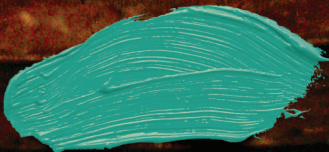




# *the girl between*

A NOVEL



"A tale of lost innocence,  
the power of art,  
and the pain of love."

—*Sunday Express*

LISA STRØMME

## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Some people in Åsgårdstrand, including Johanne's mother, view Edvard Munch with suspicion because of the nature of his paintings. How does this attitude compare to modern society's reaction to some media, including books, movies, and video games?
2. At this time in history, Norway was a very poor country with most of its population living in rural locations. Discuss how this social climate may have influenced parts of the story, particularly Tullik's fascination with Munch and Johanne's feelings for Thomas.
3. Johanne dreams of being an artist but has to sneak around to practice her craft. How does the society she is living in limit her choices in life?
4. Discuss Johanne and Tullik's relationship. Why were they drawn to each other? Have you ever experienced a friendship that was similar to theirs, with extreme ups and downs?

5. In *The Girl Between*, Munch had a relationship with Tullik's older sister, Milly, before becoming involved with Tullik. How do you think Tullik's knowledge that Munch had loved Milly first affected her feelings for him?
6. Munch's paintings inspire powerful feelings, both positive and negative, in Johanne and many others in Åsgårdstrand. Can you remember being affected in such a way by a piece of art or by a book or a movie?
7. Tullik asks Johanne to lie for her to allow her to be with Munch. Why do you think Johanne does what she asks? Have you ever had to lie to protect a friend or loved one, even when you thought what they were doing was wrong?
8. Tullik's parents burn the paintings they find in her room, believing that destroying the art and keeping Tullik away from Munch was for her own good. Do you think they did the right thing? Why or why not?
9. Near the end of the book, Johanne says that even though Tullik and Munch never spoke after that summer, she married him and "she was married to him all her life." What do you think she means? Is there anyone in your life that you feel very strongly connected to, even if you haven't seen them for years or even decades?
10. Johanne leaves her copy of *The Scream* underneath the floorboards in her house, never revealing it to the world. Why do you think she does that? What might happen if she were to uncover it?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

### **What was your inspiration for *The Girl Between*?**

Munch had been in the background of my life for many years, but I had never really paid close attention to him until *The Scream* sold at auction for a record-breaking figure. I suddenly woke up and needed to know what made this painter's work so enduring and so popular. That was the trigger. I had also admired Heyerdahl's work for years and always loved *The Strawberry Girl* so I thought it would be interesting to create a story that combined both of these painters and their work.

### **How did living in Norway affect your writing process?**

The actual writing process is something very personal and internal, so in that sense, it doesn't really matter where you are geographically; you still face the same challenges. However, living in Norway does influence what I choose to write about. I doubt I would have thought to write about Munch had I not lived in Norway, so it obviously brought me much closer to the subject matter and dictated things like the setting and the landscape.

**You write so beautifully about art and the way it affects people. How did you decide which paintings would be important in the book, and how did they help you shape the story?**

Thank you. I had most of the plot and story mapped out and the paintings slotted themselves into the scenes I was writing. Thankfully, Munch was a prolific artist and there were a lot of paintings, particularly those from Åsgårdstrand, which worked well. Sometimes paintings found their way in and inspired certain scenes, so the process wasn't clear-cut. I spent a long time with Munch's work, and writing the book became a strange osmosis that I can't really describe. He encouraged me to be very experimental, and studying his paintings close-up gave me lots of ideas as to how I could reflect them in my writing.

**Are there any of Munch's paintings that you love but that had to be left out of the book?**

Yes! In fact, my favorite Munch painting, *The Girls on the Bridge* (1901), is not in the book. It was just too modern for it, in terms of the clothing the girls are wearing. It is included in the setting—the Kiøsterud house, and the pier and the water—but it's not as specific as some of the other paintings that feature in the story.

**Real historical figures, including Edvard Munch, Hans Heyerdahl, and the Ihlen family, appear in the novel, while other characters are fictional. How did you approach the process of balancing the historical facts and taking creative liberties?**

A novel is always a piece of fiction, even if elements of it are based on real people or events. As a writer, you still have to get inside the heads of your characters and use your imagination, regardless of whether anyone actually existed in real life. However, I wanted to



make the story as authentic as I possibly could within the boundaries of fiction and tried to make the real people as close to their actual characters as they would have been, based on accounts I read of them (with the exception of Tullik and Caroline, whose personalities were almost purely fictional). Munch was the only character for whom there was a substantial amount of material to work from, but even then, he was such a complex person that the more I read, the more of a mystery he became. I took creative liberties with the characters where I thought it would enhance the story and balance out the range of personality types in the book.

**Which character do you feel most closely connected to?**

Tullik. I have always been a bit of a rebel, interested in art and artistic people, people who are quirky and a bit different. I never follow the crowd; I get bored easily, I'm emotional and very sensitive. I think if I had been stuck in her situation, I would probably have acted similarly.

**Who are some of your favorite authors?**

It's a question that's almost impossible to answer succinctly. Classically speaking, I've always been a fan of the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and Hemingway. But there are many modern authors whom I admire. Some of those are Sue Monk Kidd, Tracy Chevalier, Hilary Mantel, Margaret Atwood, Norwegian author Per Petterson, and one of my own teachers, the Irish novelist Niall Williams, is a beautiful writer.

**Did you always know you wanted to be an author, or did you start off in a different career?**

Both. I was always a keen storyteller for as long as I can remember. I loved art and English at school. I was very creative and had no difficulty

at all imagining my own worlds, adventures, and characters. However, I fell into the trap of believing that it would never be a “real job.” I got caught up in doing what my peers were doing and ended up going to university, studying business, and working in the corporate world. It didn’t fulfill me, and I found myself being drawn again and again to my true vocation. I started writing seriously after I moved to Norway in 2000 and then just kept at it, throwing myself wholeheartedly into a much more creative life. We have to honor our authentic selves on our life path because the alternatives will never satisfy us.

### **What is the most challenging part of being a writer?**

For me, it’s the discipline and the self-belief. Creative people tend to be rebellious, so making up rules and committing to a writing schedule every day can be very difficult to stick to. It’s also quite common to be madly enthusiastic about an idea, only to turn on yourself and question it endlessly afterward. Ironically, there aren’t many writers who actually enjoy writing. We like having ideas and imagining characters and stories, but it pains us to get the story to live up to the image in our heads. I am a certified creativity coach and help people deal with issues such as procrastination, fear, writer’s block, etc., and even knowing all the tricks and tools I know, I still find it difficult to work through these things myself. That’s why I also have my own coach.

### **What advice would you give to aspiring authors?**

Keep going. If you really want to write, deep in your heart, if you can’t live without it, then keep going. It’s an endurance game. And don’t be disheartened by rejection—it’s an important part of the process because it makes you dig deeper.

Before you even try to get published, make sure what you’ve

written is honestly your absolute best. You need to be critical and pick your work apart, leave it for months, come back to it, then improve it, until you are genuinely proud of it from every angle: plot, style, dialogue, setting—everything. You'll know when you are there. Until that point, you will always know that it could, in some way, be better.

Read. Read. Read.

Be kind to yourself. Be patient. Find a creativity coach, a teacher, or a like-minded writing group who will help you have fun with the process.