

Reading Group Guide: IT'S NOT LOVE, IT'S JUST PARIS by Patricia Engel

1. Set against the enchanting backdrop of Paris, this novel charts Lita's del Cielo's growing independence, her love affair, and her search for self-discovery. How does this city of light, of romance, play a role in her journey, affecting and shaping her life and the lives of the people around her? How far would it be accurate to depict the city as a character in the novel? How important is the setting to the novel?
2. Within hours of Lita's arrival at the House of Stars, she was calling Madame La Comtesse by her first name only and "the order of the house had shifted." (p.4). What is it that Lita brings to the house and the group of girls who live there? How is she different from the others and what effect does her presence have on the others? On Séraphine?
3. Séraphine de la Roque holds sway over life in the house, immaculately dressed yet bedridden, a voice from years past living vicariously through her "girls" and remembering her Parisian glory years. Why is Lita drawn to Séraphine? To what extent does Séraphine represent a different world in which pedigree was everything? What are her thoughts on the changing ways of the world? Talk about some of the ways in which Séraphine's life story parallels Lita's.
4. In many ways this is a novel about belonging. As Lita states, "No one is born with the feeling of not belonging. It's thrust upon us." (p.164) Find instances of the ways in which Lita feels like an outsider in her life in the US and in Paris, and discuss how she has been shaped by this. How does the theme of family fit into this?
5. Given the fact that she so often feels other, what is it that draws Lita immediately to Cato? Why does she feel so at home with him? And he, likewise, with her? What is their connection?
6. Discuss the ways in which Lita's feelings about being different contribute to her role as narrator. Does she bear judgment on the worlds she inhabits or the people she meets – the denizens of the House of Stars, Cato's father, her family – or does she bear witness?
7. Self-described as "very quiet out loud, shy like an escargot, saving my chatter for the privacy of my own mind" (p.12) Lita observes the worlds around her. How does she grow as a character as the novel progresses and she immerses herself more fully in her Paris world? Does she ever feel fully at home there?
8. Continue your discussion to reflect on the importance of home in the novel. What does home mean to the different characters? Consider Lita's father's "silent quandary...his wondering why I insisted on elsewhere, why *home* wasn't enough." (p.38) What does Santi mean when he states "We are your home." (p.191) What about Séraphine's impassioned plea: "I will remain here in my house because it is my right and it is what I desire, until my last breath." (p.219)

9. One of the special achievements of this novel lies in its ability to create a universal picture of Paris, of young women spending time in this city looking for and finding romance – and yet to give Lita’s experience significance. Talk about the ways in which you found Lita’s Paris life familiar or run-of-the-mill, and the ways in which her love affair was transported to another more meaningful level. How does the author accomplish this?

10. Discuss the girls of the rue du Bac. To what degree can they be viewed en masse as representatives of the “greenbloods progeny” out to have a good time in Paris in the name of education and culture? How far do they understand that their stories have been played out so many times before? Do they seek authenticity at all? Do any of the girls surprise you as the narrative progresses?

11. Lita and her old friend Ajax used to read books “about Europe and elsewhere, people living uncharted lives – the kind of people we both wanted to be after high school.” (p.12) What do you think she meant by this? Do you think that the older, 20 year old Lita says this ironically?

12. What does Lita’s Papi mean when he says, “All of us are living many lives at once”(p.15)? What are the lives that Lita is living in Paris? Does she view herself as a sum of all her parts, or as someone who is constantly evolving and seeking an authentic self? Is it possible to become a different person? How is Lita’s Paris experience different from Naomi’s?

13. The theme of abandonment is of great importance in the novel – parents abandoning children and children abandoning parents. Find instances of such loss and discuss how different characters are affected by it. Should abandonment always be viewed as a negative?

14. Consider Tarentina’s teasing that when Lita speaks of her family “it sounded more like I was speaking of a cult than of a family.” (p.236) How real is the freedom that Lita imagines when she contemplates “what it would be like to not be accountable to anyone else.” (p.236)

15. “We can’t choose our fathers just like we can’t choose our children.” (p.102) In the light of this seemingly simple statement made by Cato – and repeated by Lita to Séraphine, discuss the never-ending cycle of action and reaction that passes down through generations from parent to child, creating and shaping personalities. How has Cato been affected by his father’s political stance? Lita by her parents? Is love – an act of choice – a reprieve from this cycle?

16. Romain, a waiter at the local restaurant, has left his tightly knit family behind in Corsica to pursue – one day – his dreams of acting. How far does his experience parallel Lita’s? Why is he able to escape his destiny of working in the family business? Is it braver to give up ones dreams for family or to give up ones family for a dream?

17. “You girls are all the same. ... You say you came to Paris to become educated and cultured. You say you want to be women of the world but all you really want is a boyfriend.” (p.143) Lita hears these words or variations of them on several occasions. How accurate do you think they are in her case? For

the other young women at the House of Stars? What is it that sets her apart from the others, if anything?

18. “It was as if my blood had been moving slowly through me for years, and with Cato my pulse had been altered, changing course.” (p.103) Chart the progress of Lita and Cato’s love affair and discuss the ways in which it seems predestined or perhaps mythic. Compare it to the romances of the other girls.

19. The power of love runs deep throughout the novel, throughout the lives of the characters. Discuss the fairytale romance of Lita’s parents, their immediate knowledge that they were meant for each other. How does it compare to Lita and Cato’s feelings for each other?

20. In the light of the last question, consider Lita’s father’s statement that “You don’t find love, mi amor. You choose it. And then to keep love, you must choose it again, day after day.” (p.162) How does this compare with our inability to choose our family members? How fair would it be to say that Lita’s parents had the freedom to choose each other whereas Lita is not free – she must choose between love and family.

21. Discuss the reasons that Cato may have had for hiding his illness from Lita. Why does he not tell her that he is likely to die young? How do you think this would have changed the trajectory of their love affair?

22. In an argument with her brother Santi, an exasperated Lita exclaims, “I just want to know, when does my life belong to me?” Is there ever the possibility in the novel that Lita might stay in Paris with Cato, or did you guess that their love affair was doomed from the beginning, destined to finish within the time slot allocated by Lita’s parents?

23. Talk about the novel’s ending. How did you feel about Lita’s leaving Paris? How realistic were her reasons for not returning to France and to Cato? Did they make you question the depth and importance of her love for Cato? Had it really been a Paris romance just like every other short-lived Paris affair? Lita refers to herself as “...a coward: gutless, pusillanimous...” (p.251) for rationalizing that their love was over –how far do you agree with her?

24. “In the end we all become closer to who we started out as in life than who we set out to be. The best thing one can do is accept the life that was claimed for you the second you were born. Dreaming is for children.” (p.199) How far does Séraphine’s statement reflect Lita’s journey? Is this ultimately a pessimistic worldview or just pragmatic?

Further Reading:

THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE HER by Junot Diaz

LESSONS IN FRENCH by Hilary Reyl

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS by John Green  
ELEGANCE OF THE HEDGEHOG by Muriel Barbery  
THE PARIS WIFE by Paula Maclain  
MARTIN EDEN by Jack London  
BEAUTIFUL RUINS by Jess Walter  
LEAVING THE ATOCHA STATION by Ben Lerner  
THE PLEASING HOUR by Lily King  
VIDA by Patricia Engel