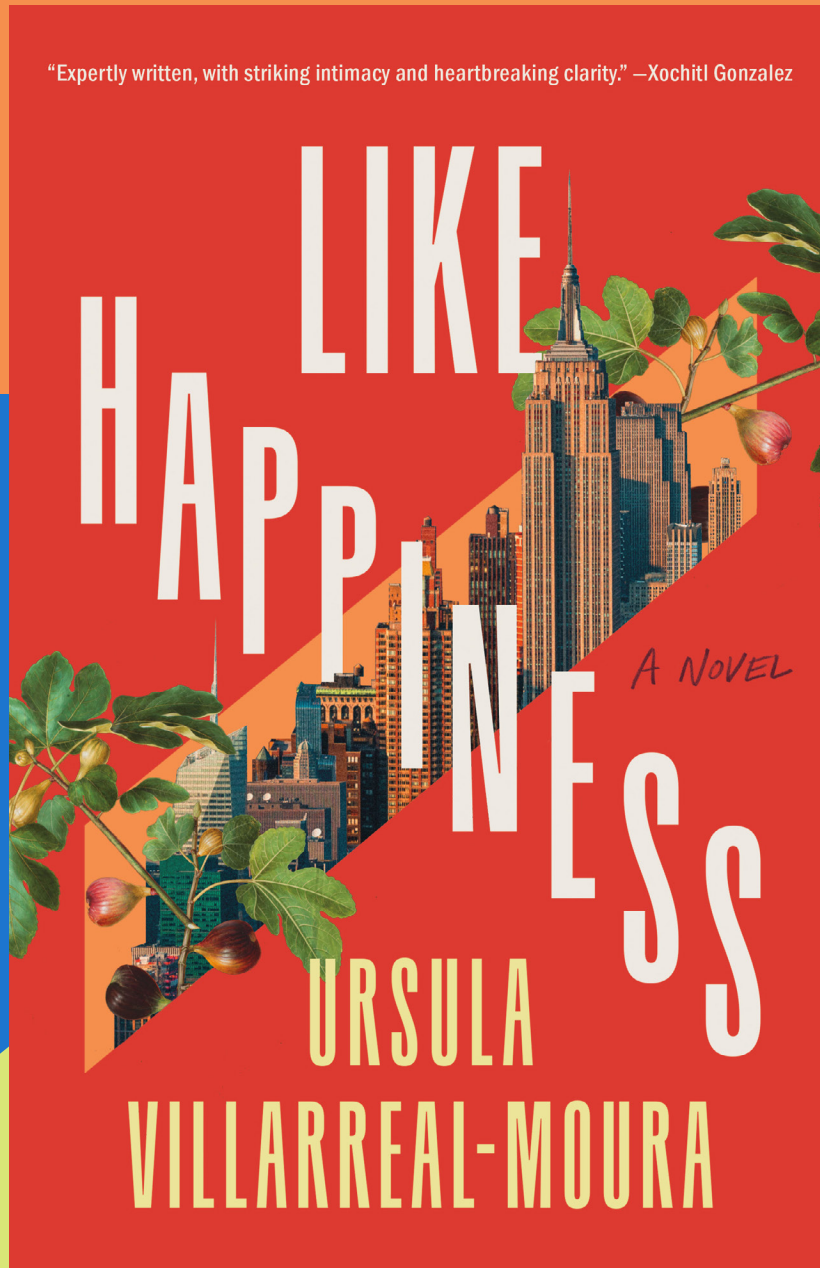


# BOOK CLUB KIT



*"Like Happiness is highly relatable, well written, and really makes you rethink your relationships. Why wouldn't you want to talk about it with your besties?!"*

—READING IS MY HAPPY PLACE BOOK CLUB (DENVER, NC)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 *Like Happiness* alternates between the present day and flashbacks told through Tatum's letter. How did this structure contribute to your reading experience?
- 2 Discuss Tatum's growth as a person. What character flaws did you pick up on as you read about her life when she was young? How has she changed by the time she is writing her letter to Mateo?
- 3 Power and fame are major themes in the book. Did the novel change the way you think about the allure of fame and power dynamics between fans and their idols? Have you experienced or witnessed similar unbalanced friendships or relationships in your own life?
- 4 Tatum describes how she loved the books she grew up with but never fully identified with any stories until Mateo's book, *Happiness*. How did the lack of diverse representation in literature influence Tatum and Mateo's relationship, both positively and negatively?
- 5 Did Mateo genuinely care for Tatum?  
**Suggested by Daybreak Little Free Library (South Jordan, UT)**
- 6 What parallels did you notice between Tatum's life and the books she loves, such as *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith?
- 7 On her trip to San Antonio, Tatum's father asks her if she's ever considered whether Mateo is the devil. Do you agree or disagree with the parallels her father makes?
- 8 Do you view Tatum's relationship with Mateo to be a romantic one or something else? How do you view Tatum's romantic relationships that occurred outside of her friendship with Mateo?
- 9 During their last conversation, Tatum tells Mateo, "For a decade, I've lived a muted life, waiting for you to realize my importance." What is the connection between her toxic relationship with Mateo and her identity as a Chicana?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 10** Why did Tatum hold onto the relationship with Mateo for so long?  
**Suggested by Book Club (Medicine Lake, MT)**
- 11** How do you feel about Mateo's final betrayal? Is there anything one can learn from the collapse of their friendship?
- 12** Why do you think Tatum was so infatuated with Mateo? Was it really because of his book, or with him as a person?  
**Suggested by BCB! (Akron, OH)**
- 13** Discuss the conclusion of the book and the conclusions that Tatum draws up in her letter.
- 14** How do you feel about the evolution of Tatum and Mateo's friendship by the end of the book? Why do you think the author chose to paint this relationship as complex rather than a simple villain/victim dynamic?



If you decide to adopt *Like Happiness* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at [reader@celadonbooks.com](mailto:reader@celadonbooks.com) or post on social media using the hashtags #CeladonBookClub and #LikeHappiness.



# AN INTERVIEW

with Ursula Villarreal-Moura

**URSULA VILLARREAL MOURA** was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. She is the author of *Math for the Self-Crippling*, a flash fiction collection. *Like Happiness* is her first novel.



**Congratulations on writing *Like Happiness*, an incredible debut novel! Why did you think this story of the imbalanced relationship between Tatum, a young Latinx woman, and M. Domínguez, a rising literary star, was an important one to tell?**

I wanted to tell the story of a woman who sometimes wasn't even the main character of her own life. I think it's an idea that might resonate with other women of color: We live in a society that values men over women, children over mothers, and white people over people of color. Through fiction, I wanted to explore how that sort of hierarchy devalues women of color and how that shapes a life.

***Like Happiness* will appeal to fans of *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell and *Luster* by Raven Leilani. How is this novel different from others that deal with similar themes?**

I consider myself fairly well read, but I don't know of many novels that tackle these power imbalances from the perspective of a Latina. Typically in contemporary fiction, Latinas are stereotyped as outspoken, sassy, and assertive. I wanted to tell a story about a Latina who is quieter and more observant. That's not a story that gets shared often.

**The relationship described in *Like Happiness* is complex, vacillating between a celebrity-fan dynamic, friendship, and almost something more. It's not, however, a story of overt sexual predation, like those that have been brought to the forefront of our cultural awareness over the last several years. Why did you decide to place this story in a complicated, gray area?**

Relationships in which people have no inkling that they're being manipulated or abused fascinate me. I'm also deeply obsessed with delusion. When a dynamic is imbalanced by age or power, it's sometimes hard for the people in the relationship to know something is fundamentally wrong. In *Like Happiness*, Tatum is unaware for years that her proverbial house is on fire. She's lived so long in a toxic relationship that nothing seems glaringly wrong or morally reprehensible to her. To me, that is a far more complex and satisfying story than one of overt abuse.

## **Liberal arts colleges are often put on a pedestal as inclusive, progressive spaces, but we see how isolating and exclusionary the experience was for Tatum. How do you think this aspect of her education shaped her story?**

Tatum's isolated New England college experience absolutely led her to write the fan letter that changed her life. Throughout the novel, Tatum finds that she's just a smidge too different from those around her. Sometimes the divisive factor is her socioeconomic status, sometimes her race, or the fact that she doesn't want to partake in drugs. This constant othering happens even at liberal arts schools, a place where she was tolerated but never welcomed.

## **We learn early in the book that Tatum is in a long-term romantic partnership with a woman. How does her queer relationship further complicate the power dynamics in her relationship with M. and shape her identity throughout her story?**

The default aspiration when Tatum was coming of age was that every young girl would ultimately grow up to marry a successful man. I was interested in depicting the pursuit of that scenario and many of the ways it can go awry. For one, it assumes every woman is heterosexual, which Tatum is not. That specific aspiration also doesn't leave much room for a woman's personal development or success. Throughout the novel, Tatum keeps thinking that the time isn't quite right for Mateo and her. The reasons she gives vary, including a lack of maturity on her part. But actually, she's pursuing another woman's dream — a straight woman's dream instead of her own.

## **Much of the story is told in a letter written by Tatum to M. Why did you choose to write the book this way?**

First and second person are so intimate. I was drawn to the intimacy of having a conversation, but a conversation in which a woman's voice and perspective is the most important. That led me to the second person.

## **As both a reader and author, what do you think are the most interesting stories being told right now?**

Currently, we're living in a renaissance of Native and Latinx writing. Years ago, I was blown away by Tommy Orange's novel *There There*. I love Stephen Graham Jones's thrillers, such as *The Only Good Indians*. Fernanda Melchor is writing fascinating books that are thankfully being translated from Spanish into English. I'm also a huge fan of Angie Cruz's writing. I love books that make me laugh, and her novel *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* is structurally brilliant and humorous.

# TATUM'S ESSENTIAL READING LIST

*Just As Long As We're Together* by Judy Blume

*Last Evenings on Earth* by Roberto Bolaño

*Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

*Say Goodnight, Gracie* by Julie Reece Deaver

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

*Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* by Fannie Flagg

*A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway

*The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith

*Motherless Brooklyn* by Jonathan Lethem

*Everything That Rises Must Converge* by Flannery O'Connor

*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith

*The Driver's Seat* by Muriel Spark

*Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe

*Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel