

Reading Group Guide
BLUFF
By Michael Kardos

AUTHOR BIO

Michael Kardos is the Pushcart Prize-winning author of the novels *Bluff*, *Before He Finds Her*, and *The Three-Day Affair*, the story collection *One Last Good Time*, and a book on writing, *The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Writer's Guide*. His books have been named a Best Book of the Year by *Esquire* and have won the Mississippi Institute of Arts & Letters Award for fiction. Michael grew up on the Jersey Shore and currently lives in Starkville, Mississippi, where he's a professor of English and co-director of the creative writing program at Mississippi State University.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The epigraph to *Bluff* is “Trust everybody, but always cut the cards.” How do you see these dual ideas of trust and suspicion playing out in the novel?
- *Bluff* opens at a holiday party for local personal injury attorneys. Why do you believe the author might have chosen this opening, and that group of people?
- *Bluff*, like the author's first two novels, is set entirely in New Jersey. What sense of the state—its landscape and people—does the novel convey? To what degree does the novel fit with, or veer from, your sense of New Jersey?
- The worlds of professional magic and poker are disproportionately male, and can be uncomfortable—or even openly hostile—to female professionals. What challenges does this present for Natalie? How is she able to turn this to her advantage?
- Several times, Natalie repeats the refrain, “Webbs aren't criminals.” Why is it so important for her to believe this about herself and her family?
- What does *Bluff* suggest are the primary similarities between a magician and a cardsharp? What are the main differences?
- *Bluff* is written entirely from Natalie's first-person perspective. If you were able to include another character's point of view, whose would it be? Why?

- Do your feelings about Natalie change from the beginning of *Bluff* to the end? If so, how? What about Ace, Ellen, Brock McKnight, and Cool Calvin?
- Beyond the money to make ends meet, what does Natalie most desire? By the end of the novel, does she get what she wants?
- By agreeing to take part in the poker game in the Highlands, do you believe Natalie is primarily being motivated by revenge? Money? Or are there other factors entering into this life-altering decision?
- Natalie brings up the movie *Thelma and Louise*. Why do you think that's a film she might admire?
- Is *Bluff* entirely suspicious of complete trust? Or are there moments when the novel demonstrates a sincere belief in the importance of trusting one another?
- If you've read any other of Michael Kardos's novels, do you notice any similar themes? Stylistic approaches?
- What about the novel did you find most surprising?
- What did you learn about magic? Poker?
- If you were casting a film adaptation of *Bluff*, who would play these people in the movie?

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