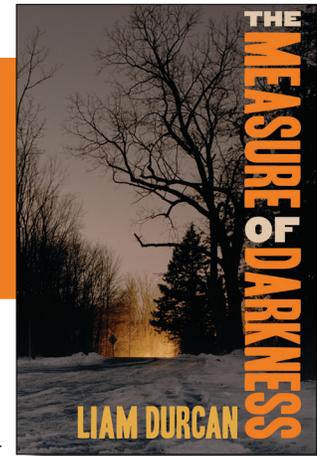




The Measure of Darkness

A novel by Liam Durcan

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National Reading Group Month “Great Group Reads” Selection

“A deft exploration of the heart and mind that offers the pathos of a Sam Shepard play nested within the unreliable storytelling of Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Raises thought-provoking questions about the sometimes conflicting roles ambition, work, and loved ones play in a complex and fulfilled life.” —*Booklist*

INTRODUCTION

Martin, an acclaimed architect, emerges from a coma after a roadside accident to find his world transformed: not only has the commission of a lifetime been taken from him, but his injury has left him with “neglect syndrome,” a loss of spatial awareness that has rendered him unfit to practice and unable to recognize the extent of his illness. Despite support from his formerly estranged brother and two grown daughters, his paranoia builds, alienating those closest to him. His only solace is found in the parallels he draws between himself and gifted Soviet-era architect Konstantin Melnikov, who survived Stalin’s disfavor by retreating into obscurity. As Martin retraces Melnikov’s life and his own fateful decisions, he becomes increasingly unsettled, until the discovery of the harrowing truth about the night of his accident hurtles him toward a deadly confrontation.

A gripping journey into the depths of a fractured mind, *The Measure of Darkness* is ultimately a resonant tale of resilience and healing.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

As a clinical neurologist, much of what I have learned about patients with right hemispheric brain injuries causing the condition called neglect has come from teaching medical students at the bedside. In some ways, these patients are similar to others who have suffered sudden catastrophic neurologic disability. They may have weakness or loss of sensation affecting one side of their bodies or have lost the capacity to see half of their visual world. But they are often different in startling ways that teach us a great deal about how the nervous system works to interpret our world.

For most patients, understanding how illness or injury will affect their lives becomes their *story*. However patients with neglect can seem like clueless bystanders to their own disasters because they are unaware of their deficits and are unable to create a personalized illness narrative. I have always felt that this inability makes it harder for their families and care providers to relate to their situation. It’s hard to offer words of consolation for someone who doesn’t know why they should be consoled in the first place.

In writing this novel, I wanted to tell the story of one of these patients, who, even with an impaired awareness of his situation, strives to make sense of its ramifications. I also wanted to explore how it might feel to experience partial recovery from a disability like this. Would coming to realize how impaired you were be a devastating realization or a form of enlightenment? Perhaps the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive.





CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. The book is about lost things, including, but not limited to, Martin's memories, reputation, and family relationships. What else is "lost" in this novel? How do the characters attempt to retrieve what was lost? In what ways are they successful?
2. The two Fallon brothers—Martin and Brendan—come from a family who lost their business during the Detroit Riot and was further broken apart when Brendan was drafted into the Vietnam War while Martin escaped to Canada. The brothers identify themselves according to, and argue about, nationality—do you really think there is that much difference between Canadians and Americans? Why do you think the author chose Detroit as one of the pivotal settings for the novel?
3. Martin and Brendan experience an uneasy reunion after thirty years of estrangement. What did you imagine Brendan's motives were for coming to his brother Martin's side? Did you feel Brendan returned out of a sense of duty? Did your feelings about his motives change as the novel progressed?
4. A recurring theme in the novel is Brendan's self-assertion that he is not like his brother. Why do you think this would be so important to a character like Brendan? As the novel progresses, is Brendan more—or less—certain of their differences?
5. The novel attempts to illuminate what it feels like to suffer from a disorienting neurological condition such as neglect syndrome, where damage to the right side of the brain leaves the patient unaware of their deficits. The nature of Martin's illness—the initial lack of awareness of his deficit—leads him to blame circumstances, and often other people, for his situation rather than the illness itself. Did this make Martin a less sympathetic character in your eyes? Did you see this tendency in Martin as a symptom of his injury or as a personality trait? Did that affect your feelings about him as a character?
6. Early in the novel, Martin is counseled by his psychologist to "concentrate on the linear" as a way of trying to deal with his neurological disability. Did you feel this advice helped Martin? How do we use stories to explain ourselves?
7. Illness is commonly used as a metaphor in novels and Martin's condition affects the very talents that account for his sense of self. Is neglect (the absence of awareness of a deficit) a metaphor you can relate to other aspects of Martin's life?
8. Conventional illness narratives often depict journeys from sickness to health. How did Martin's journey in *The Measure of Darkness* differ? Did you feel that Martin is in any way better at the end? Is a partial understanding of the extent of his deficit a victory for him or does it simply emphasize what he has lost?
9. Throughout the novel Martin is pre-occupied with the life story of the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov, at times drawing sustenance from recalling what he feels are similar struggles the two have shared. Is his obsession with Melnikov helpful or harmful?
10. The book's title comes from the Carl Jung quote, "Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word happy would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness." At one point in the novel Martin asks his daughter Norah, "Is there joy in this house?" What did you feel Martin wanted from Norah at this moment? Was it to be legitimized as an architect? As a father?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liam Durcan is the author of the novel *Garcia's Heart*, a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection and recipient of the Arthur Ellis Best First Novel Award. He lives in Montreal, Quebec, where he works as a neurologist at McGill University.

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