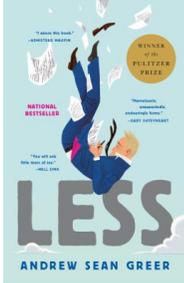


Books by the Stack



Less by Andrew Sean Greer

Receiving an invitation to his ex-boyfriend's wedding, Arthur, a failed novelist on the eve of his 50th birthday, embarks on an international journey that finds him falling in love, risking his life, reinventing himself and making connections with the past.

Why you'll like it: *Character-driven. Bittersweet. Engaging.*

About the Author: Andrew Sean Greer was born in Washington, D.C. on November 5, 1970. He received a bachelor's degree from Brown University and a master of fine arts degree from the University of Montana. His novels include *The Path of Minor Planets*, *The Story of a Marriage*, and *The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells*. *Less* received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2018. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. The novel's opening line reads: From where I sit, the story of Arthur Less is not so bad." Arthur Less, the book's protagonist, is introduced as nearly 50, with "washed-out" blonde hair and "watery" blue eyes. As we soon learn, he's also a writer less successful than his peers. How do you see Arthur Less in the opening chapters? Do you see him as a hero, as a man deserving of pity, as something else?
2. When we meet the character of Freddy, Arthur Less's soon-to-be-former-lover, he is described as "dreamy, simple, lusty, bookish, harmless, youthful." It is Freddy's marriage invitation that Less so studiously avoids – choosing to go on a round-the-world trip simply to avoid having to decline to invitation without a good reason. What do you make of this decision? Have you ever found yourself doing something similarly absurd?
3. Arthur Less's trip itinerary is as follows: New York to interview a more popular writer, Mexico City for an obscure conference, Turin for an unknown award, Berlin for a teaching gig, Morocco for someone else's birthday, India for a writer's retreat (possibly during the monsoon), Japan for an article. And somewhere along the way he will turn 50. Does his sojourn remind you of any others in literature?
4. The book Arthur Less is writing is about a man on a journey through a place and his past, as he looks back on a series of disappointments. Freddy complains that Less is always writing "gay Ulysses." Do you see echoes of or references to Ulysses or the *Odyssey* throughout "Less"?
5. Less's other major relationship in the book is with the famous poet Robert Brownburn. In the chapter "Mexican," Less recalls a day of losing his ring in the grocery store and how, in telling Robert about it, Robert saw Less's infidelities written across his face. "That's what it was like to live with genius," he writes. How does Robert's success and genius impact their relationship at the time, and how does it influence him in the end?

- 6.** So much of Less's focus during the round-the-world trip is on his own mishaps and foibles – or his perceived mishaps and foibles. Getting into a car with what he believes is the wrong driver because the name was a letter off. Believing he can speak German well when in fact he is bungling the words, bringing athletic bands to every country that he will only half use. Do you see this as actual mishaps and foibles or it a problem of perception for Less? Do you identify with that feeling at all?
- 7.** The book alternates between Less's trip in the present of memories of his youth – mostly memories involving nostalgia or regret. And yet the narrator tells us that Less also understands the pleasures of age: "comfort and ease, beauty and taste, old friends and old stories...." How does Less's grappling with age play a role in the book? Is it something you can relate to?
- 8.** In a scene at a party in Paris, Less is told that in fact he is not a bad writer, as he had come to believe, but a bad "gay writer," in that he is not telling the narratives the gay writing community wants him to. What do you make of this critique?
- 9.** In several countries, simply being around Less seems to make other characters sick. Why?
- 10.** Arthur Less is self-deprecating throughout the book to a fault; in one of many descriptions he calls himself insignificant compared to other writers he knows, "as superfluous as the extra 'a' in Quaalude." (Earlier, though, he asks if there is "any more perfect spelling" than the word Quaalude "with that lazy superfluous vowel,") Did you find these negative descriptors by Less funny or frustrating or silly or all of these? How does Greer complicate these descriptions by having some of them echo back.
- 11.** A number of people try to tell Less about what happened at Freddy's wedding. And while the wedding dominates his thoughts, he doesn't listen to them. What is keeping him from hearing the story? What do you think (or hope) happened?
- 12.** In the book, "Less" is always referred to by his last name, while Javier only by his first, and Robert Brownburn by both. Why do you think Greer chose to refer to the characters in these different ways?
- 13.** What lines in the book made you laugh out loud?
- 14.** Toward the end of the book, Less reunites with his supposed and enemy and Freddy's father, Carlos. When they meet, Carlos tells him that he believes that people's lives are half-comedy and half-tragedy and that those just appear at different times. What do you make of that?
- 15.** Were you surprised (or glad) to find out who the narrator was? Do any elements of the book change for you when you revisit them with Freddy as the narrator in mind?
- 16.** The penultimate lines of "Less" (from Freddy's voice) read: "After choosing the path people wanted, the man who would do, the easy way out of things...after holding it all in my hands and refusing it, what do I want from life?" What do you want from life? Have you similarly strayed from the path you thought you should be on?

(Questions provided by The New York Times)

