



THE MAGNETIC GIRL

by Jessica Handler

Summary:

In rural north Georgia two decades after the Civil War, thirteen-year-old Lulu Hurst reaches high into her father's bookshelf and pulls out an obscure book, *The Truth of Mesmeric Influence*. Deemed gangly and undesirable, Lulu wants more than a lifetime of caring for her disabled baby brother, Leo, with whom she shares a profound and supernatural mental connection. Lulu begins to "captivate" her friends and family, controlling their thoughts and actions for brief moments at a time. After Lulu convinces a cousin she conducts electricity with her touch, her father sees a unique opportunity. He grooms his tall and indelicate daughter into an electrifying new woman: *The Magnetic Girl*. Lulu travels the Eastern seaboard, captivating enthusiastic crowds by lifting grown men in parlor chairs and throwing them across the stage with her "electrical charge."

Gorgeously envisioned, and based on a true story, *The Magnetic Girl* is set at a time when the emerging presence of electricity raised suspicions about the other-worldly gospel of Spiritualism, and when women's desire for political, cultural, and sexual presence electrified the country. Squarely in the realm of Emma Donoghue's *The Wonder* and Leslie Parry's *Church of Marvels*, *The Magnetic Girl* is a unique portrait of a forgotten period in history, seen through the story of one young woman's power over her family, her community, and ultimately, herself.



About the Author:

Jessica Handler is the author of *The Magnetic Girl*, an Indie Next selection, Wall Street Journal Spring 19 pick, Bitter Southerner Summer 19 pick, and SIBA Okra pick. She is the author of the nonfiction books *Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief* and *Invisible Sisters: A Memoir*, which was named one of the "Twenty Five Books All Georgians Should Read" and *Atlanta Magazine's* "Best Memoir of 2009." Jessica writes essays and nonfiction features that have appeared on NPR, in *Tin House*, *Drunken Boat*, *Full Grown People*, *Brevity*, *The Bitter Southerner*, *Electric Literature*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, and *More Magazine*. Jessica is a lecturer in English at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, and lectures internationally on writing craft.

Book Reviews:

... a mystical story ... Author Jessica Handler paints a quaint picture of life in the late 19th century, when electricity was a new phenomenon. Lulu begins as a young woman used to obeying her parents, but through her performances, she begins to see her parents and their shortcomings more clearly. The Magnetic Girl is hypnotic tale about a girl growing into a woman and discovering the truth of her own powers. ~Jessica Bates/BookPage

... all atmosphere and electricity ... Handler captures the period with evocative details. It's an age in which the advent of electricity and burgeoning spiritual questions combine, priming people to believe in the impossible ... The story moves at a drawling pace, occupying Lulu's mind and rendering her childhood concerns with clarity ... Lulu's is a story on the precipice: of scientific discovery, of cultural evolution, and of increased autonomy for women. As a daughter of this dawning new world, Lulu captivates her way toward dismaying realizations, deadly conundrums, and new freedoms. Beyond its sleight of hand, The Magnetic Girl is a vintage tale about learning to harness your singular powers. ~Kirkus Reviews

With depth and emotion, The Magnetic Girl will captivate readers. ~Melissa Norstedt/Booklist Review

I learned a great deal about society in the late 1800s through this book and got to read about developments in our country at that time (technological, political and social.) I found it very rewarding to gain that learning through the lens of a heartwarming yet heartbreaking story of a young woman's coming of age. I recommend The Magnetic Girl to anyone who wants to explore a 'real-life' account of growing up and explore their thoughts about family, self and the choices we make for each. ~Mama Panda Bear/amandapandabear.com

BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How did you **experience** the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to

"get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused,

sad, disturbed, confused, bored...?

2. Describe the main **characters**—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities.

- Why do characters do what they do?
- Are their actions justified?
- Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship).
- How has the past shaped their lives?
- Do you admire or disapprove of them?
- Do they remind you of people you know?

3. Are the main characters **dynamic**—changing or maturing by the end of the book? Do they learn about themselves, how the world works and their role in it?

4. Discuss the **plot:**

- Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting?
- Is this a plot-driven book—a fast-paced page-turner?
- Does the plot unfold slowly with a focus on character?
- Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns?
- Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?

5. Talk about the book's **structure.**

- Is it a continuous story...or interlocking short stories?
- Does the time-line move forward chronologically?
- Does time shift back & forth from past to present?
- Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints?
- Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way he or she did?
- What difference does the structure make in the way you read or understand the book?

6. What main ideas—themes**—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use **symbols** to reinforce the main ideas? (See our free LitCourses on both [Symbol](#) and [Theme](#).)**

7. What **passages strike you as insightful, even profound? 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?**

8. Is the **ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?**

9. If you could ask the **author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?**

10. Has this novel **changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?**

(Questions by LitLovers. @litlovers.com)

Sources:

<https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/41949166-the-magnetic-girl>

<https://jessicahandler.com/>

<https://www.litlovers.com/run-a-book-club/questions-for-fiction>