Italian Restaurants"), Andrés recounts the three "deaths" associated with him and the town. One is the breakup with Jeremy; one is the killing of a young gay man; "[t]he third murder was of my brother, Henry, who died in the most infuriating way one can die—at the hands of a shapeless, invisible system. One that works slowly and surreptitiously, and leaves the victim blaming himself until the bitter end." To what system is Andrés referring? And did it contribute to Henry's premature death? What are the paths from upstream systems and downstream personal choices?

5 The story has an alternating narrator structure, with Andrés serving as the voice for most of the chapters. But there's an omniscient narrator as well. What distinguishes one narrator from the other? Is it important to have both? Why or why not?

6 In Chapter 13 ("The Neighborhood"), we're given a concise description of the European colonization of the American continent and of the formation of the suburban town where this novel is set. What parallels, if any, can be drawn between how the Indigenous peoples on the American continent received the invaders and how the town's early immigrants received later immigrants?

7 Several of the characters put up with the indignities of racism and xenophobia in order to climb the economic ladder. Wesley and Phyllis and Rosario and Alvaro move to a place where they're outsiders and consequently suffer for it. Despite their racial, educational, and financial differences, they all end up in the same town. How do you explain this? What is the American Dream? Is it a myth? If not, which of the book's protagonists achieve it, and which don't?

8 Marco cheats on Andrés. Andrés cheats on Marco. Jeremy cheats on Tonya. Jerzy cheats on Agnes. Jerzy and Jeremy are both bisexual, or perhaps not. Simone was a lesbian, and maybe isn't any longer. Sexually speaking, there are few firm lines in the book. How does this absence of clarity affect you? Is the ambiguity realistic? Unsettling? Distracting?

9 Marco's origins—from a large Dominican family, in a large Dominican community—stand in stark contrast to Andrés's minority status in the town. How do these differences contribute to their ideas of self and their general outlook on life?

10 Enrique and Andrés went by Henry and Andy, respectively, in high school. Pawel is Paul. Why did they change their names? And what makes Andy change his name back?

11 In Chapter 22 ("Saint Joseph"), Andrés recounts the immigrant trajectory to the United States. He places blame on US policy and culture for creating both the conditions for immigration and the motivation for choosing the US. Is this analysis accurate? Fair?

Q&A
WITH ALEJANDRO VARELA

Q: What inspired you to write *The Town of Babylon*? And how did the structure come to be?

A: This novel came out of necessity. No one wanted my short story collection. *Do you have a novel? Could you make these stories a novel?* I heard this from several editors. At some point, I gave in and wrote the novel. That's the unromantic response. The other take is that I'd been wanting to write about Roseto, a town in Pennsylvania. It's a place with a storied public health history that had a tremendous impact on me in graduate school. Understanding the health of that tightly knit community and its resilience in the face of a common enemy had become almost allegorical in my understanding of how hierarchies negatively affect health. Research conducted in Roseto found that cohesion and camaraderie were more deterministic of a community's positive health outcomes than diet, exercise, genetics, etc.

That was the story I wanted to tell from the outset. I considered telling it all in the first person, but one narrator would have been limited in their abilities. Andrés was already a know-it-all; he couldn't also have been a historian of a town that he detested. It would have been a harder sell, and it would have undercut the omniscient narrator's revelations throughout.

Q: Andrés, the main narrator, is incisive and unsparing about the people and places of his youth, but he's also witty and humorous. How did you go about striking such a wide tonal balance?

A: In part, I share that style of communication with Andrés, which is to say, I try to find the right balance between tones. Having grown up in an environment defined by its precarity, I've learned how to read a room. I think I know when to pump the brakes and when to cut loose—almost never. I learned at an early age that there must be give-and-take, or you risk anger and retribution. I write thinking, *How much can my reader stomach? How much is too much? Is this didactic? Should I undercut with some humor?*

Q: In addition to exposing readers to a well-rounded and complex cast of characters, *The Town of Babylon* also features a great deal of social commentary on race, class, and sexuality, to name just a few issues. Yet this social commentary never feels forced or heavy. Can you tell us how you manage to achieve this?

A: I knew if I was too dogmatic, I'd lose my reader. I'm grateful to hear that it didn't feel forced or heavy. And perhaps I have lost readers because of my protagonists' political piousness and, at times, condescension. That was a choice on my part. I feel an urgency to tell the stories that I'm telling. They are an extension of my public health work, which was primarily advocacy. I knew that Andrés's internal soliloquizing might happen too frequently and would go on for too long, but I chose to write a political, public health–themed novel, and I knew I couldn't be half-assed about it.

Q: Readers and critics are often quick to draw similarities between queer POC writers and their characters. Why do you think this so often happens?

A: The assumption is that we're writing veiled autobiographies and that one experience stands in for the experience of an entire [insert oppressed group here]. This has everything to do with exposure. The average reader isn't familiar with the diversity of—in this case—the queer, class-jumping, Latine/x experience. Consequently, the focus turns almost exclusively to the demographic elements of the story and its protagonists and their congruity with the writer. As an example, straight, cisgender white men don't get too many *How much of this is autobiographical?* questions. Not as often as we do. The diversity of that particular perspective has been tread often—David Copperfield, Jay Gatsby, Rabbit Angstrom, etc. The reader and reviewer can then focus on the story, the writing, and the merits of the political positions, instead of wondering if that's how white people are and live.

But readers haven't yet seen enough of us to take our identities for granted. This is further complicated by the fact that drama sells. I'm telling a story that's captivating. It's realist fiction, but it ratchets up reality for the purposes of entertainment. The consequence is that our underexplored lives are now conflated with the extremes of storytelling. Certainly, discrimination and marginalization are stressful and traumatic, but life isn't a work of fiction.

Q: *The Town of Babylon* is an ambitious debut novel with a large and vital cast of characters that even includes the town itself. How did you decide to tell your story in such a wide-lens fashion?

A: Before I started writing the book, I took a reading sabbatical of sorts. I read (maybe overread) a host of novels. And the three that stayed with me were *The*

Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez. I hadn't been looking for anything specific when I set out to read these books. I wanted only to be in the mindset of the novel form, since I'd spent the previous years writing short stories exclusively. Each of these three books weren't only exquisitely written; they also gave me the permission, if you will, to create a work of depth and breadth. They gave me the confidence to play with time and narrators. But most importantly, they told me it was okay to explore motivations and circumstances, so that I could tell a more complete story. Because of my public health background, I'm always thinking about the systems and histories that contribute to our behaviors. But I wasn't sure if I could pull off that sort of sociological writing. *The Bluest Eye* let me cut loose. Frankly, I think of Morrison as a public health writer, someone concerned with exposing the ways in which society dictates the actions of individuals.

Q: Your main character, Andrés, is forced to confront his past when he returns to the town of his youth to attend a high school reunion. Andrés bravely—though not always voluntarily—attempts to find the truth beneath the public facades of his friends, family, and even himself. In some ways, each of the characters touches upon different aspects of Andrés's identities as a son, brother, lover, professional, gay man, and member of the Latine/x community. Can you talk about your crafting of these many mirrors that are held up to Andrés?

A: In this way, I can relate to Andrés. I am a person with several political identities, who has often had to code switch, that is, think twice about what parts of me come to the forefront depending on my audience. Too gay in straight spaces? Too queer in gay spaces? Too working-class in middle-class spaces, and vice versa? Too brown in white spaces? With age, I've gotten better at accepting the tapestry, but it's taken a lot of time and energy, and consequently, sacrificing a degree of power to accommodate others. Andrés grapples with these contradictions and intersections, and I enjoyed empowering him. He is someone who thinks twice (and thrice) about social interactions, but I tried to create a character who wasn't defeated by the prospect of being himself. It's a journey in which we get to see him live his various identities, but ultimately he brings his entire person to the town. I hope in the process, the uninitiated reader gets a sense of the labor involved in being many things in a society that loves its binaries and thrives on assimilation.

Q: You address issues of race and sexual identity that Andrés and other characters face as they navigate through life in this country. You also explore Andrés's own bigotry, which, much to his surprise, arose with his husband when they were dating. Though you bring great nuance to your grappling with these issues, is there a central message you were attempting to convey?

A: Andrés's husband, Marco, is possibly my least explored protagonist. In part, I was afraid to overextend the narrative; I also didn't want to spend time in the city. Marco couldn't travel with him to the suburbs because it would have been a different story. So I had to get rid of him, hence the business trip to Namibia. The question is, why did I include him to begin with? Andrés needed a catalyst. Actually, he needed a barnstormer of a reason for why he would endeavor into a town that he'd avoided for twenty years. A fractured marriage was a dislocating-enough force to make someone act in ways they might not otherwise.

The issues of anti-Black racism within the Latinx/e community are real and woefully underaddressed. Marco, who is Black Dominican, and Henry, who is darker-skinned than Andrés, were two avenues to discuss how oppressed people oppress people too. The hierarchies among our people are akin to the white supremacist ones that define our society at large. In fact, our histories of colonization have embedded racist ideologies and lenses into our communities. The scarcity mode of capitalism and its accompanying politics of xenophobia have turned immigrants into anti-immigrants, targets of racism into perpetrators of racism, community-minded people into individualists. I could have written a book where all the villains were white, but I found it interesting to examine the forces that can make anyone self-hating.

My hope, too, was that Andrés's assessment of his own prejudices would allow readers to see that there can be growth through exploration, solidarity, and humility. The interiority (sometimes tortured) of my protagonists is a very real consequence of marginalization. There are many people like Andrés in this world. I'm related to several, friends with many, colleagues with a few others, and I might be one too. We are legion, and our society should reckon with the psychological burden that an ever-greater portion of its people carry. The more we retreat to our own psyches, the further we're removed from one another, from the center, and from self-determination.

Q: The title of the book is *The Town of Babylon*, but the town's name is never referenced in the text, and the location of the town is never clarified. Why?

A: The reference to Babylon was biblical, the story of Babel. I imagined the town in the novel being populated by people who share a geographical space but who don't truly commune. A people who began as one human race, speaking one language, but because of greed and aspirations were punished by their god.

The Rastafarian belief of Babylon as a capitalist construct instrumental in the oppression of humanity is also applicable because of how suburbs have been used to segregate and to promote economic achievement unevenly, that is, white people were given support by the government to relocate to the suburbs, while people of color, in particular Black and brown people, were denied access through redlining and other tools of political chicanery.

To further complicate the title's origins, I grew up in an unincorporated suburban village within the township of Babylon, which undoubtedly informed my writing. The personal connection, however, was meant to be insider knowledge, but right off the bat, people equated the title with the Long Island town. So much for anonymity.

I didn't name the town or situate it geographically in the text because I didn't want this to be a story about Long Island. I wished for it to communicate a universal experience. The suburban-urban divide isn't specific to New York or to the East Coast.

[Adapted from interviews with Alex Espinoza (*Los Angeles Review of Books*), Daniel Olivas (*Latino Book Review*), and Alice Stephens (*Bloom*).]

READING AND WATCHING LIST

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison

In the Time of the Butterflies, Julia Alvarez

The Dispossessed, Ursula K. Le Guin

"Long Island Divided," Ann Choi, Keith Herbert, Olivia Winslow, and project editor Arthur Browne

"The Combahee River Collective Statement," Combahee River Collective

Do the Right Thing, director Spike Lee

Director Ken Loach films: *My Name Is Joe*; *Sorry We Missed You*; *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*; *I, Daniel Blake*; and *Bread and Roses*

"A Radical Experiment in Mental Health Care, Tested Over Centuries," Matina Stevis-Gridneff, Koba Ryckewaert, and photographer Ilvy Njiokiktjien

The Great Leveller, director Paul Sen

The Spirit Level, Kate Pickett and Richard G. Wilkinson

"Lessons from a Renters' Utopia," Francesca Mari and photographer Luca Locatelli

ALEJANDRO VARELA (he/him) is a writer based in New York. His work has appeared in *The Point*, *Boston Review*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Guernica*, among other publications. He is the author of the story collection *The People Who Report More Stress*. Varela has a masters in public health from the University of Washington. Access his work at alejandrovarela.work and find him on Instagram: @drovarela.

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