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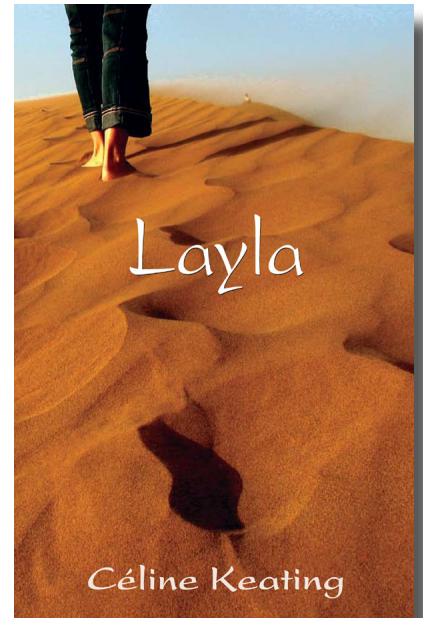


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## READING GROUP GUIDE

# Layla

a novel by  
Céline Keating



“Evoked in beautiful prose and telling details . . . [Layla] brings to life the complexity of family dynamics, with all its conflicts, dangers and rewards.”

—NAHID RACHLIN, author of *Persian Girls: A Memoir*

## INTRODUCTION

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*Layla James, a recent graduate and budding photographer, never knew anything about her father except that he named her for the iconic song by Eric Clapton. Her mother—steeped in a political activism that Layla rejects—kept their past shrouded in secrecy, and when she dies of cancer, she leaves only an enigmatic letter—the first in a series that will lead Layla through a cross-country network of '60s radicals and closer to the bombshell at the heart of her parents' past.*

*As Layla makes her way from the East Coast to a commune in the California desert, she discovers more about friendship, love, forgiveness, and the personal repercussions of political activism than she could ever have imagined. A stirring and panoramic story, viewed through the lens of the next generation, this exceptional debut novel brings the gestalt of the '60s into focus and sheds new light on the era's legacy in the new millennium.*

*Layla* was inspired in part by a profile in the *New Yorker* about Katherine Ann Power, an antiwar activist, who became a fugitive and lived a secret life under the radar. In 2003, when Kathy Boudin, a member of the radical Weather Underground, was released from prison, there was a massive public reaction. Is it surprising that their crimes were committed decades ago, but still inspire such a fiery response? Author Céline Keating has remained very involved in politics since the '60s. It was these news stories that planted the seed of a novel, but perhaps more influential was the question her friend posed after hearing about an argument between Céline and her mother regarding politics: How would you feel if you had a daughter with ultra conservative political views? This question evolved into many questions. How does the generation who experienced the '60s first hand see that period of time now? And how do subsequent generations view those years? Does the legacy of the '60s still resonate today? The novel *Layla* is a rich and complex response to these broad questions as well as a story about a mother and a daughter, a family brought together and torn apart by politics, and ultimately about the way we develop our personal moral compass.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Layla has been told her whole life by her mother, Audrey, that the '60s was a time like no other, steeped with change and meaning; when life had purpose and people—ordinary people—could make a difference. In the beginning, Layla doesn't want any part of this world. In fact she vigorously resists it. How did she develop this attitude and when does it begin to change? Why are her feelings about the era so different than Trent's, who was also raised by activist parents?
2. On her deathbed, Layla's mother begs her to take a cross-country road trip they planned before she fell ill. As a result, Layla must begin a quest that she was reluctant to take in the first place, and which is even harder to do on her own while grieving the loss of her mother. How does her interaction with her mother's friends help her through her grief? Or not? What does each visit teach her?
3. Mystery writer, Con Lehane calls *Layla* "a fast-moving story of family secrets, political intrigue, and a young woman's coming of age." Audrey's letters—the "instructions" for each leg of the road trip—reveal the family's secrets layer by layer, which culminates in a surprising and moving conclusion. How does this technique propel the novel forward and, at the same time, deepen Layla's experiences?
4. "I learned that there is a rhythm to driving long distances, a rhythm and a mood, and I felt a strange sadness as I passed the outskirts of towns and cities I never stopped to see, at the sameness of the McDonald's and the Mobil gas stations that fool you into thinking you've seen everything, when you've seen nothing at all." These are Layla's words as she begins her journey. The road trip experience is one that repeats itself throughout American literature. How does it play out in *Layla*?

5. It could be said that the community of friends who support Layla's mother and father are linked by politics as much as by friendship. In fact, her father barely knew many of the people who went to great lengths to protect him over the years. Layla's mother often said, "politics is personal." What does she mean by that?
6. Layla is a budding photographer, and in many ways finds it easier to see the world through a lens. Why is that? Does it change over the course of the novel?
7. Layla finds comfort in Nancy Drew novels. She loved them as a child, but at one of the stops on her journey, she discovers them again and devours four or five in one sitting. What does Layla find in these novels? How do they comfort her?
8. Layla comes face to face with her past in the California desert—a place as far away as possible from her New York City home—and must come to terms with her own morality. How important is the setting for this life-changing moment in Layla's life?
10. Layla's father was understandably obsessed with staying hidden and lived every moment with the fear of being caught. How did that affect him over time? Do you think going "underground" was the right thing for him to do? Do you think his self-imposed isolation was as punishing as prison?
11. Music plays a major role in the novel, and acts as a soundtrack to Layla's life. Throughout her trip she hears '60s music that initially makes her cringe. Ultimately she adopts these songs as they gain more and more meaning in her life. What kind of soundtrack would be appropriate in your life? In what ways does it change as you age?
12. Who do you identify most with: Layla or Audrey? Do you agree or disagree with their choices? Do you feel that Layla changed at a fundamental level by the end of the novel?
13. It's said that "just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you" and Layla learns this the hard way. How does her perception of her parents' past change in light of this new understanding? How does it affect her relationship with Trent? Were you surprised to learn who betrayed her secrets?
14. Does the legacy of the '60s still resonate today? Do you think history will repeat itself and that another cultural revolution is in our future?

## P R A I S E F O R L A Y L A

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“[An] emotional page-turner. Layla’s coming to terms with her parents’ dangerous activism is heart wrenching due to Keating’s delightfully drawn characters. This novel also serves as a compelling lesson in our values and how drastically they’ve changed. It serves as a better history than any essay or screed.”

—SUSAN BRAUDY, author of *Family Circle*

“Céline Keating’s deftly plotted novel takes readers on a gripping journey along the underground railroad of post-’60s radicalism. . . . Every adult has to reinterpret the story of her childhood. Keating beautifully demonstrates the courage it takes for each of us to face that bittersweet truth.”

—LARRY DARK, Director of The Story Prize

“As the Great American Nostalgia Machine works to convert the idealism and anger and, yes, the naiveté of the Sixties into a cartoon of funny hair and flowery shirts, Céline Keating’s novel, *Layla*, provides a strong antidote . . . As Layla James drives cross-country, following the cryptic directions of her late mother, she meets a wide and sharply drawn group of veteran radicals who all play a part in the search for her mysterious father. Is he alive or dead? Was he an innocent or a criminal? Were her parents who she thought they were? Keating keeps the pace fast and the suspense high . . . You’ll want to ride with her every mile of the way!”

—ROBERT HERSHON, poet and editor of *Hanging Loose Press*

“A fast-moving story of family secrets, political intrigue, and a young woman’s coming of age. *Layla* is a rare combination of a novel that is both suspenseful and insightful, narrated by a character who is charming, intelligent, appealing, and most importantly, honest. . . . a gripping tale and a memorable read.”

—CON LEHANE, author of *Death at the Old Hotel*

“A triumph of political literature. With mastery, Keating has fashioned a thrilling and moving tale of a young woman forced to discover the secret history of her family. . . . as informative as it is impossible to put down.”

—MARNIE MUELLER, author of *My Mother’s Island*

“In Céline Keating’s auspicious debut, the political and emotional collide, as one generation’s *raison d’être*—the radical politics of the ‘60s—becomes their offspring’s burden.”

—HELEN SCHULMAN, Author of *A Day at the Beach*

“Unfolds like a finely calibrated psychological mystery. . . . In *Layla*, Céline Keating has created an unforgettable character who is by turns exasperating, funny, courageous and fiercely loyal. Layla’s journey toward understanding of her past and present evokes both the idealism and danger of the ’60s, which resonate to this day.”—SUSAN SEGAL, author of *Aria*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Céline Keating is a writer and student of classical guitar, whose works appear regularly in *Acoustic Guitar* and *Minor 7th* magazines. Her articles have also appeared in *Guitar World* and *Coastal Living*, and her short fiction has been published in many literary journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Santa Clara Review* and elsewhere. She holds masters degrees in Urban Studies (Queens College) and Creative Writing (City College) and has received two fellowships to the MacDowell Colony as well as scholarships to the Bread Loaf and Writers at Work conferences. Currently Keating lives in Manhattan and edits the newsletter for Concerned Citizens of Montauk, an environmental group for which she serves as a vice president.

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