

Further Out Than You Thought

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By Michaela Carter

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Introduction

Combining the eloquence and raw sensuality of Jeanette Winterson with the romantic, renegade spirit of Patti Smith, *Further Out Than You Thought* is a taut and erotically charged literary debut, set against the chaos of the 1992 L.A. riots, about three people searching for identity and meaning from award-winning poet and indie bookshop co-founder Michaela Carter.



In the Neverland that is Los Angeles, where make-believe seems real, three dreamers find themselves on the verge of transformation. Twenty-five-year-old poet Gwendolyn Griffin works as a stripper to put herself through graduate school. Her perpetually stoned boyfriend Leo dresses in period costume to hawk his music downtown, and seems to be losing his already tenuous grip on reality. And their flamboyant best friend and neighbor, nightclub crooner Count Valiant, is slowly withering away.

When the city explodes in violence after the Rodney King verdict, the chaos becomes a catalyst for change. Valiant is invigorated, Leo plans a new stunt—walking into east L.A., naked, holding a white flag—and Gwen, discovering she is pregnant, is confronted by troubling questions. Can Leo become a good, dependable father? Can she leave the club life behind, or will the city's spell prove too seductive?

Combining poetry and sensuality with an edgy urban sensibility, *Further Out Than You Thought* is a celebration of life and a haunting story of love, friendship, and one woman's quest for redemption.

Questions for Discussion

1. The novel *Further Out Than You Thought* revolves around the young woman, Gwendolyn Griffin. What does she want? How would you describe her? Did your feelings about her change as the novel progressed?
2. How does Gwen's alter ego, Stevie, behave differently from her? Why do think Gwen invented her? Are there reasons other than her need for money that made Gwen decide to work as a stripper? In what ways does Stevie's existence allow Gwen to remain in a life that might otherwise be untenable?
3. Talk about the Century Lounge. What sense did you get of the various dancers—Brett, Devotion, and Love—and of Tony, Stevie's regular customer? To what extent did the club differ from your impression of what a strip club would be like? What role does the

club play in the novel? What does it say about Gwen's idea of what it is to be female? Does it achieve Gwen's goal of making her more empowered?

4. What three adjectives would you use to describe Leo? Why do you think Gwen has stuck with him? In what ways could you sympathize with her love for him?
5. Gwen feels a strong connection to her mother. How do her feelings of guilt around her mother's death affect her? In what regards does her mother's character define her own notions of what it is to be a mother?
6. Los Angeles is known as the city of dreams. It also fueled the most violent unrest the U.S. has seen in over a century. In what ways is Los Angeles itself a character in the novel?
7. When Gwen finds herself stuck in traffic in a particularly dangerous section of the riots what does she experience? How does this moment make her see her life differently? What part do the riots play in Gwen's transformation?
8. How does the novel portray race, cultural identity and skin color? For instance, Gwen is part Latina, while she thinks of herself as white, whereas Valiant is black, but identifies more with his sexual orientation.
9. When Gwen tells Valiant she is pregnant, he says, "You have to stop thinking of just yourself. You've been really, well, *absorbed* lately." At this and other moments, Valiant and Leo accuse Gwen of being selfish. Discuss the ways selfishness and sacrifice play into our ideas of motherhood.
10. Describe the role of environment in the novel. How does the physical environment—the smoke, the pollution, orange and avocado trees, the mountain lion, the ocean—affect Gwen's journey?
11. In many regards, the novel is about dreams and what happens when they break with reality. What were Gwen's, Leo's and Valiant's dreams? How do their realities differ? What happens when dreams don't come true? Do you agree with the idea that the truest dreams are based in reality?
12. A number of substances feature largely in the novel—alcohol, marijuana, psilocybin mushrooms, and water. Talk about the ways they influence the characters and the story.
13. What do you see for Gwen's future? How do you think Gwen's life would have been different had she stayed with Leo? What did you feel when she left him? Have you ever had a moment like this?

14. What is the significance of the title, *Further Out Than You Thought*? In what ways does it capture the heart of the novel?