

GOOP BOOK CLUB

A Reading Guide for *Luster* by Raven Leilani

Sure, you might get made fun of if you underline your books. But we like being able to look back at the passages, scenes, words, quotes, and turns in a story that affected us. And we like being able to talk about them with you. Let us know what you think in our book club Facebook group.

Here, we've picked some of the most poignant moments from *Luster*.

1. Page 5: "I put on a complex pair of underwear that is not so much underwear as a bundle of string, and I stand before the mirror. I think to myself, *You are a desirable woman. You are not a dozen gerbils in a skin casing.*" Immediately, we're immersed in Edie, inside her mind. What were your first thoughts of her?
2. Page 8: "Based on his liberal use of the semicolon, I just assumed this date would go well." How about the grammar jokes in *Luster*?
3. Pages 13–14: "‘Interesting,’ I say. Of course, it is not interesting that he has been allowed to live candidly. It is not interesting that he cannot conceive of anything else. He has equated his range of motion with mine. He hasn't considered the lies you tell to survive, the kindness of pretend, which I illustrate now, as I eat this bacterial hot dog. This is the first time I sort of understand him. He thinks we're alike. He has no idea how hard I'm trying." In what ways did the imbalance of power and privilege between Edie and Eric manifest throughout the story?
4. Pages 26–27: "When it comes to this, I cannot help feeling that I am at the end of a fluctuation that originated with a single butterfly. I mean, with one half degree of difference, everything I want could be mine. I am good, but not good enough, which is worse than simply being bad. It is almost. The difference between being there when it happens and stepping out just in time to see it on the news. Still, I can't help feeling that in the closest arm of the multiverse, there is a version of me that is fatter and happier, smiling in my own studio, paint behind my ears. But whenever I have tried to paint in the last two years, I have felt paralyzed." What do you think the author is saying about success and the pursuit of it, specifically for artists? Why had it been so hard for Edie to make her art?

5. Page 40: “Slowly, he eases me down onto his grand, slightly left-leaning cock, and for a moment I do rethink my atheism, for a moment I consider the possibility of God as a chaotic, amorphous evil who made autoimmune disease but gave us miraculous genitals to cope, and so I fuck him desperately with the force of this epiphany and Eric is talkative and filthy...” Leilani manages to write a sex scene in a single sentence that spans two pages: Please discuss.
6. Page 68: “When I get up in the morning, I look in the mirror and I see only my mother’s face. But the fact of our resemblance is such old news that to recognize it anew feels pointed, overly Freudian, a remnant of a dream I am still half inside.” How did the passages about Edie’s family and her past inform how you saw her in the present? What was the luster of memory for her?
7. Page 80: “Because it is impossible to see another black woman on her way up, impossible to see that meticulous, polyglottal origami and not, as a black woman yourself, fall a little bit in love. But we had nothing at all in common.” What did Edie’s relationship with Aria, or rather the lack of what might have been one, make you feel?
8. Pages 117–118: “We enter corpse pose, and as we lie side by side, I hear her short, irregular breaths and understand the degree of her effort. It feels personal. The finite oxygen, the smell of yeast and salt, deodorant and shampoo, the body when it is most conspicuously an organism, a thing that can weep and degrade.” Did the evolving relationship between Edie and Rebecca—and how charged it was—surprise you?
9. Pages 119–120: “‘The way he was talking to her, it felt—specific,’ I say, and there is no fluffy alternative word for what I’m trying to convey, no way to effectively explain violations that are not overt. It is a rhetorical hellscape. A casual reduction so frequent it is mundane. Almost too mundane for the deployment of the R word, as with a certain sect of Good White Person the accusation overshadows the act. *Racism!* I should yell, because I’m sure Rebecca will receive it in the uppercase regardless, and already I feel her seizing on the drama of its implication, even though racism is often so mundane it leaves your head spinning, the hand of the ordinary in your slow, psychic death so sly and absurd you begin to distrust your own eyes.” Leilani is so careful, so precise with the language in this scene—what’s the result?
10. Pages 127–128: “I could do it, though as I press the rind into the trash and see all the proof of life, the soggy cornflakes and chicken fat, I know that his declaration, the dangling carrot for which mistresses everywhere open their stupid mouths, is complete bullshit. Believing he will leave Rebecca is one of the few personal failures I can absolutely avoid, but then I see that picture of him in Greece again, his pit stains and passport necklace and vacation stubble, and I just eat it up.” What did Edie see in Eric? What did Rebecca see in him?

11. Page 163: “It feels finite, tethered to the source in a way that makes it explicitly transactional, and so of course it is demeaning. But it is also demeaning to be broke.” How does this exchange of money add another layer to Edie and Rebecca’s relationship?
12. Page 187: “Of course, this is what Rebecca loves about the work, the stories the bodies tell. She believes the best way to see how a thing is made is to take it apart.” Rebecca was a medical examiner; Eric, an archiver; and Edie, an artist (who worked many, many jobs). What did the characters’ professions symbolize? How did their work shape them?
13. Page 192: “I think of all the gods I have made out of feeble men.” How did the author create friction between Edie’s level of self-awareness and her behavior?
14. Page 196: “As I go through her hair with the hot comb, I imagine its future iterations—the five-dollar ponies and mangled yaki and rainbow Kanekalon and the certainty of a post-breakup big chop, and I wonder where inside this spectrum she will ultimately land.” There’s a lot of tenderness between Akila and Edie—what did this kind of intimacy add to the story and to the development of Edie’s character?
15. Page 206: “If I’m honest, all my relationships have been like this, parsing the intent of the jaws that lock around my head. Like, is he kidding, or is he hungry? In other words, all of it, even the love, is a violence.” How did you process the violence in this story?
16. Page 226: “It is not that I want company, but that I want to be affirmed by another pair of eyes.” How did loneliness and a longing for connection drive Edie? How does it drive you?