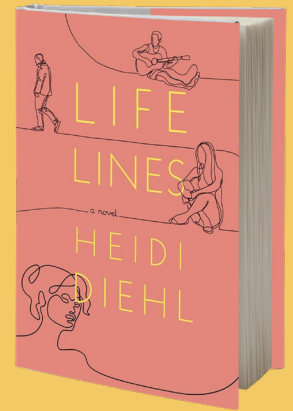


LIFELINES

by HEIDI DIEHL

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. How does Louise grow emotionally and also revise her own narrative of her relationship to her parents? Consider Dieter's relationship with his mother and to his father's story by comparison. Have you revised your own self-narrative or reinterpreted your family story as you've aged?
2. Mary says it must be strange for Louise to have a child who speaks another language. Consider the double meaning of this, given that Louise in some sense speaks another language from her parents. How do Louise and her parents bridge that gap in understanding? Do children and their parents bear equal responsibility in shaping their relationship with each other?
3. Should Hannelore have told Louise the Hinterkopf family secret? Do you think Louise does the right thing in telling Dieter? Was there a right thing to do? Does the secret belong to Dieter and should he tell Elke? Is the secret Richard, Dieter, and Louise keep from their daughters about what happened in Eugene at all comparable to the secret in Dieter's family? How does it affect Margot and Elke?
4. How does the novel's structure—wherein we move from one character's perspective to another and also between time periods—contribute to its meaning? Imagine a given experience from another character's perspective: What might Dieter's 1978 visit to Eugene look like from his perspective, for instance? If you were to gain more sympathy for Dieter, would you lose some for Louise? Josef Albers's dictums—that colors are in continuous flux and are always fooling us—express a subjectivity Louise finds reassuring (p. 42). How much of the truth of what happens is subjective? Does subjectivity become a more loaded proposition in reference to something like the horrors of Nazi Germany?
5. What desire lines does Louise trace in her life? Where do other characters stray from prescribed paths and follow their own? Walking in a Berlin park, Louise watches the path ahead disappear from sight and hears Richard's voice in her head asserting: Pedestrians need mystery. They need turns (p. 284). Is it always better not to know what paths our lives will take? When have you followed your own desire lines?
6. When they meet again in 2008, Ute recasts Louise's naked dancing not as a desperate act but as a feminist gesture. How do you read it? Can both interpretations be true? How much easier is it today to juggle a career with motherhood? Do you read Margot's role in the band as empowering or diminishing? Is that a subjective question? Have you questioned whether an action you've taken in your own life is feminist or anti-feminist?



7. Does Dieter overidentify with Germany's crimes? Does his feeling of shame do harm to his sense of identity and his relationships? When does Louise experience her Americanness? The terrorism at the 1972 Munich Olympics crushes Germany's spirits. Have you experienced a communal sense of hope or disappointment in your own nation? Is your sense of identity affected by your relationship to your country?

8. Richard is glad the communist façades at Alexanderplatz in Berlin haven't been torn down: "Better those ugly relics," he thinks, "than some chain hotel" (p. 299). Do you agree with him? In Düsseldorf, Dieter shows Louise the marks of ammunition in the buildings. Compare the preserved artifacts of a city's past with deliberately constructed monuments to past people or events. What purpose does each serve? Do all monuments become artifacts? Richard says that the architects of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin intended for life to happen in and around it. Is there some discomfort for visitors built into that encounter? Think of your favorite monument and consider the question Richard asks of all monuments: who is it for?

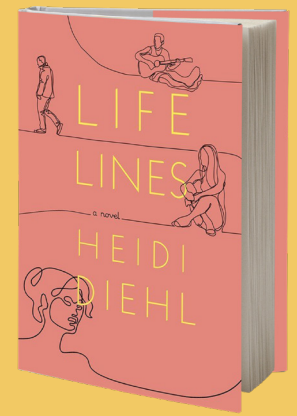
9. How does Louise's art practice evolve between 1971 and 2008? What happens when Richard refrains from documenting Louise's 18th project? Does Louise's response signify growth on her part? Louise sees the project as "a forced reckoning with time," a way of marking and assessing a thing, like an anniversary, which involves both grief and joy (p. 316). Do you use anniversaries as a way of checking in with your life's progress, or do you have another way of doing this? Is it important to both grieve and celebrate the passage of time?

10. Dieter wants to do things differently from the previous generation. Does he succeed? Does he confront the past or try to escape it? Dieter thinks Joel's knowledge of musical influences comes too easily and that internet searches make "the past a constant buffet" (p. 269). Do you think the internet cheapens our relationship to the past?

11. Louise seeks to document time's passage in her art projects while Dieter pursues a kind of timelessness, both in his music and by moving to New York, a city he describes as "ongoing" and without time. How do you experience these two attitudes toward time in your own life: as something to be measured and captured on the one hand, escaped or transcended on the other? Are both orientations necessary for living fully? Louise wonders how much of her life is a question of timing and asks herself, What if Dieter had come before she'd met Richard, or if she hadn't met Richard? Is it helpful or dangerous to consider life's what-ifs?

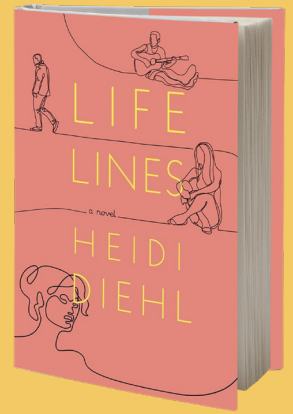
12. Why doesn't Louise return to Germany after going to Eugene? What drew her to Dieter in Germany and what divided them? Do you think Richard is a better partner for Louise? Elke and Dieter, perhaps most affected by her decision, are both doing well—if either were struggling, would you judge Louise's decision differently?

13. How do Louise and Dieter both attempt to apologize to the other? Do they forgive each other, or themselves? Does Richard forgive Louise? Is an apology needed to forgive? How does the passage of time help bring about forgiveness? Does a country need to apologize for its crimes and be forgiven—or forgive itself—in order to move on?



14. Which aspects of Louise's character do you see in Margot? In Elke? What are the strengths and vulnerabilities of each? Is Louise a different mother to each? Why is Elke drawn to astrology? What makes Margot swerve away from graduate study toward music? Elke worries about Dieter's feelings, is protective of Margot, and takes pains to reassure Richard. Does any other character express as much concern for the well-being of others? Does Elke's upbringing explain her sensitivity?

15. Louise apologizes to Elke for having her baptized and promises she'll let Elke make her own choices when she's older. Is choice sometimes overvalued or burdensome? If achieving maturity can be seen as a matter of reconciling ourselves both to the circumstances we've chosen and to those we've been handed, do you think Dieter and Louise accomplish this reconciliation? Which is more difficult: to accept the choices you've made or those that have been made for you?



Suggested Further Reading:

Nicole Krauss, *Great House*

Nora Krug, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*

W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Meg Wolitzer, *The Interestings*

Maggie Shipstead, *Astonish Me*

Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*

Joseph Beuys, *What Is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*

Ulrich Adelt, *Krautrock: German Music in the Seventies*

Stubbs, David, *Future Days: Krautrock and the Building of Modern Germany*

Lippard, Lucy, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*

Lynch, Kevin, *The Image of the City*

About the author:

HEIDI DIEHL's writing has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Indiana Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Witness*, and elsewhere. She received her MFA from Brooklyn College and has won fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, the Saltonstall Foundation, and the Vermont Studio Center. She lives in Brooklyn.

Lifelines: A Novel by Heidi Diehl

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