

BOOK CLUB KIT

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 LUANNE RICE  @LUANNERICE



Introduction

“They sat in the kitchen, Julia so lost in the tale that when he said the word *suerte*, ‘luck,’ she could almost believe that he’d had it, called it forth, that they were five years in the past and their daughters both still with them.”

Five years ago, Julia’s life was shattered when her husband, Peter, and their only child, Jenny, died in a car crash not far from their Connecticut home. Julia’s grief is compounded by the fact that the police believe that Jenny—who was only sixteen and nursing her first broken heart—intentionally drove into a wall. After the initial shock, Julia took what solace she could in her work as a cultural anthropologist. “It had been her passion, to keep the dead alive through learning how they had behaved, where they had trekked in search of food, water, love” (p. 15). And now that Jenny is gone, Julia continually replays the memories of their time together, wondering if there was something she could have done to prevent the crash.

When her aunt and uncle take an extended trip to Ireland, Julia goes to stay at their beautiful Malibu home with her dog Bonnie. She has been a regular visitor to Casa Riley and its adjacent lemon orchard since childhood, but this is her first visit following the accident. Walking on the cliffs high above the beach, Julia experiences a fleeting moment when she thinks about how easy it would be to just let go and escape into the sea.

Although the Riley’s are away, someone else notices how close Julia walks to the precipice. Roberto is the latest in a long line of orchard managers, all of whom had come from Mexico seeking a better life. At first, Julia is uncomfortable with Roberto’s concern until she recognizes that he’s burdened by a sorrow of his own. She tells him about Jenny, and learns that Roberto, too, has lost a daughter. Since he is in the United States illegally, Roberto only reluctantly reveals more. Human traffickers called coyotes took Roberto, six-year-old Rosa, and a group of others from Mexico to Arizona through the Sonoran Desert. Roberto and Rosa were briefly separated just before he was picked up by the Border Patrol. When he was finally able to return to look for her, Rosa was gone.

Without resources, in constant fear of deportation, in desperation, Roberto gave her up for lost. But Julia feels there is reason for hope—and looking for Rosa makes Julia feel closer to Jenny. Soon, her burgeoning romance with Roberto awakens feelings she thought were gone forever. As Julia combs the Southwest for conclusive evidence of any sort, she discovers help in a most unexpected place. Meanwhile, Lion Cushing, the Rileys’ movie star neighbor and old family friend, watches the pair warily. “Lion wanted Julia and Roberto to be happy in their Casa love nest, but unions between educated women and the help never lasted” (p. 229).

A captivating tale of unexpected love as well as a nuanced and profoundly moving examination of one of our nation’s most controversial issues, *The Lemon Orchard* is one of bestselling author Luanne Rice’s most powerful and compelling novels.

About Luanne Rice

Luanne Rice is the *New York Times* bestselling author of thirty-one novels, twenty-two of them *New York Times* bestsellers. There are more than twenty-two million copies of her books in print. A native of Connecticut, she divides her time between New York City and Southern California.





At the Party: Serve

Because the novel takes place in Malibu's Santa Monica Mountains, where wild herbs grow and infuse the air with magic, each of these drinks has an herbal twist. The scent is nearly as important as the taste.



MINT LEMONADE

Ingredients:

- 2 cups sugar
- 6 cups water
- 2 cups freshly squeezed lemon juice
- ½ cup mint leaves

Mix 2 cups sugar and 2 cups water in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Stir until sugar is dissolved and let cool. Place lemon juice in a pitcher, add remaining 4 cups water and 1 cup of the syrup you have just made. Add mint leaves—crushed if you prefer—and refrigerate till well-chilled. Serve over ice with extra mint. Serves six.



LIMONCELLO-LAVENDER SPRITZER

Ingredients:

- Limoncello, chilled
- Dry white wine, chilled
- Sparkling water
- Lemon wedge
- Sprig of lavender

Pour half a glass of white wine over ice, drizzle a good splash of limoncello, top off with sparkling water, garnish with a tiny sprig of lavender—more for scent than flavor—and a lemon wedge. Serves one.



LEMON DROP COCKTAIL

Ingredients:

- 1 ounce freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 thinly-sliced lemon wedges
- 1 ½ ounce vodka
- 2 springs fresh thyme
- 1 tablespoon agave syrup

Mix lemon juice, lemon wedges, and vodka over ice in cocktail shaker. Add thyme and agave syrup and shake vigorously. Strain into martini glass and serve with a sprig of thyme and a lemon wedge. Serves one.



LEMON ORCHARD CRISPS


Ingredients:

- Pita bread, split open—I use Sahara bread.
- Olive oil
- Zest of one lemon
- Dried herbs—any of your favorites will work. I love the herbes fines my sister brings back from visiting her husband's family in St. Andre de Cubzac, France, but Spice Island Fine Herbs, available at most markets, will do when I run out.

Directions:


Preheat broiler.

Lightly spread a thin coating of olive oil on the rough side of each round of pita bread. Sprinkle a judicious amount of herbs over the bread—not too much—you don't want to be overwhelmed. Add the lemon zest. Slide under broiler until slightly toasted. Remove and slice or tear into small pieces before it starts to cool. Place in breadbasket and serve with drinks.





At the Party: Discussion Questions

1. Julia and Peter's marriage was strained long before Jenny's death, but Julia felt guilty about the impending divorce because Jenny wanted them to stay together. Is staying in a marriage for the sake of your children ever a good idea?
 2. Do you think Jenny's death was a suicide? If so, why might she have decided to take her father's life as well as her own?
 3. How do Lion's feelings for Graciela change the way you feel about him?
 4. Roberto chose to take Rosa with him on the difficult desert crossing rather than leave her behind to grow up without him. In hindsight, he realized that he had underestimated the dangers they would face. Do you sympathize with his decision? What would you have done in his place?
 5. Julia loves her dog, Bonnie, all the more because Jenny loved her, too. And Roberto is overjoyed to find Rosa's beloved doll at Found Objects because she belonged to Rosa. Is there an object that you cherish because it belonged to a lost loved one?
 6. Jack Leary decides to help Julia because he understands that it's her way of staying close to Jenny, but he comes to feel that his late wife, Louella, would approve of his mission. How might Roberto and Julia's story have turned out if Jack hadn't become involved?
 7. Ronnie sends Jack on a wild-geese chase to Tucson, hoping that he won't come back and learn the truth about Rosa. Is she right to mistrust him? Do you condone Ronnie's decision to make Rosa "disappear" from the system?
 8. *The Lemon Orchard* ends on an ambiguous note with Roberto and Rosa reunited and Julia returning to California alone. Do you think that Roberto and Julia's story will end here, too?
 9. There are many Cinderella stories about women who are "rescued" from their less privileged lives by wealthier men. And—even in the twenty first century—relationships like Julia and Roberto's give many people pause. Why is it more socially acceptable for the man in a given couple to have a better education and more money than the woman?
 10. Have you ever been involved with someone who came from a radically different socio-economic background than your own? How conscious were you of your differences?
 11. America is the land of immigrants. Did Roberto's experience resonate with what you know about your family's journey to America?
 12. What is your opinion on the United States' current immigration policies? Do you think that most would-be immigrants have a clear picture of what life in the States is really like?
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A Conversation with Luanne Rice

Julia has always felt close to the Mexican people, in part, because of her Irish ancestor John Riley, who fought for Mexican independence. Was there a real John Riley?

John Riley was born in Galway, Ireland and immigrated to America through Mackinac, Michigan in 1843. He and other Irish immigrants, fleeing famine and oppression at home, took jobs as soldiers in the U.S. Army. He defected to Mexico to form the San Patricio Battalion with other Irish-born soldiers. He was young, idealistic, charismatic, and saw Mexico as being the “side of right.”

You write very empathetically about Julia’s desire to be an anthropologist. Is this a field you ever considered going into yourself?

I studied anthropology with Professor June Macklin at Connecticut College. She was a wonderful teacher and ignited my lifelong interest in the subject. I’ve remained fascinated with migration, the movements of people in search of, always, a better life: more food, less hardship, opportunity.

The novel powerfully evokes the tensions of life along the Mexico–United States border and the horrors faced by Mexicans trying to cross the desert illegally. Did you spend a lot of time there while researching and writing the book?

I visited the border several times but did most of my research in Los Angeles, getting to know a family who crossed the desert much the way Roberto and Rosa did.

Are there organizations like The Reunion Project and the Found Objects gallery that are working to help undocumented immigrants who are separated from loved ones during their journey across the border?

There are forensic anthropologists who study human remains found in the Sonoran desert, and there are many people working to help immigrants during and after their crossings.

While Roberto and Rosa’s story ends well, you share the stories of others that did not. Did you feel hesitant about including some of the more graphic details?

I wanted to tell the story in the truest possible way. I spoke to people who nearly died on the journey. Others saw death along the way. These stories affected me deeply. They are a part of our national history, shocking and real, happening right now.

Malibu and Boyle Heights may only be a short distance apart in terms of miles, but they couldn’t be more different. What inspired you to bring these two disparate worlds together?

Living in Los Angeles has shown me how these worlds merge. You see workers waiting along the roadside, hoping to be chosen for a day’s work. How can we not look beneath the surface and see them as people? Oscar Mondragon has done that. He runs the Malibu Labor Exchange out of a trailer near the Malibu City Hall and the public library. It’s a place where workers are matched with employers, treated with dignity and respect.

Handsome, charming, and delightfully self-centered, Lion Cushing is a character straight out of Hollywood’s Golden Era. What movie star or stars did you base him on?

Lion is inspired by the same friend upon whom I based Harrison Thaxter in *The Silver Boat*. But I also think of him as Peter O’Toole meets Albert Finney and fast-forwards to George Clooney.

*Immigration reform is one of today’s most hotly debated issues. Where do you see *The Lemon Orchard* fitting into the discussion?*

I hope that readers will see immigration as a human story.

Whichever side of the issue one might be on, your novel humanizes both the would-be immigrants and the law-enforcement officials charged with patrolling the border. Was this your intention?

My intention was to write a good story with real characters. Black and white thinking—all good versus all bad—makes me uncomfortable. It’s easy to blame one side or one group, but how realistic is that? I try to take a gentle approach, with compassion, not automatically shut down to ideas that make me feel uneasy. Everyone has a point of view, everyone has a story.

