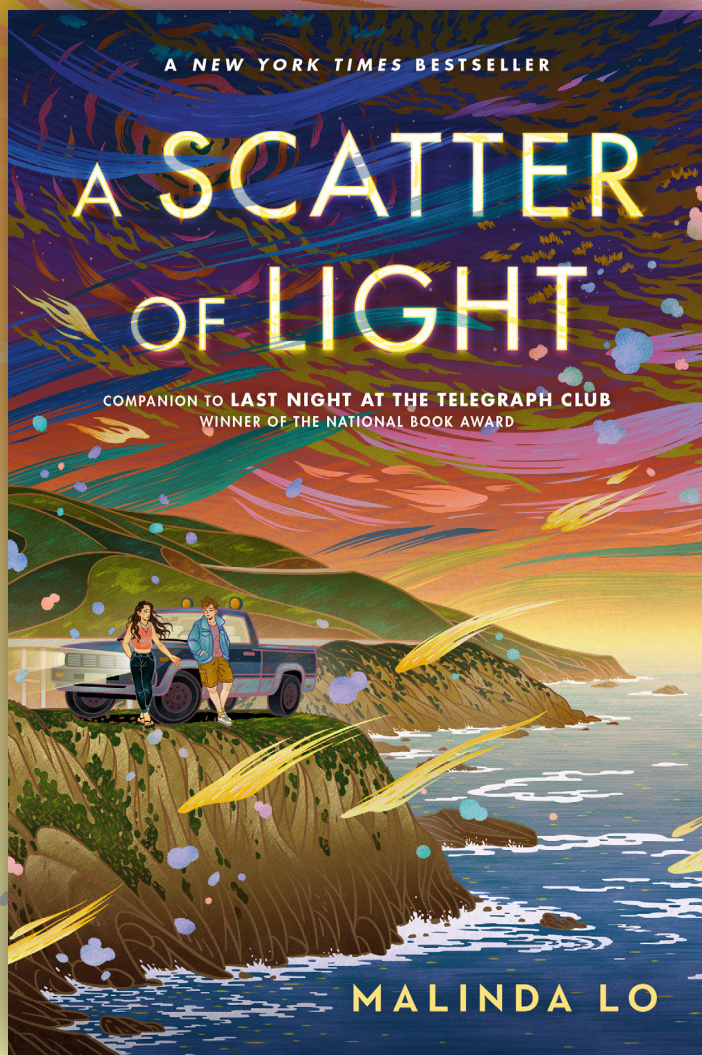


A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO



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ABOUT THE BOOK!

Last Night at the Telegraph Club author Malinda Lo returns to the Bay Area with another masterful queer coming-of-age story, this time set against the backdrop of the first major Supreme Court decisions legalizing gay marriage.

Aria Tang West was looking forward to a summer on Martha's Vineyard with her best friends—one last round of sand and sun before college. But after a graduation party goes wrong, Aria's parents exile her to California to stay with her grandmother, artist Joan West. Aria expects boredom, but what she finds is Steph Nichols, her grandmother's gardener. Soon, Aria is second-guessing who she is and what she wants to be, and a summer that once seemed lost becomes unforgettable—for Aria, her family, and the working-class queer community Steph introduces her to. It's the kind of summer that changes a life forever. And almost sixty years after the end of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, *A Scatter of Light* also offers a glimpse into Lily and Kath's lives since 1955.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR!

MALINDA LO is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, winner of the National Book Award, the Stonewall Book Award, and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, as well as Michael L. Printz and Walter Dean Myers honors.

Her debut novel *Ash*, a sapphic retelling of Cinderella, was a finalist for the William C. Morris YA Debut Award, the Andre Norton Award for YA Science Fiction and Fantasy, the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, and the Lambda Literary Award. Malinda's short fiction and nonfiction has been published by *The New York Times*, NPR, Autostraddle, *The Horn Book*, and multiple anthologies. She lives in Massachusetts with her wife and their dog.



This guide was written by Erica Gillingham, a queer poet and writer living in London, England, via Siskiyou County, California. She is a bookseller at [Gay's The Word Bookshop](#), former books editor for [DIVA Magazine](#), and poetry editor for [The Signal House Edition](#). Erica has a PhD in lesbian love stories in young adult literature and graphic novels. (She wrote a lot about kissing.)

PRE-READING EXERCISE

In *A Scatter of Light*, Aria’s family members’ working lives and interests impact her relationships with them—individually and collectively—and influence the areas of study and creative expression that she chooses to pursue. Malinda Lo uses those fields—astronomy, art, opera, and writing, specifically—to develop her characters, provide narrative tension, make connections metaphorically, and introduce new concepts throughout the novel.

EXERCISE: How have family members’ work or areas of interest positively or negatively impacted your relationships with them? Have individuals inspired you to pursue certain studies or hobbies? Or have you chosen a different path? Briefly reflect on those influences in a writing exercise. As you are reading *A Scatter of Light*, consider how Lo weaves in Aria’s familial relationships with the main actions and themes of the novel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the opening flashback scene set in 2008, Malinda Lo establishes the relationship between Aria and Joan West as atypical for a granddaughter and grandmother. How does a small act, like Aria calling Joan by her first name, change the nature of their relationship?
- The Supreme Court decision to overturn Proposition 8 in 2013, which defined marriage as between one man and one woman in the State of California, is part of the political backdrop of the novel. How does this celebratory moment correlate with Aria’s burgeoning crush?
- Aria is in California for the summer as a result of topless photos posted online without her consent. How do the people around her—from her parents and friends to her classmates and school administrators—react to these photos? Are they justified?
- Aria isn’t sure about the “correct” terms to talk about her sexuality, so she describes the bodily sensation instead: “[a]n edgy, slightly queasy feeling; anticipation mixed with seasickness.” What does this communicate about Aria in this moment? How do those feelings change over the course of the novel?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

- At San Francisco Pride, Aria sees a poster about the Chinese American lesbian artist Bernice Bing, and her curiosity is piqued. Why do you think Joan tells Aria to “keep looking” when she brings up the artist the next day? Is this specific or general advice?
- At movie nights at Steph and Lisa’s house, the characters watch and discuss science fiction classics, including *It Came from Outer Space*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Forbidden Planet*. How do the characters’ analytical discussions of the films enhance the narrative?
- In different contexts, Aria is introduced to the work of white American lesbian poet Adrienne Rich (*Diving into the Wreck*, *The Dream of a Common Language*). How does Lo use these works throughout the book, including as objects and as metaphor?
- Discuss Joan’s different expressions of time in her artwork, from ephemeral time to deep, geological time. How do scientific and artistic concepts of time influence the overall story?
- Why does Lo juxtapose Aria’s visits to the hospital with her desire for Steph? What does Aria mean when she says, “I was split in two: my future and my past. I wanted to remain here on the edge between my two selves, doubly exposed, all hunger and heart”?
- The relationship that Aria and Steph have is an affair. Consider Aria’s brief discussion of guilt after they are found out.
- Lo offers readers of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* an update on Lily and Kath. How does Aria respond to their news story? How does their story relate to Aria personally as well as to the lives of same-sex couples more broadly at that time?
- The novel concludes with a scene set in 2023 where Aria is opening her first art exhibition. How does she explain the title of her largest painting, *A Scatter of Light*, to her best friend, Tasha? And how does it operate as the title for the novel itself?

POST-READING EXERCISES

EXERCISE: Consider the major government decisions that have taken place during your lifetime, whether they were a result of a Supreme Court ruling, an executive order, a voting outcome, or any other government-related reason. How have those decisions impacted you, your family and friends, or people you know? Or, have the people that you know and love been *unaffected* by those decisions? Did those decisions, in your opinion, change the course of U.S. history? Or did they enshrine into law what you already believe to be true? Choose one decision from your list, read more about that event, and then write a reflection using both factual evidence and your personal experiences or observations.

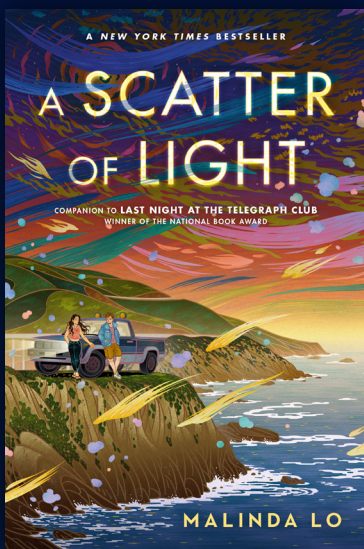
CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISE: In *A Scatter of Light*, the poetry of Adrienne Rich inspires Steph to write song lyrics and the artwork of Bernice Bing and Joan inspire Aria to start painting. Choose a writer or artist that interests you and find a specific work that speaks to you in this moment. Then, write a creative piece of any form (a poem, lyrics, fiction, script, creative nonfiction, etc.) inspired by that piece of art. To start with, you could borrow the title or a single line as your starting point, a description of it, or notes of your personal response to it—and then “keep looking” as your written piece takes shape.

FURTHER MATERIAL, AS REFERENCED IN *A SCATTER OF LIGHT*

- *Diving into the Wreck* by Adrienne Rich, poetry
- *The Dream of a Common Language* by Adrienne Rich, poetry
- *Forbidden Planet* (1956), film
- *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, 570 U.S. 693 (2013), U.S. Supreme Court opinion
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), film
- *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), film
- *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Malinda Lo, novel
- *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, play
- *The Worlds of Bernice Bing* (2013), film



PRAISE FOR A SCATTER OF LIGHT



★ "Raw and bittersweet . . . [an] expansive tale of yearning, self-discovery, and first love."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

★ "Aria's story is . . . about what it means to be an artist, a friend, a daughter and a granddaughter, and about how identities of all kinds can converge and crystallize as part of the process of growing up."

—BOOKPAGE, STARRED REVIEW

★ "Tells the powerful story of one young woman's life-changing summer of self-discovery . . . Both newcomers and longtime fans of Lo's work should enjoy this narrative of a young woman coming to understand herself and her wants better."

—SHELF AWARENESS, STARRED REVIEW

★ "An excellent coming-of-age and coming-out story. Characters are complicated and messy but in a realistic and relatable way. The story is driven by Aria's truthful narration, which is beautifully reflective of an 18-year-old at that time . . . A must-have."

—SLJ

