



Lettered Press Reading Group Guide for *So L.A.*

Introduction to the Author

BRIDGET HOIDA grew up in the San Joaquin Valley on an eight-mile road flanked by grapevines and asparagus. She remembers "ducks, guinea pigs, goats, all kinds of bunnies"; kids frolicking on levees and splashing in the cooling water; and machines rumbling across fields at night to avoid 109-degree heat.

Reading, Hoida told the *The Stockton Record*, was her thing: "My parents would take us to an A's game and I'd sit there eating popcorn and reading a book." Obsessed with words, she assembled them effectively for school publications when, as a sophomore, she became part of the first two classes to attend Bear Creek High School in 1992. As a senior, she wrote a column ("Bridget's World" in the era of "Wayne's World") for the *Bruin Voice* and was the paper's editor. "We created the newspaper from scratch," explained Hoida, "We Xerox-ed it and stapled it together."

Always an avid reader, writing was a natural progression. At UC Berkeley, she studied English and fiction writing where she was tutored by Stockton-born author Maxine Hong Kingston. From Kingston, who had "a sheer love of the Valley," Hoida learned to embrace her roots. After Berkeley it was on to San Francisco State University where Hoida earned a masters degree in fiction.

The move south came when she joined the first of University of Southern California's Literature and Creative Writing Ph.D. program. There, she lived cheaply on Sunset Boulevard while absorbing Hollywood culture and earning a doctorate in California literature. Hoida's research into the myths of California twinned with her cultural navigation led to the development of *So L.A.*: a satirical and critical look at the city through a revision of the "ranch-novel" genre. She spent the next ten years working on what started as a blonde joke.

Hoida has taught at USC, UC Irvine and Saddleback College in Orange County, where she and her husband Jesse are raising two young children. Currently, she is busy at work adapting the novel as a screenplay and editing a collection of writings about motherhood.

-Courtesy of *The Record* reporter Tony Saro & *Lettered Press* editor C.L. Cardinale

Description

MAGDALENA DE LA CRUZ, born Magdalena Bamberger—awkward, gangly San Joaquin valley girl—trades her agrarian central California upbringing for the glamour and glare of Los Angeles. She heads south to escape reminders of the traumatic and sudden death of her twin brother Junah who falls to his death in a Yosemite National Park rock-climbing accident. Haunted by guilt and obsessed by her dead brother's presence, Magdalena uses her body as a canvas of reinvention. "When Junah died I stopped wanting to be me," Magdalena explains, literally cutting any resemblance between herself and her brother "out with sleek scalpels." She is reborn as an L.A. bombshell in a body "temporarily scarred with puffy red staples" in order "to erase the light brown spots of San Joaquin sun." As Magdalena takes refuge in boutiques and Botox—seeking desperately for something to fill the void her brother has left—her marriage to Ricky, a socially conscious first-generation Mexican-American, is in jeopardy; her few friendships begin to unravel; and Diamond Myst, her booming designer water business, is drying up.

Discussion Questions

1. How is the reader introduced to the narrator and protagonist, Magdalena de la Cruz, in the first chapter? What is she inviting the reader "to believe," and what kind of narrator does she promise to be?
2. Rather than quotation marks or numerical chapters, the book offers five takes and chapter headers with titles like "The Problem of Surprise" or "Characters Are Not People." How does the structure of this, inspired by *STORY!* a primer for how to write a winning screenplay by Robert McKee, tell us how to read the novel?
3. In American literature there is a rich tradition of rural and urban opposition. With this in mind, what are the ways the agrarian San Joaquin Valley is constructed as the opposite of the city of Los Angeles?
4. How does Magdalena's body, covered in a "Los Angeles vixen varnish" (327), work both as a metaphor and a critique of the city? How does the city work, like Magdalena, to "hide its roots"?
5. What does Ricky's story—from the A&E Biography version to the Moses in the basket version (114-119)—suggest about the American immigrant (or California migrant) mythos?
6. One reviewer has described the story of Junah as a kind of mystery: "At the heart of Magdalena's story is her attempt to cope with the death of her brother [. . .]. We read to find out what really happened to Junah, her brother, and what Magdalena's part in his death truly is, for she clearly carries much guilt for his too-soon death." What really happens to Junah and does knowing the "truth" change our perception of Magdalena?
7. Magdalena is, to borrow from the epigraph by Michael Ventura, "a hard beauty to love." What moments do you sympathize with, and perhaps even despise Magdalena? What are her forgivable and unforgivable sins? Where are your loyalties in the end?
8. Alone, in the Beverly Hills Hotel Magdalena asks: "Who am I to Quentin?". Discuss the necessity of Quentin in Magdalena's emotional journey. He functions as a reckless undoing of her marriage to

Ricky, and yet he is also the redemptive force that allows Magdalena to come to terms with Junah's death. Who is Quentin to Magdalena and how does he function within the novel?

9. Magdalena's success as a Los Angeles diva is made possible by the selling of bottled water where "underneath all the rhinestones and the pixie dust [. . .] water is scarce and we're all thirsty" (374). The story of California, both the San Joaquin Valley and Los Angeles, is really the story of water. How does Magdalena's story of water mirror the very nature of the narrative of California?

10. What do you make of the "Director's Cut"? What does the addition of another "version" suggest about the narrative itself? How does it both unravel the narrative, beginning with the "story problem" in the first chapter, and suggest other possibilities for ending? What is the "truth," and does it matter?

After Reading the Novel

In many ways this novel is a narrative of California, contributing to a rich history of dystopian literature. In *So L.A.*, California may not be a literal paradise lost, but the protagonist certainly is. Magdalena favors feeling over historical accuracy, or what most people call "the truth." She's an incurable nostalgic in that she wishes for a past that is so idealized that it probably never occurred. You may want to consider Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* or John Fante's *Ask The Dust* as interesting companion novels. *So L.A.* also begs to be read alongside filmic adaptations of Los Angeles, from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* to Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*. And of course, Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* paints a similar, albeit celluloid, portrait.