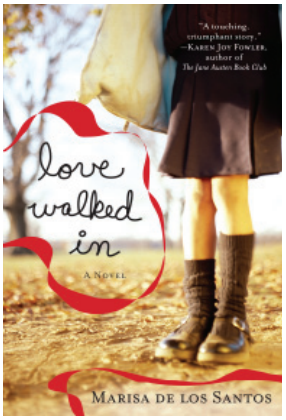

Love Walked In Reading Group Guide

INTRODUCTION

When Martin Grace enters the hip Philadelphia coffee shop Cornelia Brown manages, her life changes forever. Charming and debonair, the spitting image of Cary Grant, Martin sweeps Cornelia off her feet, but, as it turns out, Martin Grace is more the harbinger of change than change itself.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, eleven-year-old Clare Hobbs must learn to fend for herself after her increasingly unstable mother has a breakdown and disappears. Taking inspiration from famous orphans (Anne Shirley, Sara Crewe, Mary Lennox, and even Harry Potter) Clare musters the courage to seek out her estranged father. When the two of them show up at Cornelia's café, Cornelia and Clare form a bond as unlikely as it is deep. Together, they face difficult choices and discover that knowing what you love and why is as real as life gets.

ABOUT MARISA DE LOS SANTOS

Marisa de los Santos is an award-winning poet and a former professor of English at the University of Delaware. *Love Walked In* is her first novel. Her first collection of poems, *From the Bones Out*, was published by the University of South Carolina Press in 2000. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry, Southwest Review, Antioch Review, Prairie Schooner*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

A CONVERSATION WITH MARISA DE LOS SANTOS

Why did you choose to set this novel in Philadelphia as opposed to a bigger city like New York?

When *Love Walked In* first started to take shape inside my head, I was living in Center City, Philadelphia, and I never considered setting the novel anywhere else. I have tremendous affection for the place. New York is an astonishing city, dazzling, but I've always had a soft spot for cities that are smaller, less glamorous, less firmly planted in the culture's collective imagination. Philadelphia isn't smug because it can't afford to be. It's scrappy, vibrant, a little raggedy, but full of history and unexpected pockets of loveliness. It's also a very livable, negotiable city, and, while Cornelia may have bigger cities in her future, when *Love Walked In* begins, Philly just suits her.

There is much reference throughout the novel to Cornelia's physical appearance and stature. Why was it important to you for Cornelia to be such a physically small person?

I hear this question fairly often, and it's an interesting one for me to consider because Cornelia's smallness was a very intuitive decision for me. She just was small; from the beginning, it was something I knew about her. But like most intuitive decisions, when I look back at that one and examine it, I see all kinds of reasons for it. Mostly, I see that Cornelia's size has had everything to do with who she is when the novel opens. Growing up, Cornelia's smallness was something she grappled with and worked against. Because her body refused to cut her a break and develop stature, glamour, or curves, she developed those aspects of herself that were developable: her wit, her intelligence, her convictions, her strength of character. It would have been much easier for her to go the cute and helpless route, but she refuses that. She becomes a big person in a small body. Also, I like that she and Clare are the same height. It's a sort of physical manifestation of the way their personalities rhyme. But I like that they won't stay the same size; Clare will outgrow Cornelia eventually.

How did all the classic movies you reference inspire this novel?

Cornelia comes by her love of classic movies honestly. I'm a fan, particularly of the romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. I think we associate that era with high glamour, but, ultimately, that's not what draws me to those films. First of all, I love the language: that elegant, rapid-fire, razor-sharp, incredibly funny but incredibly revealing dialogue. You listen to those people talk and understand the real necessity and nobility of humor. The language feels so fresh, and, certainly, I wanted to make language feel fresh in the novel. I didn't want to foreground language or decorate with it, but I wanted to use it in unexpected ways.

Second of all, I love the women in those old films. The men are glorious, but the women steal every show. Carole Lombard, Irene Dunne, Katharine Hepburn, Jean Arthur. They're so subtle and sexy and vibrant and wicked-smart. They're not invulnerable, though. They're not perfect. They're capable and strong, but they're human. I wanted Cornelia to be human in that way, too.

Was it difficult to make the transition from poetry to fiction? Did you always write fiction as well?

Before I wrote *Love Walked In*, I'd never written any fiction, at least in my adult life. Not a short story. Nothing. So if I'd stopped to think about the transition from poetry to fiction, it probably would have been very difficult. It probably would've scared me silly. Luckily, it happened gradually, and I didn't stop to analyze it. One day, I had a character in my head, a voice, and over time, that voice developed into Cornelia. She was quite fully fleshed out in my head before I had a sense of her story, and then the plot started to form, and then Clare showed up. All of this happened before I wrote a single word, and it took a long time. Then, I started to write down what I'd been thinking about, and there I was, writing a novel.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a second novel, a sort of follow-up to the first. I hesitate to call it a sequel because it's a very different book. Cornelia is a main character, but she shares time pretty equally with three other main characters, a woman named Piper who is in many ways the anti-Cornelia, a thirteen-year-old spooky-smart boy named Dev, and Dev's mother, Lake, a woman with a secret. Cornelia is married and living in the suburbs, where she's a fish out of water, and her life intersects with the lives of these other characters in unexpected ways. If the first book was about finding love, the second book is about what we do once we've found it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Clare's attraction to fictional orphans. Why is she so fascinated by them, even before her mother leaves? Why can she relate to them? In what ways is she abandoned even before she is actually abandoned?

2. Cornelia claims that she doesn't fantasize about living in an old Hollywood movie but it becomes clear that she does. In what ways does she try to keep her own desires for the perfect Hollywood romance at bay? Why does she think she'll never have it? Does she harbor false or unrealistic expectations about love? In what ways, in the end, is Cornelia's story "old Hollywood?"

3. Why do you think Cornelia is so immediately drawn to Martin Grace? What does he represent to her? In what ways does he live up to her expectations? In what ways does he fail?

4. Discuss Martin's reaction to Clare's situation. Why do you think he never told Cornelia about Clare? Once Clare reappears in his life, what do you make of his actions and reactions to both Clare and to the missing Viviana? Do you think he handles it well? Try to imagine his perspective. Discuss.

5. In what ways are Cornelia and Clare alike? Why does Cornelia immediately feel the need to comfort Clare? How do they fill empty places in each other's lives? Also, why does Clare take to Teo so quickly when she can't do the same for her father? What about Cornelia and Teo together comforts Clare?

6. Clare realizes quickly that her father does not love her. Do you think that she's correct in her assessment? Do you think, in general, she is fair to Martin? Is Cornelia? When Martin told Cornelia he loved her, did you believe him? Why or why not? Do you think it's possible that he could love Cornelia but not his own daughter?

7. Why does Cornelia insist on taking Clare to her own house for Christmas? Do you think that was a mistake? In what other ways does Cornelia try to accommodate Clare? Why do you think she does these things? In what ways does returning to the house help Cornelia to better understand Clare? Why is this so important later on?

8. On p. 184, Clare thinks about love: "What she came to was that even if someone wasn't perfect or even especially good, you couldn't dismiss the love they felt. Love was always love; it had a rightness all its own, even if the person feeling the love was full of wrongness." Do you think Martin is a bad person? Do you think he deserves Cornelia's love? Clare's? Why or why not?

9. What do you make of Clare's reaction to Martin's death? Discuss the conversation she has with Teo on p. 204. Why does Clare think she's evil? Do you think she is? Why do you think she can have such open conversations with Teo? What about him makes him so trustworthy to her? Why are his opinions so important? What void does he fill in her life?

10. Throughout the novel, Linny is a very stabilizing force. What about her soothes Cornelia? Why are both Clare and Cornelia so relieved when Linny arrives just after Viviana? What role does Linny's character play in the novel? In what ways is she the opposite of Cornelia? Why is that something both Clare and Cornelia need so badly?

11. Were you surprised by Viviana's return? Did you believe that she would return? Do you think Cornelia's plans for herself and Clare were realistic?

12. What does Mrs. Goldberg represent to Cornelia? How do her memories of Mrs. Goldberg help her through difficult situations? How do her stories about Mrs. Goldberg help Clare? What does Mrs. Goldberg's house represent to Cornelia? To Clare? Why does Clare want so badly to stay there?

13. In the end, do you think Cornelia makes the right decision to leave Clare with Viviana? How is leaving them at Mrs. Goldberg's different than them returning to their own home? Why does it seem safer to all of them? Do you think Clare will really forgive Cornelia for leaving her?

14. Why is Cornelia surprised to discover that she is in love with Teo? Were you surprised? Why or why not? In what ways is he exactly what she was looking for? In what ways is he not? What do you make of his relationship with Ollie? Do you think he and Cornelia have a chance? Why or why not?

This Reading Group Guide is also available online at www.penguin.com.

Marisa de los Santos is occasionally available for book club phone chats. To request a chat with Marisa de los Santos, please contact Marie Coolman by phone at 212-366-2516 or by email at Marie.Coolman@us.penguingroup.com