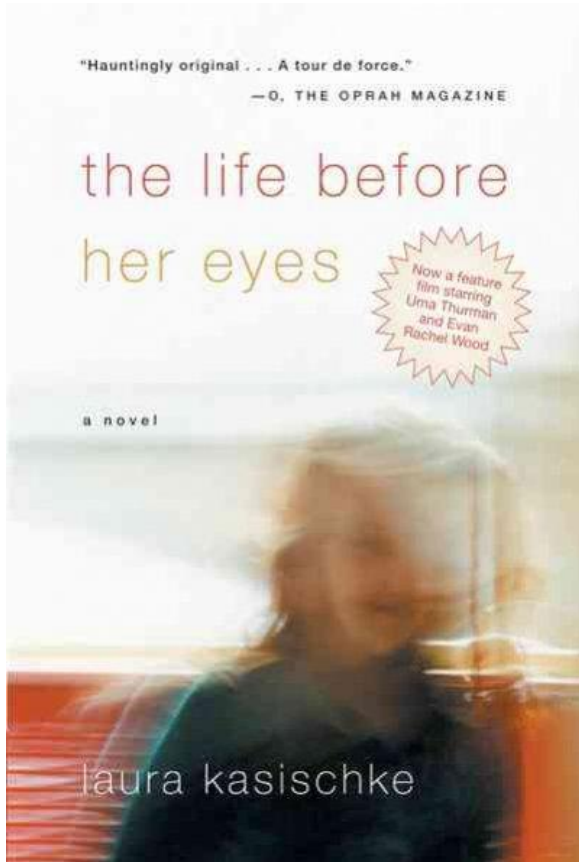


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1353325>

### About the Book



Diana stands before the mirror preening with her best friend, Maureen. Suddenly, a classmate enters holding a gun, and Diana sees her life dance before her eyes. In a moment the future she was just imagining--a doting wife and mother at the age of forty--is sealed by a horrific decision she is forced to make. In prose infused with the dramatically feminine sensuality of spring, we experience seventeen-year-old Diana's uncertain steps into womanhood--her awkward, heated forays into sex; her fresh, fragile construction of an identity. Together with the sights and sounds of renewal, we experience the tasks of Diana's adulthood: protecting her beloved daughter and holding onto her successful husband.

### About the Author *Source:*

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/grad/mfa/mfaFacDetail.asp?ID=964>



**LAURA KASISCHKE** has published six collections of poetry and three novels. Her novels include *Suspicious River* (1996), *White Bird in a Blizzard* (1999), and *The Life Before Her Eyes* (2002). They have been translated widely, and adapted for film. In 2006, her first novel for young adults, *Boy Heaven*, will be published by HarperCollins. Her most recent poetry collections are *Gardening in the Dark* (2004) from Ausable Press, and *Dance and Disappear*, which received the Juniper Award in 2002 from the University of Massachusetts Press.

She has also been the recipient of two creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the DiCastagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, several Pushcart Prizes, the Bobst Award for Emerging Writers, and the Beatrice Hawley Award. Her other collections of poetry are *Wild Brides*, *Housekeeping in a Dream*, *Fire and Flower* and *What It Wasn't* . Her poems and stories have been published in *Ploughshares*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *The Iowa Review* and elsewhere. Kasischke, an Assistant Professor with our program (University of Michigan, Department of English), has a joint appointment at the Residential College.

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

Disturbing fiction (*Suspicious River*, 1996, and *White Bird in a Blizzard*, 1999) is fast becoming prizewinning poet Kasischke's hallmark. Her third novel opens with a haunting scene set in the girls' washroom of a high school. Diana is goofing in front of the mirror with her best friend, Maureen, "when they hear the first dot-dot-dot of automatic gunfire. It sounds phony and far away." They are eventually confronted by the gunman, a fellow classmate whom "they'd never even really noticed." He asks them a terrible question, "Which one of you girls should I kill?" Kasischke then juxtaposes scenes from 17-year-old Diana's life with scenes from her apparent future as a 40-year-old wife and mother. In the final chapter, however, the author ambushes the reader with a shocking revelation about Diana's fate. Whether the novel is viewed as a cheap narrative trick (there will be plenty of readers crying foul) or an imaginative exploration, there's no denying that Kasischke is a fearless writer.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Acclaimed poet Kasischke applies her lyrical skills to fiction in this double portrait of Diana McPhee as 40-year-old wife and mother and 17-year-old girl. As in her earlier novels (*White Bird in a Blizzard* and *Suspicious River*), here Kasischke's precise imagery and the languid, dreamy pace capture the poignancy and sluggish awakening of late adolescence, though they are at odds with the harsh tale that unfolds. Blond Diana and dark Maureen, regarding their images in the high school bathroom mirror, jolt from their teenage dreams at the sound of gunfire. Their attacker is fellow student Michael Patrick, who laughs as he delivers a horrible ultimatum: one girl will live and one will die; each has a moment to choose. Maureen offers herself, and the sacrifice is accepted—or so it seems. As the past begins to contaminate Diana's safe suburban life with her beautiful daughter and loving husband, it becomes clear that this future is the result of her imagination constructing a life she may never live in the moments before Patrick releases the safety on his gun. Kasischke is at her best writing about young women—urgently sexual, childishly careless. This song of innocence and of experience reads like a fairy tale gone drastically wrong, the sensibility heightened by Kasischke's emphasis on language. Despite the poignancy of the

central moral conflict (her or me?), its resolution is made secondary to the novel's stylistic imperatives and, as a result, the story loses much of its power. Still, it will please readers who were mesmerized by *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides and other tales of teenage reverie.

### *Library Journal*

This third novel by Michigan author Kasischke (*Suspicious River*) opens with a shocking scene from a Columbine-like school massacre. Diana and her best friend are confronted by a schoolmate killer, but only Diana is spared. Fast-forward 20 years: Diana, now middle-aged and still beautiful, is a housewife and artist living in the same idyllic university town with a handsome professor-husband and a young daughter. She has seemingly repressed her memory of the event as well as her survivor's guilt, but her perfect world and her grip on reality are both starting to crack. These scenes are imbued with that sense of eerie apprehension found in a good horror flick. Woven through the book is a flashback narrative of Diana's sunny but empty-headed adolescent days. The novel plays teenage Diana's youthful illusions of immortality and beauty against the shifting, uneasy reality of middle age. Kasischke, also a published poet, writes prose that is dreamy and lyrical. This is one book you won't want to put down. Highly recommended for all popular fiction collections.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How did you react to Kasischke's alternating scenes from Diana McFee's fortieth summer with scenes from her high-school years? How does this technique contribute to our understanding of Diana's life, personality, and behavior? Why are *apparent* past events recounted in the present tense, and *apparent* present events in the past tense? What effect might this discrepancy of tenses have on our appreciation of Diana's stories?
2. Why does the narrative turn so frequently to Mr. McCleod, Diana's high-school biology teacher? What is the significance of his appearance at the zoo on the day of Emma's school outing? What is the importance to each of us of what Mr. McCleod tries to impress on all his students – "the enormity, the complexity, of *themselves*"?
3. "It is a moment in which a small good could triumph over a small evil," Kasischke writes of Mr. McCleod's not yet noticing the word *SLUT* written on his blackboard. "The world is always poised, waiting before such moments." Why do you agree or disagree with the possibility of small goods triumphing over small evils? How might we know that the world waits before such moments? What kind of small good might have prevented Michael Patrick's attack on his fellow students? What evils, small or large, occur in the novel for which there is neither explanation or identifiable source?

4. What parts “of the dream of the life she’d someday have” contribute to the quality of the adult Diana’s life, and what parts contribute a distinctly dreamlike quality to that life? Which elements and events seem part of a credible actual life, and which suggest that Diana’s life is not what it appears to be? At what point in the story did you suspect that the adult Diana’s life is a “dream” projected instantaneously into the future from a fear-filled Briar Hill High girl’s room?
5. Forty-year-old Diana’s rush of feeling for her daughter, Emma, “had to do with the great, unexpected *mercy* of love.” What do you think Kasischke means by the “mercy of love”? What other instances of the mercy of love occur in the novel, and how do they contribute to our understanding of the role of love in all our lives? What failures of love’s mercy occur, and what is their significance?
6. What does the novel indicate about the fragility and the tenuousness of life, even young life? In what ways might we understand the sentence, “Her daughter... would only be a child for a short time...”? What images of and references to insubstantiality, transitoriness, and the ephemeral occur—for example, Diana’s feeling that “her hand could pass right through the furniture and walls” of her dream home? How do these images and references affect our understanding of Diana’s life and our own lives?
7. What is the importance of *intentional evil* and *intentional good*, as Professor McFee presents the concepts? What instances of intentional evil and intentional good do you find in the novel, and how would you explain the circumstances of their occurrence? Do we *always* have a choice between the intentional and the unintentional in relation to evil and good? Why might “*all the goodness all our lives*” be “*the miracle... the real miracle*”? In what ways does *The Life before Her Eyes* celebrate the exuberance of life in the face of death and the glory of good in the face of evil?
8. Why should Diana McFee feel “as if she’d been punched” or feel “a bright flash at the side of her face” when she hears the “unnaturally bright” voice on the radio say, “I am in hell”? What does Diana, as high-school student or as forty-year-old mother, know of hell? What other instances are there of the adult Diana feeling blows to the side of her face, feeling out of breath, or developing sudden and intense headaches, and what might be the significance of those instances?
9. What significance do physical beauty, sensuality, and “the blatant sexuality” of life have for the teenaged Diana and for the adult Diana? What roles do beauty and sexuality play in the lives of the novel’s characters and in all our lives? How successful is Kasischke in conveying the young woman’s and older woman’s sexual awareness and experience?

10. How might we explain the sequence of increasingly mysterious and scary events that transform the adult Diana's dream-perfect life – for example, the howl and laughter she hears on the radio after her meeting with Sister Beatrice, and Timmy's reappearance? What might be the sources and significance of these and similar experiences? To what extent did each event prompt you to modify your view of Diana?
11. What instances are there of the adult Diana's noticing the absence of something from her world and at that precise moment observing her world fill up again with that something? To what extent might these instances affirm the power of thought and imagination to shape the world in which we live? To what extent might their significance relate to some other power?
12. What is the significance, near the novel's end, of the wolf that the adult Diana, we are told, had seen before – "the blue eyes, the howling in the next room"? How might we interpret the clause that follows Diana's recognition of the wolf – "but that was something else, that was before he became this, before he began this life"? Why might the moment outside the wolf cage, as Diana faces the wolf, be "the moment she'd been born for," "the moment in which she gave up *herself*..."?
13. One reviewer has written of "the central questions of the novel: What is the difference, if any, between perception and reality? Is an imagined future as real as an actual one"? How does Kasischke explore these questions, and what conclusions does she arrive at? After completing *The Life Before Her Eyes*, how would you answer these two questions?
14. How credible is it that the story of Diana's adult life occurs instantaneously, as Michael Patrick shoots her in the left temporal lobe of her brain, "the place where the future is imagined, the place where what would have been is"? What details in the preceding narrative link the "what would have been" with what has been and what is? What situations might give rise to an instantaneous view of the possible versions of one's life? What alternative versions of Diana's future life might we—and she – envision?

## Multimedia

### ***Uma Thurman: Before 'Her Eyes,' A Varied Life (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89623831>

From a martial-artist mother in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* to dewy-eyed ingenue in Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* to a mobster's employee in John McNaughton's *Mad Dog and Glory*, Uma Thurman has played all kinds of characters. She joins *Fresh Air* to talk about her background (she's the daughter

of noted Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman), about her varied career and about her role in the new independent film *The Life Before Her Eyes*.

### ***Life Before Her Eyes (Movie)***

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1326190>

Diana is a suburban wife and mother who begins to question her seemingly perfect life, and perhaps her sanity, on the 15th anniversary of a tragic high school shooting that killed her best friend. Diana was a vibrant high schooler who, with her shy best friend Maureen, cut class, fantasized about boys and vow to leave their sleepy suburb at the first opportunity. Now, however, Diana is haunted by the increasingly strained relationships she had with Maureen as the day of the school shooting approached. These memories disrupt the idyllic life she now has with her professor husband Paul and their daughter Emma. As older Diana's life begins to unravel and younger Diana gets closer and closer to the fatal day, a deeper mystery slowly unravels.

### **Further Reading**

#### ***Author's official website***

[http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/29411/Laura\\_Kasischke/index.aspx](http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/29411/Laura_Kasischke/index.aspx)

Information and resources about the author.

### **Read-Alikes**

#### ***The Hazards of Sleeping Alone*** by Elise Juska

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1232563>

Charlotte, a single mother, reminisces about her previous marriage and past experiences, but she reevaluates her life after her daughter comes to visit for the weekend with her boyfriend.

#### ***A Hole in the Water*** by Mae Briskin

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1187698>

Two years following her husband's death, Anna journeys to Italy on a quest of familial and personal redemption that elicits more questions than answers in her search for both a long-lost child and a long-awaited romance. In the 14 years since her daughter ran away, Anna and her husband frequently searched Florence, the city where Susan was last sighted, and where Anna encountered the secretive and seductive Vincenzo. Now alone, professionally accomplished but personally bereft, the 67-year-old widow embarks on one final attempt to locate her daughter and consummate an affair she once could only contemplate.

#### ***Choices*** by Deborah Lynn Jacobs

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1306446>

Overcome with guilt over her brother's death, a teenaged girl shifts between multiple universes in an attempt to find one in which he is alive.

*Summaries from AADL.org*

**Extra!**

As a group, discuss ideas on how to curb violence in schools. Write a letter to your local senator with the group's ideas.

