



Reading Group Guide

# GIRL IN ICE

## ERICA FERENCIK

*This reading group guide for **Girl in Ice** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

### Introduction

Valerie Chesterfield is a linguist trained in the most esoteric of disciplines: dead Nordic languages. Despite Val's successful career, she leads a sheltered life and languishes in the shadow of her twin brother, Andy, an accomplished climate scientist stationed on a remote island off Greenland's barren coast. But Andy is gone: He willfully ventured unprotected into fifty degrees below zero weather. Val is inconsolable; suicide is the easy conclusion—but she suspects foul play.

When Wyatt, Andy's fellow researcher in the Arctic, discovers a scientific impossibility—a young girl frozen in the ice who thaws out alive, speaking a language no one understands—Val is his first call. Will she travel to the frozen North, meet this girl, and try to comprehend what she is so passionately trying to communicate? Under the guise of helping Wyatt interpret the girl's speech, Val musters every ounce of her courage and journeys to the Arctic to solve the mystery of her brother's death.

The moment she steps off the plane, fear threatens to overwhelm her. The landscape is fierce, and Wyatt, brilliant but difficult, is an enigma. The girl, however, is special, and Val's connection with her is profound. But something is terribly wrong; the child is sick, maybe dying, and the key to saving her lies in discovering the truth about Wyatt's research. Can his data be trusted? Does it have anything to do with how and why Val's brother died? With time running out, Val embarks on an incredible frozen odyssey—led by the unlikeliest of guides—to rescue the new family she has found in the most unexpected of places.

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### Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. At the start of the novel, Val is confined to her personal bubble by choice, whereas her father is confined by old age and the inability to take care of himself, let alone travel. We also see Val and her father butt heads over what they each think happened to Andy. How does this family relationship influence Val's mindset at the beginning of her journey? Is she traveling to get out of her bubble, to find out the truth about Andy's death, or to prove something to her father? Could it be all three?
2. In a flashback scene, Andy is adamant about refusing to have children due to a sense of climate change fatalism. He does not want to bring children into what he sees as a doomed world with a failing environment. How does this desire to protect potential children from the dangers of climate change connect to Val's decision to fly to Greenland to help Sigrid? Do these attitudes from the two siblings toward helpless children seem to match or diverge? Do you share Andy's concerns about how the world is changing for future generations?
3. Sigrid responds emphatically to chocolate and communicates via drawing pictures when she doesn't respond to toys, new clothes, Val's languages, etc. What are ways we can communicate with one another that don't involve speech? What would your version of the chocolate bar be if you were in an unfamiliar and scary situation like Sigrid's?
4. "The word in Inuktitut for climate change translates to 'a friend acting strangely'—what a personal and beautiful way of describing a relationship to the natural world" (page 24). The setting of the Arctic almost acts as its own character throughout *Girl in Ice*, informing many of the characters' decisions, impulses, and actions. Discuss each character's relationship to the Arctic.
5. During the ice storm, all of the characters are stuck in the main house with one another. There is an irony in being trapped in a room with several people while stationed in total isolation. The stress of this proximity leads to rising tensions between Wyatt and Val and results in Wyatt and Jeanne forcibly drawing blood from Sigrid. How did your perceptions of Wyatt and Jeanne change at this turning point in the story? Discuss how Val is increasingly wary and distrustful of Wyatt from this point forward. Does Sigrid's fear toward Wyatt and Jeanne actually advance her relationship with Val? With Nora and Raj?
6. *Girl in Ice* is told entirely through Val's perspective. If you could read the book through another character's eyes, whose would it be? How might each of the characters describe one another and the setting of the Arctic, and how would these ideas differ from Val's perceptions of her surroundings? For example, Val finds the Arctic desolate and unforgiving, while Sigrid loves being outside in the cold. How would Sigrid's perception of her environment differ from Val's?
7. Each of the characters seems to be in Greenland to cope with death. Val has recently lost her brother, Jeanne has lost her husband and daughter, and Nora and Raj have lost their infant son. Even Wyatt is dealing with cancer and facing his own impending death. How can a new environment help us gain perspective on our problems? How can seeking out a new environment backfire on us?

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8. Jeanne is loyal to Wyatt even when he mistreats her and insults her behind her back to the other characters. She even intentionally sabotages his research to try and keep him from leaving the Arctic and her with it. Why might Jeanne go along with his violence, abuse, and scheming throughout the novel, and what do you think causes her to finally turn her back on him? Does she turn against him for her own sake, or for Val and Sigrid's?
9. At what point did you start to suspect Wyatt of being responsible for Andy's death? Do you think that Val became suspicious of Wyatt soon enough, or was she in denial? What do we know about Val that can help us understand why she kept herself from seeing a painful truth?
10. Did you theorize about Andy's death or the mystery of Sigrid thawing out alive while reading? Discuss what you thought might have happened to Andy or how Sigrid could have thawed out from the ice alive. Were you surprised by the ending?

## Enhance Your Book Club

1. Who would you like to see cast in a movie or TV adaptation of *Girl in Ice*?
2. The characters in the book, especially Wyatt and Jeanne, have had to eat mostly canned, dried, frozen, or reconstituted fare flown over from the mainland at great expense. In one scene, they name a few fresh foods that they crave after having spent more than a year on the research base. What fresh foods would you miss the most if you found yourself in a similar situation?
3. Sigrid and Val overcome a sharp learning curve due to their inability to understand each other's speech patterns and language. Spend five minutes with your group trying to communicate without speaking, then discuss the experience. Can you better relate to Val and Sigrid as characters struggling with communication?
4. After learning what the challenges of living in the Arctic can be like, look into supporting Indigenous groups in Greenland. Some resources include the [International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs page on Indigenous peoples in Greenland](#), or [Oceans North](#), which aims to spread awareness about the conserving the marine environment and coastal lands in collaboration with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic.
5. What parallels in Sigrid's ancient society do you see in the world today, in terms of competing for resources deemed more and more precious due to climate change?