

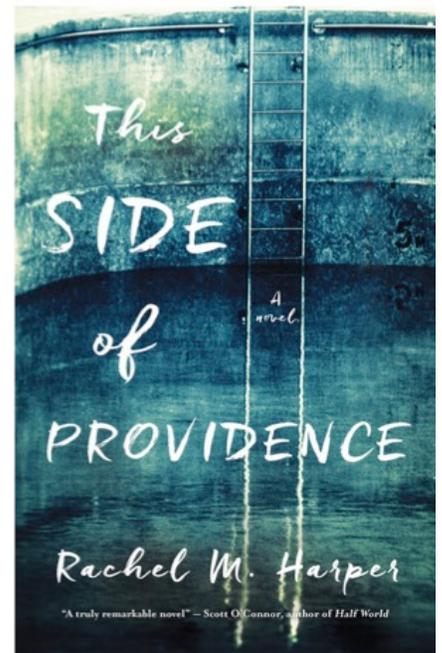
Readers' Group Guide

***This Side of Providence***

By Rachel M. Harper

**Conversation Starters**

1. This novel is told through many points of view—why did the author use multiple narrators to tell this particular story? Did you have a favorite narrator? Were all of the narrators reliable?
2. Arcelia and Cristo narrate a similar number of chapters; is it clear which one is the protagonist? Are they dual protagonists? Who changes the most by the end of the novel?
3. Arcelia struggles with heroin addiction; is she the only addict in the novel? Does Miss Valentín qualify as an addict? Why or why not? How does her relationship with food and body image impact her life?
4. What role does love play in this story? Is it love or obligation that propels many of the characters? Does Arcelia love her children? What does she do that shows she cares for them? Is it enough? Who or what does Snowman love?
5. Water is an important symbol in this novel. There are several scenes where characters are immersed in water: some are caught in rain, while others bathe or swim in the ocean or pools. What is the significance of water in these scenes? Does water represent something different to each character? Who needs water the most?
6. How is the theme of forgiveness played out in this novel? Who has the most difficulty trying to forgive? Who is the most forgiving? Does Arcelia succeed at forgiving herself?
7. There are many letters written in the novel; what role does letter writing provide in the story? Are there things conveyed through the letters that wouldn't (or couldn't) be expressed face-to-face? Do the letters feel different from the voices in the narrated chapters? Does one feel more or less real?
8. There seems to be a connection between love and sacrifice in this novel; who makes the largest sacrifice for the sake of love? Is it enough? Is sacrifice itself a form of love?
9. We hear from three narrators only once; how did their chapters enhance your understanding of the larger story? Did they convey something that would have been missing without them?
10. How do Arcelia's flashes (the single-page italicized paragraphs that begin with "She sees") function throughout the book? How did they affect your understanding of Arcelia's journey? Did they allow you to be more or less sympathetic to her plight?



## Rachel M. Harper on *This Side of Providence*

I was inspired by many things to write this novel, but the first strike of inspiration came in the form of a single question: *Can an addict be a good mother?* I asked myself this question many times throughout the writing of this book, and I got many different answers; in one form or another, all of them are found within its pages.

It was important for me to tell an authentic version of this story. I didn't want it to be one-sided or preachy; I didn't want to pick heroes or victims. I wanted to tell the story of a family impacted by addiction and poverty, and to show the aftermath of getting caught up in the system, so to do it right I felt as if we needed to hear from everybody intimately involved. That's why I chose to use multiple narrators. This isn't just Arcelia's story, or Cristo's story; each one of the main characters has an important perspective, and I felt it was necessary to include all of them in order to see the entire picture. No single narrator holds the entire truth, but my hope is that together they give the reader a complete picture of what happened and why it matters.

I grew up in Providence, and over the three decades I lived there I saw the city change and grow in a lot of interesting ways. It's an old city, founded by religious exiles, so there's always been an underdog quality to its various communities. We all felt like outsiders in a way, and that gave us a reason to bind together, and perhaps something to hold onto. I think it helped form an aspect of my personality, and instilled in me an interesting relationship with *place*, with the idea of being from somewhere, and ultimately forced me to think about what it means to fit or not fit in to your home.

As I watched different immigrant communities come and go, I saw the landscape in the South Side and West End evolve: the sights, sounds, and smells of each neighborhood slowly changing to reflect the different cultures, as Spanish replaced Italian and Portuguese, as new restaurants popped up on vacant street corners, as different music filled the night air. I tried to capture that transformation in this novel, to populate the story with voices I hadn't heard in the books I read growing up. Like Cristo, who says he's telling this story because nobody else will, I felt compelled to shed light on the side of Providence no one seemed to talk about, the one neglected in the tourist maps and history books.

The title, *This Side of Providence*, has a double meaning, and is intended to echo the phrase *this side of paradise*. I want the reader to think about the many sides of their own hometown, and to question if there are entire neighborhoods they don't visit or even know about. In a time when so many communities feel divided, it's important to be aware of the many sides that make up the whole, to acknowledge the privilege of being from the "right side," and to imagine the burden of coming from the wrong one, to recognize how much energy it takes to survive when the odds are stacked against you. This novel is about love and forgiveness, sacrifice and redemption; it's about the struggle to live beyond the expectations others have put upon you, and how to exceed the limits we put upon ourselves.