

Mercury: A Novel

Harper Perennial

By Margot Livesey

ISBN: 9780062437518

Introduction

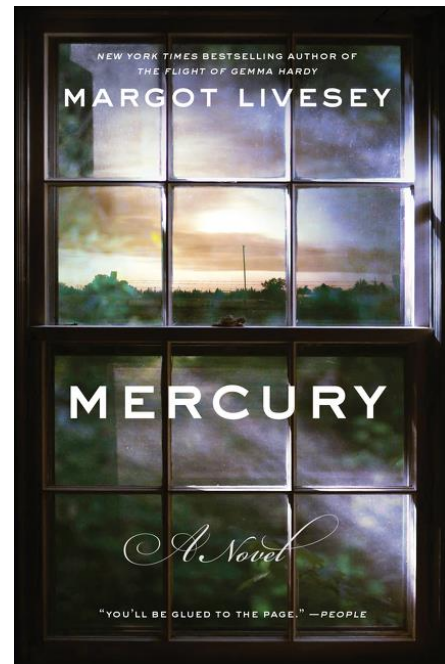
The *New York Times* bestselling author of “brilliantly paced contemporary adventure” (*Elle*) delivers her most gripping novel yet—at once a tense, psychological drama and a taut emotional thriller about love, obsession, and the deceptions that pull a family apart.

Donald believes he knows all there is to know about seeing. An optometrist in suburban Boston, he is sure that he and his wife, Viv, who runs the local stables, are both devoted to their two children and to each other. Then Mercury—a gorgeous young thoroughbred with a murky past—arrives at Windy Hill and everything changes.

Mercury’s owner, Hilary, is a newcomer to town who has enrolled her daughter in riding lessons. When she brings Mercury to board at Windy Hill, everyone is struck by his beauty and prowess, particularly Viv. As she rides him, Viv begins to dream of competing again, embracing the ambitions that she had harbored, and relinquished, as a young woman. Her daydreams soon morph into consuming desire, and her infatuation with the thoroughbred escalates to obsession.

Donald may have 20/20 vision but he is slow to notice how profoundly Viv has changed and how these changes threaten their quiet, secure world. By the time he does, it is too late to stop the catastrophic collision of Viv’s ambitions and his own myopia.

At once a tense psychological drama and a taut emotional thriller exploring love, obsession, and the deceptions that pull a family apart, *Mercury* is a riveting tour de force that showcases this “searingly intelligent writer at the height of her powers” (Jennifer Egan).



Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the name Mercury and its literal and mythic meanings and implications. In what ways is each relevant throughout the novel?
2. What layers of meaning exist in the novel because of Donald's profession as an optometrist?
3. Donald says he is "pleased by an average day...neither great nor awesome." What does he mean? In what ways is this approach to life valuable or limiting?
4. When Viv first considers quitting her job to work at the stables, Donald reminds her of Margaret Fuller's statement that "Men for the sake of getting a living forget to live." What elements or qualities has Viv possibly forgotten? How might a person balance the need to make a living and to live well?
5. What's important in the novel about Nabokov, the African grey parrot? Of what significance is his name?
6. Viv enters into activities and causes "wholeheartedly." In what ways does this serve her well or not? What are the benefits or dangers of such an approach to living?
7. What important qualities, knowledge, and experience does Jack bring to the novel?
8. Jack instructs Donald on the etymological link between the words "secret" and "separate." How is this relevant to Donald and Viv? What are some valid justifications for keeping secrets?
9. Consider all the literary allusions throughout the novel: Chekhov, Dickens, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Nabokov, etc. What does each add to the complex subjects of the story?
10. Of what particular relevance is the mention of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*? To what extent are extreme personality shifts natural and healthy or a sign of problematic instability?
11. How is the Persian mythological bird the Simurg important to Donald? How might such myths serve people in their lives?
12. For Donald, "honesty and integrity have always mattered more...than freedom." How much freedom is necessary for happiness? What qualities or experiences justify some sacrifice of personal freedom?
13. Viv admits that her parents' divorce changed her. In what ways? How might the difficult experience have influenced her decisions regarding Mercury?

14. Viv explains to Marcus that “grown ups” get confused a lot because they want too many things. What does she mean? What are the many things that Viv wants? What’s a healthy balance of desire and restraint?

15. In the midst of his struggles, Donald recalls Diane’s important question: “Which matters more: ideals or people?” What does he decide? Which seems more important?

16. After the dramatic resolution to the situation, Robert tells Donald that he will have “a second life and a third.” What does he mean? To what extent is continuity in a life important or limiting?

17. To what extent is Viv’s behavior understandable? Is it justified? Should Donald wait for her and work to rebuild their relationship? Why or why not?