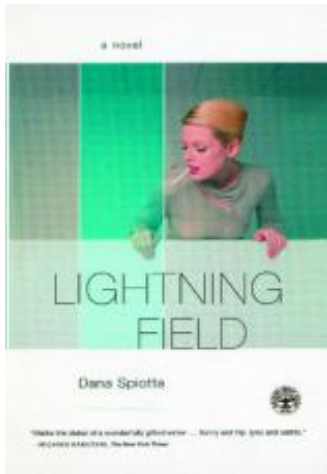


# Lightning Field: A Novel

by Dana Spiotta

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## About the Book

The Los Angeles Dana Spiotta evokes in her bold and strangely lyrical first novel is a land of Spirit Gyms and Miracle Miles, a great centerless place where chains of reference get lost, or finally don't matter.

Mina lives with her screenwriter husband and works at her best friend Lorene's highly successful concept restaurants, which exploit the often unconscious desires and idiosyncrasies of a rich, chic clientele. Almost inadvertently, Mina has acquired two lovers. And then there are the other men in her life: her father, a washed-up Hollywood director living in a yurt and hiding from his debtors, and her disturbed brother, Michael, whose attempts to connect with her force Mina to consider that she might still have a heart -- if only she could remember where she had left it.

Between her Spiritual Exfoliation and Detoxification therapies and her elaborate devotion to style, Lorene is interested only in charting her own perfection and impending decay. Although supremely confident in a million shallow ways, she, too, starts to fray at the edges.

And there is Lisa, a loving mother who cleans houses, scrapes by, and dreams of food terrorists and child abductors, until even the most innocent events seem to hint at dark possibilities.

**Lightning Field** explores the language tics of our culture -- the consumerist fetishes, the self-obsession and the peeing possibility that you just might have gotten it all badly wrong. In funny, cutting, unsentimental prose, Spiotta exposes the contradictions of contemporary lives in which "identity is a collection of references." She writes about overcoming not just despair but ambivalence.

Playful and dire, raw and poetic, **Lightning Field** introduces a startling new voice in American fiction.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the significance of the arresting title image of a lightning field "these hundreds of precisely aligned, perfectly spaced lightning rods in a field in a valley about two hundred miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico" (page 99). Why do you think Michael was struck by this image?
2. Lorene's business, Pleasure Model Enterprises, is designed to make people comfortable. She has the uncanny ability to understand and cater to the desires and idiosyncrasies of the wealthy clientele. What does Lorene receive from her work? What needs and desires does she have and does she fulfill them? If so, how?
3. Lorene strives for material and superficial perfection. She places a high value on material objects and luxuries. What do these things signify to her and her clients? Discuss the importance of class in **Lightning Field**. Compare and contrast Lorene and Lisa.
4. Minds father was a Hollywood director; movies were a seminal part of her childhood, her relationship with her father, and the ways in which she interacts with the world. Discuss Minds philosophy of movies and what it tell us about her perception of reality. How do movies shape Mina's identity?
5. One of the only points of connection between David and Mina is the movies they watch together. What do these movies offer that allows for this connection?
6. Most of what we see of Max and Minds affair happens through the medium of film. How does this fit into the other ways in which films have informed or influenced Mina's life?
7. Sex forms one of the principal axes of **Lightning Field**. Compare the role of sex in Minds and Lorene's lives. What purpose does 'it serve for each of these women? What meaning does it hold? Discuss how Spiotta uses power and love in each of the sexual relationships that we learn about.
8. "And now it had come to this, hadn't it? Lorene needed to hire someone named Beryl to touch her" (page 31). Explain how 'in this novel the physical need for touch lies somewhere between sex and distance on the continuum of personal relationships. What do we learn about Lorene from her St. John's Therapy? Do you think the personal relationships of the characters that Spiotta has created reflect the relationships we cultivate in contemporary society? If so, in what ways? If not, how are they different?
9. Growing up, Mina shared a powerful bond with her brother Michael. How does Minds relationship with Michael inform her romantic and sexual relationships?
10. Family plays an important role in **Lightning Field**. Discuss the different familial structures and relationships we see. Spiotta repeatedly takes us back into Minds family life but not into Lorene's. What does this explain about their characters?
11. Discuss the different ways in which the author has chosen to portray women in **Lightning Field**. What roles do they play? What are their expectations? What is expected of them? Though **Lightning Field's** protagonists are women, men play an integral part in their lives, particularly in Minds. Where do women fit into her life? How does her relationship

with Lorene differ from her relationships with men?

**12.** During therapy with Beryl, Lorene tells a story about passing a young man in a parking lot, "He gave me no look back. And I can't believe it. I am only thirty-two, and I am invisible to this guy. And then suddenly I saw the rest of my life stretched out before me. In a flash. The slow, excruciating dismantling of me as an object of desire" (page 124). Discuss this quote in light of the themes of beauty and sexual desire in this novel.

**13.** How do each of the main characters define themselves. Which characters, if any, have a firm sense of self? Discuss the importance of identity in relation to the novel's other major themes: beauty, love/sex, and movies.

**14.** There is an overwhelming distance between the characters in this book: the separation of Lorene and Michael; Michael and Mina; Mina and Scott; Mina and David; David and Max; Lisa and her husband, and to some extent all of these people from themselves. Discuss these relationships, the different ways that distance manifests itself, and how each of these couples chooses to deal with that distance.

**15.** On many levels **Lightning Field** is a novel of escape, both physical and emotional. How do the characters try and escape? What are they trying to escape from? Do any of them succeed?

**16.** Describe how Spiotta has structured the novel. What forms does she use and how do they inform the novel's themes? What do we learn about Mina and Lorene from the structure?

**17.** At once playful and dire, chic and raw, the tone and subject of **Lightning Field** seem to often be diametrically opposed. Discuss how Spiotta employs this juxtaposition. Do you find it effective? If so, how? If not, why not?

**18.** How does the book's ending inform our understanding of Minds, Lorene's, and Lisa's journeys? What does it imply about each of their futures? Do You think that any of them have been transformed over the course of the novel? If so, how?

## Author Bio

Dana Spiotta is the author of *INNOCENTS AND OTHERS*, which won the St. Francis College Literary Prize and was shortlisted for *The Los Angeles Times* Book Prize; *Stone Arabia*, which was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist; *EAT THE DOCUMENT*, which was a National Book Award finalist; and *LIGHTNING FIELD*. Spiotta was a Guggenheim Fellow, a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow, and she won the 2008-9 Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome. In 2017, the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded her the John Updike Prize in Literature. Spiotta lives in Syracuse and teaches in the Syracuse University MFA program.

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