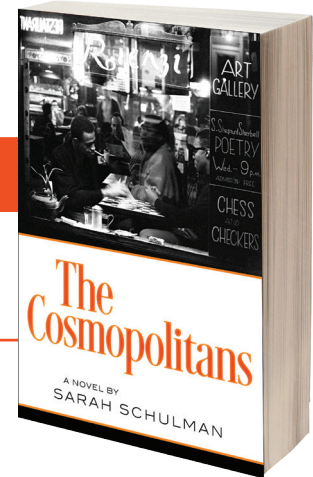


READING GROUP GUIDE

THE COSMOPOLITANS: A Novel by Sarah Schulman
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1. New York City is its own character in *The Cosmopolitans*, informing how Bette and Earl live their everyday lives, as well as shaping the characters' understanding of "home." What streets, restaurants, landmarks—anything specific to your city or town—define your idea of "home"?
2. How did the 1950s setting impact your reading of the novel? Were you surprised by any discrepancies or similarities between the past era and today? Does the novel succeed in acting as a historical snapshot?
3. The three central female characters—Bette, Hortense, and Valerie—represent different generations of women at different places in their lives. Did you relate to one more than the others? How have you changed and adapted to shifting circumstances—place, relationships, priorities—as you've grown older?
4. Schulman frames her novel as a performance, using "Acts" and an "Intermission" to divide sections and events; in the opening scene, Bette views her world as she would a movie. What are other examples of performance in the novel? How are Earl's and Hortense's acting aspirations different or similar to Bette's performance as a loving cousin, Valerie's performance as an advertiser, or broader gendered or racial performances?
5. Though he longs to find success as an actor, Earl is forced to work a demeaning job at a slaughterhouse. When have you dealt with compromise or sacrifice, and how have you worked to either accept or challenge the disappointment?
6. Earl and Bette share a fiercely intimate friendship, one that is often threatened by outside forces or one another. What is at stake in a friendship like this? At what point, if any, does a friendship become too intimate, too personal?
7. Bette is a controversial character, and often very unlikeable. How do you read her ostensibly happy ending? What does it mean when a female protagonist takes control and "succeeds," if only through manipulating others?
8. What does "cosmopolitan" mean to you? How do Schulman's characters fit this definition, and how do they subvert it?

9. Bette and Earl are introduced as outsiders, challenging the norms and expectations—does this change throughout the book? By the end of the story, do they still exist on the edges of social order, or have they adapted and/or acquiesced to convention?
10. In her final chapter, Schulman inserts herself into the narrative, assuming the first person. What did you make of this decision? How does it change the way you read the novel—is it more intimate? Is it intrusive?



Sarah Schulman's love of New York is evident in *The Cosmopolitans*, her 10th novel and 17th book. Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at CUNY, her honors and awards include a Guggenheim in Playwriting and a Fulbright in Judaic Studies. A well known literary chronicler of the marginalized and subcultural, Sarah's fiction has focused on queer urban life for thirty years. Her nonfiction includes *The Gentrification of The Mind*, a memoir of the homogenization of her city in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Her plays and films have been seen at Playwrights Horizons, The Berlin Film Festival, and The Museum of Modern Art. An AIDS historian, Sarah is cofounder of the ACT UP Oral History Project. She is on the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace and is faculty advisor to Students for Justice in Palestine at the College of Staten Island.

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