



## The Post-Birthday World

By Lionel Shriver  
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### Introduction

In this eagerly awaited new novel, Lionel Shriver, the Orange Prize-winning author of the international bestseller *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, delivers an imaginative and entertaining look at the implications, large and small, of whom we choose to love. Using a playful parallel-universe structure, *The Post-Birthday World* follows one woman's future as it unfolds under the influence of two drastically different men.

Children's book illustrator Irina McGovern enjoys a quiet and settled life in London with her partner, fellow American expatriate Lawrence Trainer, a smart, loyal, disciplined intellectual at a prestigious think tank. To their small circle of friends, their relationship is rock solid. Until the night Irina unaccountably finds herself dying to kiss another man: their old friend from South London, the stylish, extravagant, passionate top-ranking snooker player Ramsey Acton. The decision to give in to

temptation will have consequences for her career, her relationships with family and friends, and perhaps most importantly the texture of her daily life.

Hinging on a single kiss, this enchanting work of fiction depicts Irina's alternating futures with two men temperamentally worlds apart yet equally honorable. With which true love Irina is better off is neither obvious nor easy to determine, but Shriver's exploration of the two destinies is memorable and gripping. Poignant and deeply honest, written with the subtlety and wit that are the hallmarks of Shriver's work, *The Post-Birthday World* appeals to the what-if in us all.

### Questions for Discussion

1. In *The Post-Birthday World*, we get to see Irina lead two very different lives based on a choice she makes between two men. Have you ever wondered what your life would be like had you chosen a different path?
2. In each universe that Irina inhabits, she is drawn to the man she let go. Do we always want what we can't have? Why are the choices that we didn't make so appealing in retrospect?
3. In the characters of Lawrence and Ramsey, Irina is offered the choice between two opposites: where Lawrence is predictable, Ramsey is wild; where Ramsey is extravagant, Lawrence is disciplined. Do you think that by casting the men so differently Shriver is portraying general male stereotypes, or is there some truth in these characters? What are the pros and cons of each man as a partner? Do women prefer one type to another at different times in their lives? Why?
4. Is Irina the same person in her relationship with Lawrence as she is in her relationship with Ramsey? Do you think that the person you're with determines the person you are, or would you be the same person no matter with whom you're in a relationship?
5. Irina is happy and unhappy in both universes, with both men. Who do you think Irina is happiest with? If she had both men before her and could see her different lives with each, which man would she choose? Which man would you choose to be with?
6. Irina is a self-sufficient and highly successful woman, yet throughout *The Post-Birthday World* she believes that her ultimate happiness will come from a man. Does Irina's recognition that she needs a man in her life characterize her as a throwback to a pre-feminist era, or can she need a man in her life and still be self-actualized?
7. Children are completely absent from this story. How does this affect the characters, their decisions, and their relationships?
8. How much of our choice about the person we end up in a relationship with has to do with fate and how much has to do with the decisions we make over the course of our lives? And are the decisions you might make in your 20s different from the choices you'd make in your 30s, 40s, or 50s?

### About the Author

Lionel Shriver's books include *The Post-Birthday World*, *Game Control*, and the Orange Prize-winning *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. She writes frequently for the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. She lives in London.