

# LONELY CROWDS BOOK CLUB KIT





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1** Does Maria's family history impact how others view her? How does it impact her relationships with others?
- 2** Ruth spends her life chasing Maria, in one way or another. When Ruth decides to take her paintings seriously as an adult, she claims it is because she's afraid of being left behind by Maria. How is this decision a breaking free from Maria, and how is it a continuation of their patterns?
- 3** When Maria and Sheila begin spending more time together, Ruth thinks Maria is riding Sheila's coattails. Is this hypocritical of Ruth? In what ways does Sheila's relationship with Maria differ from Ruth's relationship with Maria?
- 4** How would you describe Ruth and Maria's relationship over the decades? How do these feelings evolve throughout the book?
- 5** Ed becomes important to Ruth quickly over time. Why does this relationship feel important to Ruth?
- 6** Ruth has mixed feelings at Maria's gallery show after seeing a young version of herself. Why do you think Maria uses the video of Ruth and why doesn't she ask Ruth?
- 7** Maria claims that the quintessential question of Ruth's life is "How would that look?" Do you agree with Maria? What other driving forces are there in Ruth's life?
- 8** After finally meeting her father, Maria claims that there wasn't space in her life for both her father and herself. How does her father's presence threaten her vision of herself? Does Maria ever make space for other people?

# LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

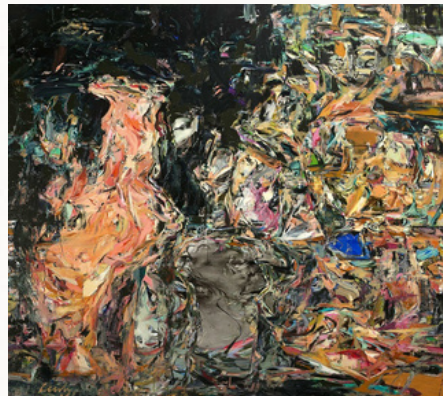
I began writing *Lonely Crowds* when I was twenty-three years old. I had just moved to New York City from the Hudson Valley to begin graduate school and had become preoccupied by the voice of a woman painter, middle aged, recounting her childhood and adolescence. I took a job at the Noguchi Museum in Queens, another job bookselling in SoHo alongside a string of other part-time jobs teaching and writing. All the while, I continued to hear this voice that would become the character Ruth, the woman at the center of this novel. I walked many of the routes Ruth walks in this story, had a number of the experiences she has: trying to make a life as an artist, deciding which parts of my education and upbringing to keep and which parts to abandon, thinking about the sort of influence one's friends and lovers have on the way one lives. I didn't imagine then that the disparate passages I jotted down throughout those years would become a finished book. The fact this book will soon be in the world and read continues to feel like nothing short of a miracle and a surprise.

This book, as you'll see, is very concerned with friendship and traces a decades' long relationship between Ruth and her best friend, Maria. Although the words "best friend" don't quite adequately express the volatility, devotion or ambiguity of what passes between these two girls who become women together. I'm not sure if the word friendship is really capacious enough to capture just what it means to be close to someone, to share confidences, to resent your closeness with another person, to want to be someone just as much as you want to individuate and distance yourself from them. But it's the only word that comes to mind. As I reread *Lonely Crowds* to write this letter, I was struck by how much our peers can influence us and how that influence - how it organizes and reshapes our lives - can only really be felt after the fact. We begin to attend school before we can understand what it means to receive an education; many of us are introduced to our parents' religions before we know what it means to adopt a belief system. We become adults and have to decide, with what we've been given, what sort of person we want to be. *Lonely Crowds* attempts to trace that question in the life of one woman. I hope you will enjoy reading it.

Thank you,

Stephanie Wambugu

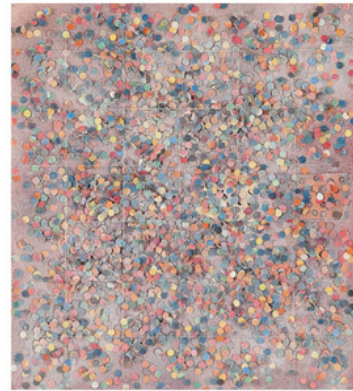
# THE ART THAT INSPIRED RUTH



Artwork, beginning top left: **Arshile Gorky**, *One Year The Milkweed*, 1944, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. **Beauford Delaney**, *Can Fire in the Park*, 1946, Smithsonian American Art Museum. **Bob Thompson**, *Garden of Music*, 1960, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, © Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, Photo: Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum. **Alice Neel**, *Randall in Extremis*, 1960, Estate of Alice Neel. **Stanley Whitney**, *Untitled*, 2010, The Studio Museum in Harlem. **Cecily Brown**, *Puttin' on the Ritz*, 1999-2000, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, © Cecily Brown. **Edouard Manet**, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863. RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Benoît Touchard / Mathieu Rabeau.



# THE ART THAT INSPIRED MARIA



Artwork, beginning top left: **Charles Burnett**, *Killer of Sheep* (film), 1977, photograph courtesy of UCLA. **Howardena Pindell**, *Untitled #27* (mixed media), 1974, Weatherspoon Art Museum. **Oscar Micheaux**, *The Exile* (film poster), 1931, The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. **David Hammons**, *African-American Flag*, 1990, The Studio Museum in Harlem; bequest of Peggy Cooper Cafritz. **Ana Mendieta**, *Untitled: Silueta Series*, 1979, © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. **Jenny Holzer**, *Untitled (Selections from Truisms, Inflammatory Essays, The Living Series, The Survival Series, Under a Rock, Laments, and Child Text)* (installation), 1989, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, © 2009 Jenny Holzer/ Artists Rights Society (ARS). **Frederico Fellini**, *I Vitelloni* (film), 1953, image courtesy of MoMA.