

READER'S GUIDE

The Art of Being Lewis by Daniel Goodwin

INTRODUCING *The Art of Being Lewis*

Lewis Morton works for an architecture firm headed up by an anglophile who preaches “Dress British, think Jewish.” Or he did, until his boss suddenly dies, the firm is sued for copyright infringement, and the firm is taken over by a British consortium. On paid leave, Lewis has little to do but think about his unstable artist mother who committed suicide, and avoid talking to his lawyer father who works for the mob. Lewis’s life become even more complicated when he pisses in the park and is seen by a bunch of high school girls, becoming the unknown park exhibitionist being hunted by police.

Fearing prison, public shame, and being unable to support his family, Lewis becomes increasingly anxious as the truth gets closer to being revealed. Eventually, he finds the courage to be himself, confront his fears, not shy away from his Jewishness, and to engage with the artistic impulse inherited from his mother.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Mental Health/Suicide

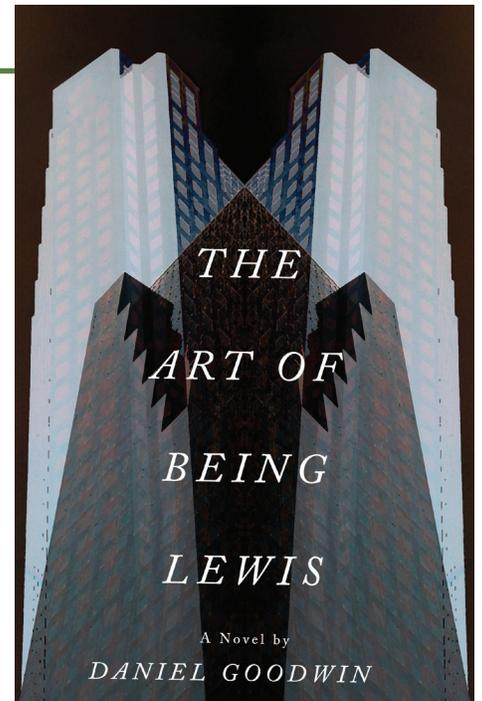
Lewis’s childhood was shaped by his mother’s battle with depression and her four suicide attempts, the final one of which was successful. Miranda’s artistic passion is linked to her mental health issues, while Lewis eschews his artistic side for a practical career in architecture. Goodwin sets up this stereotype only to destroy it through Lewis’s own contemplation of suicide when his life collapses. He explores how mental illness affects families in different ways.

Jewishness/Religion

Lewis’s Jewishness is complicated by his non-practicing father who often compares Judaism to Christianity in terms of public relations and practicality, his Christian wife, and his grandfather’s last name, which was changed from “Mortinsky” to “Morton” by a custom’s official. Belonging, tradition, history, and even architecture are all contemplated from a Jewish point of view.

Identity/Selfhood

Throughout the novel, Lewis must contend with the pressures of his changing identity. Losing the job that defines him leaves Lewis adrift, a man without hobbies or a sense of self outside of work. His friendship with Drescher colours how he presents himself to his colleagues. His ambivalence about his Jewishness and his unintentional identity as the park pervert lead Lewis to further question who he is as a husband, a father and a member of the community. His complicated feelings about his mother’s art and her suicide are entangled with his ambivalence toward his own artistic talent. In the end, Lewis must reconcile the different sides of himself.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe Drescher, and how does his influence on Lewis linger throughout the novel?
2. Discuss Lewis's relationship with Laura. How does Lewis view Laura? What does their relationship reveal about Lewis?
3. How does Lewis handle the incident in the park? Is there anything he could have done differently?
4. Compare the description of Miranda's painting *Deer Family* (99) with Lewis's painting (237-239). What are the similarities and differences between the two paintings? What does Lewis's changes reveal about how he has come to think of his family?
5. Being a father is a large part of Lewis's character. Discuss the three main fathers in the narrative (Lewis, Mordecai, and Bob) and what their actions reveal about fatherhood. What kind of fatherhood does the novel advocate?
6. How does Lewis express his Judaism? What other influences have shaped his relationship with his Jewish faith?
7. Spaces and architecture are an important part of the novel. Discuss the various buildings and settings Lewis describes. What does Lewis's descriptions of places tell you about him? Is there any setting in the novel that stood out to you? Why?
8. Why does Abercrom help Lewis? Was he right to have done so?
9. What surprised you most in the novel?



ABOUT DANIEL

Born in Montreal, Daniel Goodwin grew up in a bookish and artistic Montreal household (Irving Layton was an omnipresent great-uncle, Betty Goodwin a more distant aunt). After a mis-spent youth writing poetry, he ran away to the East Coast in his mid-twenties to join an oil company. He has since lived in four provinces and worked as a teacher, journalist, corporate communicator and government relations executive, but through it all he continued to write, and his poems and essays have appeared in several Canadian journals and newspapers including *Literary Review of Canada*, *Contemporary Verse II*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Calgary Herald*. Goodwin's first novel, *Sons and Fathers*, was published in 2014. Goodwin currently lives in Calgary with his wife and three children.