Leylah Attar

53 LETTERS for my Lover

BOOK CLUB KIT

Inside this kit is material put together exclusively to make your book club a smashing success
53 LETTERS
for my Lover

LETTER # 1: HERE WE ARE  
Jon B & Babyface: Someone To Love

LETTER # 12: FIREWORKS  
Tom Jones: Help Yourself  
David Bowie: Let’s Dance

LETTER # 14: HOTEL ROOM  
Gloria Estefan: Here We Are

LETTER # 29: FOUR YEARS LATER  
Lionel Richie: Oh No

LETTER # 30: DARK SPELL MASTER  
Bryan Adams: Please Forgive Me

LETTER # 31: FLY, DAMMIT, FLY!  
Lenny Kravitz: I Belong To You

LETTER # 32: LEVEL SEVEN KANOODLING  
The Beatles: Love Me Do  
Bill Withers, cover by Lighthouse Family: Ain’t No Sunshine When She’s Gone

LETTER # 43: A DOUBLE BETRAYAL  
Bread: Baby I’ma Want You

LETTER # 50: NO MORE DISGUISES  
Duran Duran: Come Undone

LETTER # 52: THE WINDOW  
INXS: Never Tear Us Apart
Here are some questions to consider as you discuss the book:

**LOVE**

**ATTRACTION**

**CHOICES**

**GUILT**

**INFIDELITY**

**FORGIVENESS**

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**CHARACTERS**

**SYMBOLISM**

**STRUCTURE & WRITING**

**Q & A WITH AUTHOR, LEYLAH ATTAR**

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***SPOILER ALERT***

This document includes specifics you might want to avoid until you have finished reading the book.

www.leylahattar.com
LOVE
Consider the following quote from the book:

“We have an infinite capacity to love, but when you wrap up your love and give it to someone, they expect all of it. And that’s what you think too—that you’re giving them everything you’ve got. You really do. Until you realize that love is endless, bottomless, boundary-less. The more you give, the more gushes out. It spills over, refusing to be contained in neat little parcels, swelling like a river after a flash flood. And in the end, it doesn’t matter which part was whose, because in the end it’s all one, like streams merging into the ocean. My love for Troy, my love for Hafez.”

Do you think it’s possible to love two people at the same time? Do you believe there are different kinds of love? What do you think it takes to “have it all” with someone? Have you had, or do you have a relationship that can be defined as “having it all.” On what levels do you have to be compatible?

In what ways do you think Shayda failed or succeeded in love? Can you point to any passages in the book?

How important is self-love in a successful relationship?

How do you tell the difference between self-love and selfishness?
ATTRACTION

Do you think Hafez and Shayda were attracted to each other the first time they met? How was this different from the first time Shayda met Troy? Discuss the nature of attraction, both in the novel and in your own experience. What factors do you think go into creating intense mutual attraction? Do you believe it can be sustained over a lifetime?

Did you think Hafez was attractive? What qualities about him did you like? What qualities did you dislike? Hafez and Shayda are joined by similar losses. They both come from broken families and crave the security of a stable home. They are both haunted by Pasha Moradi. They also share the same culture, traditions, religion etc. Is there something to be said for sharing similar experiences as a couple? Do you think it makes them more empathic towards each other?

Did you think Troy was attractive? What qualities about him did you like? What qualities did you dislike? Why do you think he affected Shayda so powerfully? Discuss the power dynamics between the two. Do you feel that it shifted during the course of the story? Why or why not? In what way did her relationship with Troy change Shayda? How much did physical intimacy have to do with it? What did you think of the sex scenes in the book? Any particular ones (good or bad) that stuck with you? Is it possible to confuse good sex with love? What do you think fueled the intense sexual chemistry between Troy and Shayda?
What are your thoughts on cross-cultural relationships? Are you attracted to people who bring something new to your life, or are you uncomfortable with? Why do you think Shayda was uncertain about Troy’s parents accepting her? Are there social stigmas associated with being divorced or do you feel these are self-imposed, stemming out of one’s upbringing or sense of failure? Do you think people with kids from a previous relationship suffer because of it? Do we shut out people we are attracted to based on their past, their ethnicity, religion or other labels? Does that hinder our personal growth, or protect us from future heartbreak? Have you ever caught yourself making a decision based on a stereotype?

Shayda and Troy experience significant pushes and pulls over the course of the novel. Is it possible to be “just friends” with someone for whom you have deep feelings? Is it better to cut off the relationship completely? Why or why not?

Do you think we are more attracted to something if it’s out of our reach? Is it easier to idealize what we can’t have than appreciate the things we do?
CHOICES

When Shayda finds herself at a crossroads, she almost wishes she could go back to a time when she did not have the freedom to make choices.

“It was so much easier in that other world. If you were a woman, you didn’t expect happiness, so you didn’t chase after it. If you found it, you held on to whatever scraps you could get. And if you collected enough, you could stitch together a cloak and get through life intact. But this. Having the freedom to make choices. It makes you greedy. It makes you want more when you already have enough.”

Discuss the condition of women and minorities, who live in countries and cultures where their voices are not heard. Do you think they have a strong sense of disenfranchisement or is it a non-issue because they have never experienced the alternative?

Are our expectations shaped by our surroundings—what we see, hear, read; where we grow up—or are they an intrinsic part of human nature? How difficult would it be for you to adjust to living in a place with a different set of ideologies? How difficult do you think it would be for someone to adjust to yours?

Do you believe we have free will in any given situation, or are some things are a matter of destiny?
GUILT

Shayda blames herself for Zain’s accident.

“It’s my fault. My fault, my fault. I was kissing Troy in the kitchen when I should have been looking for Zain. I was distracted by petty jealousies while my son fell in the water. I dropped him at Maamaan’s to spend an afternoon with my lover. This is my punishment. This is my tsunami. Except it’s claimed Zain, not me.”

Do you think we are conditioned to seek out punishment when we do something wrong?

Do we inflict self-punishment to alleviate our sense of guilt?

How much of this has to do with cultural/religious/societal concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?

Would you allow yourself the freedom to do certain things that you would not normally do if you knew there would be no judgement and no-one would find out?

What do you think stops most people from acting on their impulses—the fear of how other people would judge them, or having to live with their own actions afterwards?

Do you think Shayda overcame her sense of guilt? If so, at what point? What do you think allowed her to move forward?
INFIDELITY

The media portrays men as more likely to cheat on their spouses. How did you feel about a female character involved in the same situation? Did you find yourself hating Shayda? Did you find yourself sympathizing with her?

What about the other characters who were unfaithful? Kamal Hijazi? Hossein Kazemi? Ali Kazemi? Did you feel differently about any of them?

Did Shayda’s infidelity impact her relationship with her father? Why or why not?

Did you dislike Troy for having an affair with a married woman? Why or why not?

Do we tend to be more forgiving if there are ‘real’ feelings involved?

Are there different shades of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’? Do these change based on our life experiences, religious upbringing, the era or society we live in?
FORGIVENESS

The theme of forgiveness is touched on many times in this story—forgiveness of self, as well as of others.

How do you think forgiveness helped Shayda, Hafez and Troy move on?

What instances can you think of where this happened?

Are there people in your own life that you need to forgive or release in order to move forward?
MISCELLANEOUS

Discuss the concept of physical beauty as it plays out in the story. Shayda starts out feeling “like November…dull and colorless,” next to her mother. Do you think she is reflecting on outer appearance or does she feel dead on the inside? At what point do you think she starts to feel differently about herself? Is there something particular that brings about the change in her attitude? Does it start on the inside or out? What questions about conventional beauty does she have to face after her mastectomy?

How did you feel about Troy’s behaviour towards her the first time they met after her surgery? Do you think it was appropriate? Why or why not?

How do you think Shayda’s struggle with breast cancer affected her perspective on life? Do you think we evaluate life differently if we know we have a limited amount of time? What was the most difficult decision you’ve ever had to make? Do you have any regrets? Would you do anything differently if faced with the same situation now?

Do you know how to perform a breast self-exam? Have you established a regular breast self-exam pattern for yourself? Close to forty percent of diagnosed breast cancers are detected by women who feel a lump. Do you know what to look for in addition to a lump?
The sexual abuse that Hafez suffered as a child impacts his relationship with Shayda in more ways than one. Being betrayed by his father adds to the trauma and unhinges his self-esteem. How did Shayda’s affair affect him? What did you think of his reaction when he found out? Would you have had a different response? If so, in what way? How did his father’s visit affect him?

Does healing in one aspect of our life lead to healing in another? Can you think of a similar experience in your life?

How would you support a family member or friend who has been or is being sexually abused? Could you recognize the symptoms?
CHARACTERS

Can you describe the main characters in 53 LETTERS FOR MY LOVER?

How did you feel about Shayda? Troy? Hafez?

Who did you like the best? Why?

Who do you like the least? Why?

Why do the characters do what they do? Are their actions justified?

Do you think they were realistically portrayed?

Did any of the characters remind you of yourself or someone you know?

Were there any moments where you disagreed with the choices of any of the characters? What would you have done differently?

Do the main characters change by the end of the book? Do they grow or mature? What events trigger such changes?

Was the ending satisfying? Why or why not? If not, how would you change it?
SYMBOLISM

Some of the symbols used in 53 LETTERS FOR MY LOVER are:

- Monarch Butterfly
- The color red
- Troy’s rosary
- Setting the Haft Seen table
- Lighting the candles

Are there any others you can identify?

Pick a symbol that resonates with you and discuss what it meant.

Do you enjoy looking for hidden meaning in a novel? Does it make you feel more connected to what the author was trying to say?
STRUCTURE & WRITING

What did you think of the overall structure of the novel? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to “get into it”? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, happy, confused, entertained? Did the story keep you interested? Would you say this is a plot-driven book: a fast-paced page-turner? Or does the story unfold slowly with a focus on character development? Were you surprised by the plot’s complications? Or did you find it predictable, even formulaic? How credible did the author make the setting and dialogue?

What scene did you find was the most pivotal for the book? How do you think the story would have changed had that scene not taken place? What scene resonated most with you personally in either a positive or negative way? Why? Did certain parts of the book make you uncomfortable? If so, why did you feel that way? Were there any scenes that made you laugh? Was there anything that surprised you about the book?

What did you think about the time-line? Were you able to move seamlessly between past and present? Was it difficult to follow? Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way she did?
Here is a quote from the novel:

“Somewhere in the fabric of all these years, our lives got tangled, like unruly threads pulling and snagging into impossible knots.”

Are there any passages in the novel that you enjoyed or found insightful? Perhaps a bit of dialog that’s funny or poignant, or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there’s a particular comment that states the book’s thematic concerns? Has this novel broadened your perspective or given you something to think about? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas?

Are there any books that you would compare this one to? How does this book hold up to them? Did you enjoy the author’s use of language and style of writing? Would you recommend this book to a friend? If so, how would you describe it? What did you enjoy most about it?
Q & A WITH AUTHOR, LEYLAH ATTAR

Where do you write from? My desk sits before a fabulous old window, overlooking giant evergreens and a (mostly) blue sky. That’s where I usually am in my head. In reality, it’s a completely unglamorous, albeit functional, work station where I spend hours staring at the wall.

What inspired you to write this book? The idea for this book came to me when I was watching a music video. It made me wonder what had brought the couple being portrayed, to that point in their lives. I used that as the ending for the story and worked my way back. The entire novel was inspired by music. Sometimes I would listen to a song and picture the same couple at a different stage in their relationship. I strung the evolving vignettes in my head into different scenes and then tweaked them to fit the story. All the songs are included in the story, except, ironically, the one that got me started. Reader feedback was overwhelmingly in favor of an alternate ending, so it never made it in the published version.

What is your background? What inspired you to write about a Persian protagonist? I am not Persian, but I’ve always had a lot of Persian friends, and I love the culture. I wanted to capture the immigrant experience of a young woman caught between East and West, between a deeply engrained sense of duty and new found personal freedom. Living in an ethnically diverse city like Toronto helped me realize that this is a very real struggle for many women who grew up with the ideologies of another place and time, but who now find themselves entrenched in western society.
Why did you choose to write in this genre? I didn’t set out to write in any particular genre. I just wrote the story in my head. That’s probably why *53 Letters For My Lover* does not fit neatly into any particular category. It’s not a typical romance; although some parts are steamy, it can’t be classified as erotica either. It touches on heavier subjects like sexual abuse and breast cancer, so I don’t see it as chick-lit either. That was the toughest part for me—completing the story and then trying to figure out where exactly I would find it, if I went looking for it in a bookstore. I don’t think I could have done it any differently, but my advice to aspiring authors is to figure all that out before you start writing—it will make your life much easier.

How long did it take you to write this book? It took me a year to complete the novel, with many starts and stops. And then another three months to get it ready for publication. I find I am most productive when I immerse myself in the writing and lock the world out. But life doesn’t always co-operate and when I get de-railed, it takes me a while to get back into it.

Did you have a platform in place? I launched my website and social media pages a few months before release date. It was fairly intimidating—I knew no-one in the business, had no connections and did not belong to any writing groups. But everyone starts with nothing. At least that’s what I told myself when I was keeping myself company on facebook and twitter. On the plus side, there’s no audience to witness your screw ups, so it’s a fantastic time to learn!
Tell us something personal about you that people may be surprised to know. I was once chased by a gazelle as a child. Our planet is brimming with wildlings and I get Bambi. I guess I should be thankful. I wouldn’t be here if Scar had popped out of the bushes instead.

What’s next? I’m working on a number of ideas. All love stories with a twist, of course.

What would you like to say to your readers? I love, love, love them! I have the most amazing readers. I would not be here without their support, enthusiasm and love of books. I would like express my sincere gratitude to all the readers, book clubs, bloggers and reviewers who have read the book, shared their love for the characters, connected with me, friended me, tweeted me and liked me. You guys rock!