

## Reading group guide for *VIDA* by Patricia Engel

Guide by Erin Edmison

1. Sabina is the recurring character throughout *Vida*, even when the point of view of the narration changes; we see her at different ages, in different cities, with and without her family, in different relationships. What do we come to learn about Sabina throughout the book? What kind of a girl or a woman is she? What is her relationship with her parents like? With her brother? With her Colombian identity? How does Sabina see herself, and the various roles available to her, in relation to the women in her own family? Consider her mother, her aunt Paloma, and other members of her extended family in the United States and in Colombia.
2. What do you make of the author's epigraph: "In each life, particularly at its dawn, there exists an instant which determines everything." Do you agree with this statement? Was there an instant in Sabina's life that determined everything?
3. At the end of "Lucho," Sabina realizes her true feelings for Lucho only after he dies: "I didn't even know I loved Lucho till that second. But I did . . . He came looking for me when I was invisible" (p. 22). How did Lucho "come looking" for Sabina? How was she invisible? Many characters in this book die. What do you think the author is saying about life considering the various ways her characters experience death?
4. In "Refuge," Sabina mentions a coworker, Wanda: "Wanda likes me because we have the same last name though we are no relation—she's Puerto Rican and I'm Colombian stock—and she says us Latinos have to stick together though she doesn't speak Spanish" (p. 32). Ethnic identity is complicated; how does Wanda define ethnic identity? How does Sabina? Does Sabina agree that she and Wanda should "stick together"?
5. On page 35, a character says, "The guy is dead. And death is a huge aphrodisiac." Why could death be an aphrodisiac? Are there other examples in the book of love as a result of a certain kind of fantasy?
6. In "Refuge," Sabina's boyfriend Nico gets into a fight. "'The punches I took for you,' Nico would say, like it was a debt to be paid" (p. 39). Where else in this book are women considered to "owe" a debt to men?
7. In "Refuge," newspapers are hidden from children so that they won't see the disturbing images of 9/11. In "Lucho," Sabina's mother hid newspapers with information about the uncle on trial. What do you think of this separation of family/domestic life and the "news" of the world? Is it important or damaging?

8. Also in “Refuge,” Sabina says, “It will be months, and most of the wreckage will have already been cleared, before we admit it’s not enough. It will be uneventful, the way most life-changing moments are.” After the aftermath of 9/11, Sabina and her boyfriend decide to break up. Do you agree with Sabina’s statement that most life-changing moments are not the biggest events, but smaller ones? Has your personal life ever been significantly altered by an event that occurred on the world stage?
9. In “Green,” the narration shifts and the story is written in the second person, although it’s clear that the story is still being told from Sabina’s point of view. What do you make of this shift in narration? How does it change—if at all—how you read?
10. On page 53, the narrator says, “Your parents are immigrants who don’t really understand the concept of depression.” What do you think about this statement? Is depression a particularly “American” phenomenon?
11. “I gave you a little smile so you would feel absolved” (p. 106). Guilt and blame come up frequently in the book—between couples who may or may not be faithful; in the aftermath of accidents; in friendships. What do you think of Sabina’s sense of accountability—is she too frequently feeling guilty? Not enough? What about the other characters and their sense of accountability?
12. “He was a boyfriend for the shadows” (p. 122). Sabina has many secret-boyfriends or almost-boyfriends. Why do you think this is? What is it about these sorts of relationships she finds appealing?
13. Sabina tends to surround herself with other young drifters who spend their time looking for love and then fleeing from it. Discuss some examples of this tension between being sought out, being found, and the urge for isolation, retreat, escape.
14. Many different languages appear in the book—Spanish, Ukrainian, Portuguese, Hungarian. Even the Spanish is not always the same to each character: “She found my Spanish amusing. Said I talked like it was the seventies. That’s the Spanish my parents left with” (p. 120). What do you think of this cacophony of languages and second languages and translations? Do you think they ultimately lead to misunderstandings or does there seem to be an essential understanding among the characters, despite language barriers?
15. In “Vida,” Sabina learns that a friend of hers had been forced to work in a brothel. Her reaction to learning this information about her friend is complicated. At first she feels she must keep it secret, because she fears that if Vida’s boyfriend found out the truth, he would leave her. Then she learns that Vida’s boyfriend had actually worked at the brothel with her. Sabina seems uncertain what to do; she claims at first she had no impulse to get involved: “Nothing in me said I should

help Vida. . . . I just wanted to drink her up like everyone else” (p. 135). It’s a question of exploiting Vida’s story; when we learn of gruesome events, is our interest driven by a desire to help, or mere curiosity? Later on, Sabina accuses Vida’s boyfriend of not helping her enough: “Being a witness can make a person just as guilty” (p. 141). Who is Sabina really accusing here?

16. Vida says, “There is no love. Only people living life together. Tomorrow will be better” (p. 145). What do you think of Vida’s outlook on life and love? Is it optimistic or pessimistic (Or realistic?). Does Sabina share this outlook?
17. *Vida* moves back and forth from New Jersey to Manhattan to Miami, and then, finally, to Colombia, in “Madre Patria.” What is Sabina’s connection to Colombia? How does it differ from that of her parents’?

Suggestions for further reading:

*Drown* by Junot Díaz; *Last Evenings on Earth* by Roberto Bolaño; *War by Candlelight* by Daniel Alarcón; *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* by Saša Stanišić; *The Question of Bruno* by Aleksandar Hemon; *Esther Stories* by Peter Orner; *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; *Book of Clouds* by Chloe Aridjis; *War Dances* by Sherman Alexie; *Miles from Nowhere* by Nami Mun; *Sightseeing* by Rattawut Lapcharoensap; *The Boat* by Nam Le; *Paraiso Travel* by Jorge Franco