



ALLEN & UNWIN'S
Book Group Guide
Conversation Starters



Contents

About the book	2
Conversation starters	2
Just for fun	3
A note from the author	4
About the author	5
Praise	6
If you like this ...	6
Further reading	7

Give yourself a taste of New York to set the scene for your book club. Offer smoked salmon & cream cheese bagels or deli-style sandwiches with corned beef and pastrami on rye. Don't forget to enjoy dill pickles on the side! New York is where the wine industry was first pioneered in the USA so enjoy a glass while you ponder the art that is *The Museum of Modern Love* or, if you're feeling more adventurous, then a Manhattan cocktail is synonymous with the city. Of course, if you still have room, you can finish off with a slice of New York-style cheesecake.

About the Book

Winner of the 2017 Stella Prize and the Christina Stead Award for Fiction in the New South Wales Premier's Prizes.

A mesmerising literary novel about a lost man in search of connection - a meditation on love, art and commitment, set against the backdrop of one of the greatest art events in modern history, Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*.

She watched as the final hours of The Artist is Present passed by, sitter after sitter in a gaze with the woman across the table. Jane felt she had witnessed a thing of inexplicable beauty among humans who had been drawn to this art and had found the reflection of a great mystery. What are we? How should we live?

Arky Levin is a film composer in New York separated from his wife, who has asked him to keep one devastating promise. One day he finds his way to The Atrium at MOMA and sees Marina Abramović in *The Artist is Present*. The performance continues for seventy-five days and, as it unfolds, so does Arky. As he watches and meets other people drawn to the exhibit, he slowly starts to understand what might be missing in his life and what he must do.

This dazzlingly original novel asks beguiling questions about the nature of art, life and love and finds a way to answer them.

Conversation Starters ...

- *The Museum of Modern Love* is a blend of fact and fiction. Do you think the novel would have been as successful if it had been based on a fictional artist?
- Heather Rose has described the character based on Marina Abramović as someone 'who had given her life, and her love, to art.' Could you say the same of Arky Levin?

- ☞ One spectator of *The Artist is Present* remarks “What you have to understand is the art is irrelevant ... You can’t write your way alive, or paint your way out of death. Sitting is not art, no matter how long you do it for.” (p. 19)
Do you think Marina’s performance is art? Why?
- ☞ The story is told through an omniscient narrator. Is this an effective technique for the novel’s imagination and structure?
- ☞ Jane tells Arky “I think art saves people all the time.” (p. 19)
What do you think she means?
- ☞ After witnessing *The Artist is Present*, Arky feels the need to keep returning. “Something about this was important, but he couldn’t say why.” (p. 25)
Why do you think it’s important to him? To Jane? To Brittika?
- ☞ Heather Rose has said that female artists often don’t get the protracted, uninterrupted periods of thinking time that male artists do. Do you agree? How does Marina’s and Levin’s creative lives challenge or confirm this?
- ☞ Are Lydia’s instructions for Levin to continue his life without the burden of caring for her an act of love? Do you think he’s being selfish for doing so or not being selfish by complying with her wishes? Is Levin a good husband to Lydia?
- ☞ During their earlier performance of *Nightsea Crossing*, Ulay had to leave due to pain while Marina continued sitting without him. “I think it made him hate her a little bit. Knowing she could be stronger.” (p. 84)
How does this aspect of their relationship compare with those of Lydia and Levin, Francesca and Dieter, and Healayas and Arnold.
- ☞ “Love accounted for so many things. A series of biological and chemical interactions. A bout of responsibility. An invisible wave of normality that had been romanticised and externalised. A form of required connection to ensure procreation. A strategic response to prevent loneliness and maintain social structures.” (p. 47)
Is this love? Would you add anything to the list?
- ☞ Watching the final moments of the performance, Jane comes to a realisation that “it is all about connection. If we do it with the merest amount of intention and candour and fearlessness, this the biggest love we can feel.” (p.266)
In what ways does *The Artist is Present* connect people?
- ☞ As *The Artist is Present* comes to an end, Arky finds the bravery to face not only Marina but his own situation. What do you think he has learned? Do you agree with the decision he ultimately makes regarding Lydia’s wishes?

Just for fun ...

- ☞ If you had to visit and discuss *The Artist is Present* with any of the characters in the novel, who would you choose and why?
- ☞ What would your performance art piece be?

A note from the author

In this Stella Prize interview, Heather discusses the murky line between fact and fiction, the power of art, and what it feels like when a character in your book gives you feedback.

You have called *The Museum of Modern Love*, ‘a strange hybrid of fact and fiction’. Is there a clear line between the two within the book?

I’m not sure there is ever a clear line between fact and fiction. The story occurs within and around a real event – a 75-day performance at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010 by the artist Marina Abramović, called *The Artist is Present*. Abramović appears as a character in the book. I did extensive research, but this lives within a web of fictional characters and relationships. It was a delicate process to balance the weighty responsibilities I felt for the facts within the larger fictional world of the novel.

***The Museum of Modern Love* follows many different characters, but there is also an omniscient narrator who is very important to the novel’s imagination and structure. Could you talk about this narrator’s role, and how you envision their presence in the story?**

The omniscient narrator arrived early, but I wasn’t sure I had the confidence to include them, so I removed them for many years. In the last year they slipped back in, and that was the final puzzle piece after eleven years of work.

I’ve always loved the angelic beings in the film *City of Angels*. I think this narrator is a little like them. Mostly invisible and yet sometimes powerfully felt. This timeless presence has a prime directive to help artists of various persuasions ‘do something worthwhile before they die’. If I had to cast the movie version of the novel, I’d choose Tilda Swinton for the narrator. Marina Abramović could play herself ...

The book is directly inspired by Marina Abramović’s performance piece, *The Artist is Present*, and she gave you permission to include her as a character. Have you had feedback from Abramović as to what she thinks of the novel?

Marina’s assistant conveyed to me that Marina had read the book in India and had rung him to say, ‘it is wonderful and so well done’. It is extremely strange when a character in your book gives you feedback, but it was a huge relief to think she liked it.

***The Museum of Modern Love* is partly about the power art can exert over individual lives. What power do you think art possesses in society today?**

I’ll leave that to Jane in *The Museum of Modern Love*, who says: ‘I think art saves people all the time.’ That’s the power of art.

- Read the full Stella interview at: <http://thestellaprize.com.au/2017/04/stella-interview-heather-rose-museum-modern-love/>
- Listen to Heather discuss Marina Abramović and *The Museum of Modern Love* on *Books and Arts* at: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/a-novel-about-marina-abramovic/7941530>
- Share in Heather's creative process and inspiration behind *The Museum of Modern Love* in the *Sydney Morning Herald* at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/marina-abramovic-and-me-how-a-chance-encounter-inspired-a-tale-of-modern-love-20160812-gqr0rr.html>

About the Author

The Museum of Modern Love is Heather Rose's seventh novel. Her novels span adult literary fiction, children's literature, fantasy/sci-fi and crime.

Heather's previous novels are *White Heart* (1999), *The Butterfly Man* (2005) and *The River Wife* (2009). Heather also writes the acclaimed Tuesday McGillycuddy series for children (written under the pen-name of Angelica Banks with fellow-author Danielle Wood and published internationally). The series is *Finding Serendipity* (2013), *A Week Without Tuesday* (2015) and *Blueberry Pancakes Forever* (2016).

Heather won the 2017 Stella Prize and the Christina Stead Award for Fiction in the New South Wales Premier's Prizes, and the Davitt Award in 2006. Her work has been shortlisted for the Nita B Kibble Award and the Aurealis Awards, and longlisted for the IMPAC Awards. She is also a recipient of the international Eleanor Dark Fellowship.

Heather was the inaugural Writer in Residence at The Museum of Old and New Art (MoNA) in Hobart 2012-13 where she did much of the research for *The Museum of Modern Love*. She is currently studying Fine Arts at UTAS.



Praise for *The Museum of Modern Love*

‘This is a weirdly beautiful book.’ **David Walsh, founder and curator, MoNA**

‘Life beats down and crushes the soul, and art reminds you that you have one.’ **Stella Adler**

‘From its conception to its last page, the book challenges our perceptions of where life ends and art begins (if they were ever separate to begin with). As readers, we sometimes find ourselves in the atrium, keenly observing from the periphery, or we find ourselves pulled along in the currents of all these connected lives. When the book is at its most powerful, we’re also invited into the centre, asked if we’d like to take a seat and meet the gaze.’ **Dominic Smith, *The Australian***

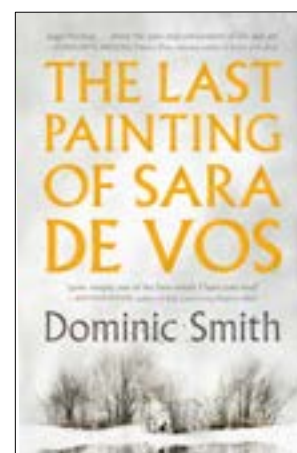
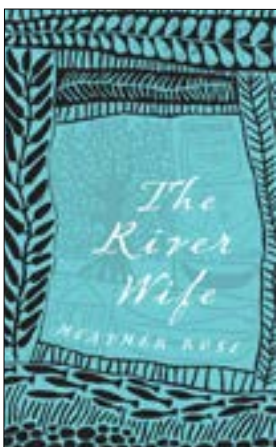
‘*The Museum of Modern Love* is more than just that rare treat, a book that requires something of the reader – it is a book that painstakingly prepares you for its own requirements. In a playful way, this bold new novel by Heather Rose is an astute meditation on art, bravery, friendship, love, how to live, and on dying.’ **Louise Swinn, *Sydney Morning Herald***

‘It’s true that the subject matter is fascinating in itself but Heather Rose deserves credit for taking the initial inspiration to create her own thoughtful, multi-layered work; deftly grabbing the reader’s attention right from the beginning and sustaining the multiple narrative threads throughout. The theme of connection is predominant and I found the most significant part of the novel to be how the characters respond to the exhibition and whether they are able to take that experience into their own lives (i.e. truly connect art to life).’ **Amanda Rayner, *Readings***

If you liked this book . . .

May we suggest the following?

- ☛ *The River Wife* by Heather Rose
- ☛ *The Natural Way of Things* by Charlotte Wood
- ☛ *The Last Painting of Sara De Vos* by Dominic Smith



Further reading . . .

How to Be Both by Ali Smith

The Woman Upstairs by Claire Messud

What I Loved by Siri Hustvedt

The Flame Throwers by Rachel Kushner

Further reading about Marina Abramović

Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present by MOMA

Portraits in the Presence of Maria Abramović by Marco Anelli

Marina Abramović by Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Iles