

Reader's Guide
For
The Lucky Place
by
Zu Vincent
A Young Adult Novel

About the Book

"Here's what I think. I think having two daddies is like riding the elephant. You don't know until you get up there what an elephant smells like, or how high you will be on the elephant's back. But then you realize. And the basket tips one way and then the other, like you might fall, every time the elephant steps."

When her father gets drunk and forgets three-year-old Cassie at the races, it's the last straw for her mother. Soon Cassie and Jamie have a new dad and move into what their mother calls their Lucky Place, where her two little brothers are born. But behind the rosy picture of '60s suburbia is another, more fragile and complex world. A world Cassie narrates with a fierce family loyalty, weaving her tale of a girl's love for two fathers, an outcast brother and a mother in denial.

About the Author

Zu holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College where she was awarded Harcourt's post-grad semester in 2006. She's a freelance writer and former Senior Editor of the art magazine *Expressions*, and has produced book-length non-fiction for Harcourt, Signet and Plume, as well as a series of short stories, a play and numerous feature articles and photos for various newspapers and national magazines.

She lives on the edge of California's Ishi Wilderness. *The Lucky Place* is set in a river valley not too far from this wilderness.

Discussion Questions

1. The author notes that the title for *The Lucky Place* came from a childhood memory about a white horse.

"When my mom would see that white horse in the field near our home, she'd lick her thumb and stamp it on her palm for luck. As a child I was sure this would work, and that our family would stay charmed forever. I wanted to write about the conflicts that arise when this early magical belief meets reality."

How does this theme play out in the novel? Cassie isn't the only child affected by events, her brother Jamie loses his innocence, too. What early beliefs do the children abandon as

they grow up? Are there other metaphors at work in the novel (the postcard, the gold?) that point to theme? Do you see some irony in the title?

2. When Cassie meets Ellis she decides to call him New Daddy and her father becomes Old Daddy. This literal view of events helps her accept her stepfather in a way her brother Jamie can't. How are the two men different in Cassie's mind? Does her view fit with reality? Jamie's opinion of New Daddy is different. Compare and contrast New Daddy and Old Daddy, and Cassie and Jamie, to see what makes the children respond to the two men so differently.

3. Throughout the novel, being part of a family is very important to Cassie, even when she loses people she loves. Do you understand this fierce devotion? What does family mean to you? Have you experienced some of the same losses Cassie does, through divorce or death? If so, how did that change you? If not, how did these experiences, especially the father-daughter bond, change Cassie?

4. How does the idea of superstition in the novel help show character? For instance, when she's little, Cassie comes to believe Old Daddy's gypsy lady has cursed her family. What causes her to change her mind? What does this change of heart say about Cassie herself? Cassie's mom Belle once told her the white horse in the field near their house brought them luck. Does Belle's notion of luck or magic ever change? In the end, who is more realistic, Belle or Cassie?

5. In *The Lucky Place*, Cassie starts telling us the story when she's three and ends her tale when she's twelve. How does the style of the writing reflect this change? Did you feel Cassie's perception of the world changing as her voice "grew up"? Do you see a correlation between Cassie's love of home movies and the way the book is written?

Activity

In *The Lucky Place* Cassie sometimes shows us scenes from Ellis's home movies and even seems to see the world through a human "camera eye." Whether or not your family takes home movies, can you envision a scene "onscreen" like Cassie does? What family moment would you choose to show real emotional impact?

Portray this moment in writing as if through your own "camera eye." Remember to focus on the characters, landscape and details unique to your life, so that the mood and emotion you intend will be revealed. If you have access to a video camera, you might try actually filming your family in a way that captures something telling or important about them.