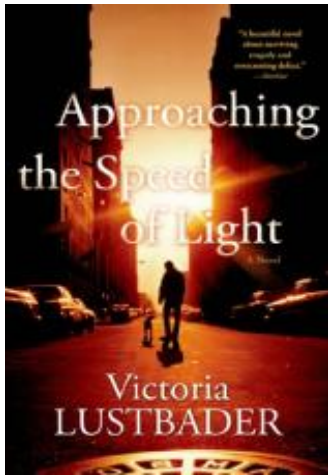


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# Approaching the Speed of Light

by Victoria Lustbader

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## About the Book

It's said that the flapping of a butterfly's wing can start a chain reaction that leads to an unstoppable storm. In the same way, random twists of fate and transitory acts of kindness and cruelty can shape our destinies, just as we affect the people around us—sometimes in ways we can't possibly imagine.

Jody is a likable young man getting by in New York City at the turn of the millennium. On the surface, he seems to have it together, with friends, family, a decent job, and a steady string of girlfriends. But a secret history has left Jody scarred and broken inside, lacking faith in the future or himself. Like the ceaseless pull of a black hole, his buried secrets hold him back, defining him, until his trajectory crosses the path of three very different women, who, in their own ways, hold out the tantalizing possibility of healing, connection—or self-destruction.

## Discussion Guide

1. APPROACHING THE SPEED OF LIGHT tells a story of child abuse and the legacy of that abuse throughout one man's adult life. At the age of nine, Christopher Cannavarro was given a new start and a new family, taking a new name, Jody Kowalczyk. What did he leave behind, of the experiences he endured in his four years with Scott Hanson? What did he carry with him his new life? Into adulthood? To what degree could the love and security of his new family counter the abuse he had suffered?

2. In the intersection of Jody's path with Ella, then with Tess, and then with Ella once again, a powerful hand appears to be directing events. What does each character believe about meeting the others? Do any of them attribute any part of these meetings to coincidence? How often have you had the experience of feeling that you have met someone for a pressing, if not immediately obvious, reason?

- 3.** In narrating his story, and in the writing he does for Tess, Jody often uses the language of Christianity, mentioning God, Jesus, and the concept of the Savior. Which characters saved, or tried to save or protect, Christopher/Jody? At what points was he able to accept their intervention in his life?
- 4.** As the book progresses, Jody becomes more convinced that his identity and fate are inextricably linked to those of Matt, Tess's son and Ella's former lover. Do you think it is possible that Jody is, in fact, a reincarnation of Matt? Is that what Tess sees, or believes she sees, when she first mistakes Jody for Matt? Do you believe that we may have lived before, and that, if so, we may be able to recognize people who were important to us in prior lives? What is Jody learning that Matt, in his lifetime, perhaps did not have a chance to learn?
- 5.** Jody meets Evan, Ella's son, when Evan is nine years old – the age at which Jody's own life changed forever. What, if any, similarities do you see between them? What memories and experiences present obstacles for Jody in relating to Evan? On the other hand, are there lessons drawn from those experiences that Jody can impart to Evan as he grows up? How do we make our children safer than we ourselves were without instilling a disabling level of fear in them?
- 6.** Fern is an unusual and contradictory character – by turns cold, then overheated; distant, then intrusive. What does Brendan love about her, despite how different their personalities are? How much do you believe Fern and Jody truly have in common, and how are they different? Are you surprised by the decision Jody makes during their second encounter? Which character, or characters, do you think he wants to protect?
- 7.** There are multiple layers of post-traumatic stress disorder evident in several of Lustbader's characters, not only Jody. How does PTSD manifest itself in Scott? In Lennie Cardoza? In Fern? What has each character experienced that has permanently marked them? More importantly, how do these various layers and experiences of PTSD intersect and amplify one another as the book unfolds?
- 8.** Lustbader describes with great clarity the process by which hidden abuse turns Christopher from a bright, eager student into a disconnected child with behavior problems. How do you think Christopher manages to function at school each day during the four years he lives with Scott? How does that experience impact his learning in the long term? What do you make of Jody's intelligence as an adult? How has he acquired most of his education?
- 9.** In Christopher's belief that he was "born guilty" and in need of punishment, we see some of the most catastrophic effects of domestic abuse. What did Christopher feel was Scott's role in his life? Why do you think he didn't attempt to escape Scott sooner? What did he believe about the relationship between love and pain? How did those beliefs affect his subsequent relationships, and his ability to ask for help?
- 10.** Ella lost Matt without knowing, at first, that he was gone. At the book's end, Jody states that he has orchestrated his own fate knowing that Ella will now have to endure that experience again. How did you react to his decision to do that? What is his purpose in doing so? Does he have a goal outside his and Ella's existing relationship? Do you think that he is capable of making a different choice?

11. At the book's end, Jody carefully and deliberately constructs his own death, a day shy of his 29th birthday. Why, having just experienced true happiness, does he decide not to continue living? What imprisons him, in the end, ensuring that, as Lustbader writes, "he will live forever and die alone behind the walls of 113 Superior Street"? What does Jody's decision say about the power of love to heal? Are there some people who are ultimately unable to accept some kinds of healing? What emotions does the book's conclusion inspire in you?

12. At the beginnings of Parts One, Two, and Three and the book's Epilogue, Lustbader offers explanations from physics about various aspects of existence or travel within space-time. What types of thresholds are various characters in the book approaching? In what ways do we travel, as readers, as Jody tells his story? How does Jody parcel out his history to finally create what he believes to be a complete picture? And what do we discover, in backward glances, that he himself never learns of? What alternate existences might he have had?

## Author Bio

Victoria Schochet Lustbader has had a long and varied career in publishing, including stints as the editor of *Analog* magazine and as Senior Editor for SF/Fantasy at the Berkley Publishing Group. Marriage to bestselling author Eric Van Lustbader led to retirement and work as a freelance editor. It also led to a new career in environmentalism when Victoria Lustbader joined The Nature Conservancy as a local volunteer. She soon became a member of the Development and Communications Staff and later a member of the Board for Long Island and all of New York State.

Lustbader and her husband, both native New Yorkers, have homes in New York City and Southampton. They travel frequently and have spent a lot of time in Los Angeles, Boston, several locations in Florida, and Paris, France.

## Critical Praise

"Lustbader crafts a beautiful novel about surviving tragedy and overcoming defeat, even when life's demons almost seem indestructible."

? *Booklist*

"[Lustbader] nails the mental and physical horrors of living without love, approval, or basic comforts?few will fail to be moved by the child's plight."

? *Kirkus Reviews*

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**Publication Date:** July 22, 2014

**Genres:** Fiction

**Paperback:** 368 pages

**Publisher:** Forge Books

**ISBN-10:** 0765378833

**ISBN-13:** 9780765378835