

# THE FAMILY FORTUNA

LINDSAY EAGAR



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Also available as an e-book and in audio

## About the Book

Beaked. Feathered. Monstrous. Avita was born to be a star. Her tent sells out nightly, and every performance incites bloodcurdling screams. She's the most lucrative circus act from Texas to Tacoma in 1889, the crown jewel of the Family Fortuna. Avita feeds on the shrieks and fear, but when a handsome young artist arrives to create posters of the performers, she's appalled by his rendering of Bird Girl. Is that all he sees? A hideous monster—all sharp beak and razor teeth, obsidian eyes and ruffled feathers? Determined to be more, Avita devises a plan to snatch freedom out from under the reign of her father, the charismatic circus ringmaster. But will their fragile circus family survive the showdown she has in mind when she steps out of the shadow and shines? This delightful and disturbing, bawdy and breathtaking, horrific and heartfelt story is like nothing you've ever read before.

## Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe the Family Fortuna circus, including its appearance and different acts. Where do they perform, and how do they travel? Who comes to see them? Why is the circus called the Family Fortuna? Why is that also the book's title? Discuss Avita's description of the circus members as "trafficking in dreams" (page 90) and Arturo's insistence that the performers be mirrors. How important is the circus as a setting to the novel?
2. In the first chapter, Avita recalls Arturo praising her for being a monster, and she remembers looking in the mirror as a small child and seeing herself as a monster. She also observes about her father and their family, "Compared to his beloved circus, we were inconsequential" (page 1). How do these scenes and her observation foreshadow the rest of the novel?
3. When Avita is young, Arturo predicts that she will be "famous from Texas to Tacoma" (page 8). Why does he think that? Describe Avita's appearance and Mama's belief about why Avita looks that way. Summarize Avita's act. How did she come up with the idea for the act? Why was it called the Aviary Extravaganza? Why is it so important to the circus?
4. Early in the story, Avita loves performing. She calls showtime "the best time" (page 9). On the way to Peculiar, she reviews "the catalog of screams" she's heard and remembers "the anticipation of thrilling a crowd" (page 132). Why does she enjoy performing? Why does she look forward to the audience being afraid of her?
5. What kind of person is Arturo? What is his background? What are his greatest strengths as a circus owner? What kind of father and husband is he? Discuss these two descriptions Avita gives of him: "He smiled like the devil, dollar signs in his eyes" (page 8) and "He loved cash, but his true currency was applause" (page 13).
6. Why does Avita crave her father's approval? In what ways are she and her father similar? In what ways are they different? How does her attitude toward and feelings about her father change in the course of the story?
7. Ren reflects that his father gave him "every insecurity a person can have" (page 349). Why is Arturo so cruel to Ren? What has Ren done for the circus? What are his strengths? Why did he try, and fail, to join Le Cirque Americana? What do you think his future will be like?
8. What is Luna's role in the circus? Describe when she started performing and why her father was so pleased about it. Why is Luna happy about being pregnant? Discuss the scene where Arturo says, "You're a whore," and Luna thinks, "He has turned me into this thing that he now finds reason to despise" (page 305). What do you think about the way he has treated her?
9. Luna describes her parents as having "commodified" her (page 240). As she's leaving, she says to Arturo, "You've sold your own children to get the whole world off" (page 305). What does she mean? Do you agree? Has Arturo commodified Ren and Avita? If so, how? How might Arturo justify his actions?
10. What's the role of religion in Mama's life, and why does it play that role? Why does Avita call her a "reformed rascal" (page 129)? How was Mama a rascal? Is she still one? Discuss her marriage. Why does Avita call Arturo the "king" in the marriage (page 105)? After Arturo is harsh to Ren, why does Mama say, "My son . . . leaves the tent before I can apologize with my eyes for what I married" (page 282)?



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11. Who is Tomás? How does he end up creating posters for the Family Fortuna? What are his dreams for his future? How does his attitude toward Avita as an artist influence how she perceives herself? How is he a catalyst for change in Avita's life? Discuss his comment about Impressionism: "I like this idea—that everyone is looking at the same things, but only a few people can truly see them" (page 99).
12. Describe the first banner of Avita that Tomás creates. What is Arturo's reaction? How do people in the crowd react, and how does Avita feel about their remarks? Discuss her comment after she sees it: "For the first time, I was afraid" (page 193). In the chapter "Caged," what happens after Avita tries to sing to the audience? Why does she say that her face "had caged" her (page 261)?
13. How does Avita transform her own act near the end of the novel? Discuss the poster that she and Tomás make. What does the transformation of her act show about her and how she's changed? Relate your analysis to her comments "No daughter can cage herself forever" (page 365) and "The whole world was mine" (page 376). Describe the audience's reaction and her father's reaction to the new act.
14. Avita says of the rivalry between Arturo and Cornelius, "This was war" (page 152). Compare the two men and their circuses. What does Le Cirque Americana have that the Family Fortuna doesn't? What does the Family Fortuna have that Le Cirque Americana doesn't? How does Arturo hope to triumph?
15. The novel ends as it begins, with a memory concerning Arturo and Avita, but this time from Arturo's point of view. He says, "I love her more than a circus, more than a performer" (page 389). Earlier he remembers how much he loved Luna and Lorenzo when they were born. Do you think he still loves his three children by the end of the story? What is evidence for and against the idea?
16. Discuss different aspects of the book's narrative, including the use of long flashbacks in chapters labeled "A History." Why do you think the author uses first-person voices? Why is Avita's the main voice? Who else narrates chapters, and what does having different narrators add? Why do you think the book closes with Arturo speaking?
17. The novel uses figurative language, some of which might be termed colorful or coarse, such as "red as a clown's pubic hair" (page 78) and "silent as the moment right before a good piss" (page 76). Find some striking examples of figurative language and analyze what they add to the narrative, the sense of character and setting, and the overall feel of the story.



### About Lindsay Eager

Lindsay Eager is the highly acclaimed author of the middle-grade novels *Hour of the Bees*, *Race to the Bottom of the Sea*, *The Bigfoot Files*, and *The Patron Thief of Bread*. *The Family Fortuna* is her debut novel for young adults. She lives in the mountains of Utah with her husband and their two daughters.

These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who now gives workshops for educators on new children's and young adult books. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery award committees.