

"A sensory journey of self-discovery...*vivid* and evocative."  
—Meera Klein, author of *Seeing Ceremony*.

# MICHIKUSA HOUSE

a NOVEL



EMILY GRANDY

Winner of the Landmark Prize for Fiction

# READING GUIDE

# MICHIKUSA HOUSE

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# INTRODUCTION

This reading group guide for **Michikusa House** includes discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q+A with author Emily Grandy. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope these ideas will enrich your reading and conversation.

Please contact Emily Grandy at [emilygrandy.com](http://emilygrandy.com) to request the author's participation in your scheduled book group discussion of Michikusa House!

**IN THIS SEASONALLY ATTUNED, ATMOSPHERIC AWARD-WINNING DEBUT NOVEL, A YOUNG WOMAN DISCOVERS A NEW PATH IN LIFE AFTER SPENDING TIME ON A SMALL FAMILY FARM IN RURAL JAPAN, AT MICHIKUSA HOUSE...**

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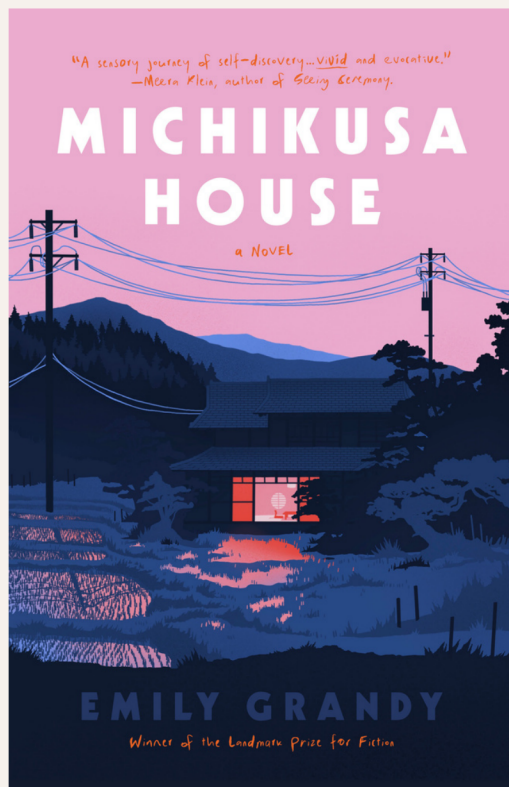
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AWARD-WINNING NOVELIST

# MICHIKUSA HOUSE

WINNER OF THE LANDMARK PRIZE



## FOR FANS OF NORWEGIAN WOOD AND UNSHELTERED...

After enduring a complicated recovery from eating disorders, Winona Heeley is struggling to return to normal life. Her mother recommends a change in scenery and arranges for Winona to stay with friends in rural Japan, at Michikusa House.

The centuries' old farmhouse hosts residents who want to learn about growing their own food and cooking with the seasons. Jun Nakashima, an aspiring *kaiseki* chef, is one such resident. Like Winona, Jun is a recovering addict and college dropout. While the two bond over culinary rituals, they change each other's lives by reconstructing long-held beliefs about shame, identity, and renewal.

But after Winona returns to her Midwest hometown, and despite her best efforts to keep in touch, Jun vanishes.

Two years pass, and Win is about to drop out of university for a second time, a decision that irreparably fractures her relationship with her partner of nearly a decade. Refusing to accept permanent failure and disappointment, Winona once again seeks revival through gardening. Much to the chagrin of her parents, she accepts a job as a groundskeeper at a local cemetery and begins searching for Jun Nakashima once more.

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# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

## A CHARMING, SMART, AND COMPULSIVELY ENJOYABLE EXPLORATION OF LOVE, FRIENDSHIP, AND FOOD CULTURE.

**1.** Winona is introduced in the Prologue, but we don't meet Liam until Chapter 1. What were your first impressions of each of these characters? Did those impressions change after their argument in the cemetery?

**2.** Winona has tried to abandon many elements of her life to the past, including her health issues and memories of Michikusa House. Yet both of these elements continue to define her life and her decisions in the present. What does this tell us about Winona? How does this foreshadow her future decisions?

**3.** We learn that it was Winona's mother, Juliet, who arranged to have Winona stay at Michikusa House—enabling the “final” phase in Winona's healing journey. How does this arrangement transform each woman's life and their relationship with one another? Did the novel move you to any new insights about generational difference? As they shift from parent-child to a more adult relationship, what does Juliet learn from her daughter?

**4.** Erin urges Winona against pursuing a relationship with Liam. Why do you think Erin becomes so protective of Win? What weaknesses in Liam's character might Erin see that Winona can't?

**5.** How does the powerful experience of loss contribute to both Win and Jun's stories? Discuss some of the major and minor losses throughout the book and how these shaped them as characters.

**6.** How do the characters in the two timelines (Cleveland vs. Japan) variously understand and connect with the natural world? The book Juliet shares with Winona states “There are as many inter-relationships to be uncovered in a backyard flower bed as in a meadow, in a cemetery as in a forest.” How does the introduction of this material affect these two women?

**7.** What is it that Winona finds in Jun that she didn't find with Liam? How do the two men in her life differ from one another? Winona says, “what we long for is fulfillment. To feel satiated, we need connection, somebody to reciprocate our love.” Were both relationships reciprocal? Which was the “better” relationship?

**8.** Like addiction, chronic eating disorders are a symptom of underlying mental health issues. Is it problematic that Winona and Jun, who each endured separate mental health issues, fell into a romantic relationship? Consider what qualities make a relationship healthy. If they had ended up together, how would their pasts affect their relationship going forward, for better or worse?

**9.** How have the various characters' education, heritage, and culture shaped their perspectives? Why do you think a select few of them are able to think “outside of the box”?

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

## BLENDING FLASHBACKS WITH A TENDER LOVE STORY, MICHIKUSA HOUSE IS A WORK OF LITERARY FICTION THAT DRAWS ON THE AUTHOR'S OWN EXPERIENCE

**10.** Winona thinks of Liam as an example of someone who's leading a successful life and compares life to an equation to be solved: "If you plug in the right tasks and the right milestones, then out pops success. A plus B equals C." However, we learn that Liam had a difficult childhood which included the death of a parent and his mother's subsequent depression. How do challenges in life fit into this equation? Why might the equation have failed to work for Winona? How do mental health issues factor into the equation of a "successful" life? What does "success" look like for Winona?

**11.** A major theme of this novel is the search for authenticity and meaning. At the end of the novel, Winona says, "Have you been pitched sideways, wrecked and silted with debris, still to find yourself, absurdly, fighting to be hopeful?" What is Winona hoping for at the end of this story? How has being "pitched sideways" contributed to where she finds herself at this point in the story?

**12.** What do you think happens to Winona after the end of the book? What does her future hold?

**13.** What are three words you would use to describe this book?

## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

**1.** As Winona dives into seasonal life on a small family farm, she learns about different types of food and cooking styles from a culture that is quite different from her own. Research the history of Japanese food and preparation practices—or choose a country that interests you and learn about their food culture. Why do you think there is a growing interest in food culture today?

**2.** Shoko introduces Winona to many of the wild plants that grow in her corner of the world, including some that are edible. List the edible plants that are native to where you live and see if you can identify any in your neighborhood or at a local botanical garden.

**3.** Winona feels that she finally healed her mind and body after staying at Michikusa House; it changed her so profoundly that she tries to replicate some of what she liked about that lifestyle by working at the local cemetery, the one place in the city that connected her to other with living things. Think about the places in your life that bring comfort. Where do you feel most spiritually connected? What qualities do these places have in common?

# IN CONVERSATION WITH EMILY GRANDY

**Q.** There's a lot of Japanese culture woven into the book, particularly regarding food and cooking. What was your research process like?

**A.** I had already developed a longstanding love affair with Japanese food traditions and regional cultures that spanned more than a decade before I began writing this book. It truly was learning about food cultures other than my own, especially those of the Japanese people, that taught me not only how people traditionally eat (i.e. by consuming what grows where they do) but how to respect and give thanks for the food we eat and the land it comes from. Japan has very distinct regional practices and cuisines in large part because the archipelago stretches almost 2,000 miles from north to south and ranges from sub-tropical in Okinawa to a cold, "humid continental climate" in Hokkaido. For Michikusa House, my research was more prefecture- and season-specific, and delving into the practices surrounding foraging culture.

Additionally, while I had a rudimentary understanding of ceramics-making and its history and well-defined traditions on the island of Kyushu, I had to do a much deeper dive for this book. The types of kilns, firings, glazes, preparations, all these elements required a lot of learning on my part.

**Q.** Is there anything you learned that you wish could have made it into the book?

**A.** Honestly, this book barely scratches the surface of Japanese cuisine. I would have loved to include more detail about the distinct food traditions on Kyushu. Each ingredient has its own rich history of use and preparation. There are also special food traditions surrounding holidays and ceremonies which failed to make it into this novel.

In fact, the spiritual side of Japanese culture was not directly addressed in this book, full stop. On the island of Shikoku, for instance, there exists one of the only circular pilgrimage routes in the world, which takes journeymen to 88 temples around the circumference of the island, a route about 1,200 km long. Win and Jun never visit any temples in the traditional sense, and apart from a passing mention of a shrine appearing inside the Hanada's house and another at the end of their road, we don't get a strong sense of the Shinto or Buddhist traditions that are strongly interwoven with modern life throughout the country.

**Q.** Atmospheric is the perfect word to describe Michikusa House. How did you get in the mindset to write something so sensory?

**A.** I always listen to music to set the mood when I write. For Michikusa House, I listened primarily to Japanese Indie Folk artists, which to me felt fresh and emotive and easy-breezy—all elements I wanted to translate into the text. You can listen to my Michikusa House Inspiration Playlist here:



# IN CONVERSATION WITH EMILY GRANDY (CONT.)

**Q.** If you were going to cast the Michikusa House feature film, who would you choose to play the lead characters?

**A.** Oh, I love this question! I would cast Natalia Dyer as Winona; Hale Appleman as Liam; Sen Mitsuji as Jun; Arisa Yura as Shoko; Jessica Chastain as Juliet, Win's mother; and J.K. Simmons as Curtis the superintendent...the rest, TBD!

**Q.** Winona feels disconnected, even disenchanting in the world of academia, and you pull the veil back on some of the problematic sides of that institution, such as how scientific "methods are imperfect, statistics can be manipulated, and funding programs favor hot topics". What do you hope readers learn about the innerworkings of these institutions and how it relates to nutrition?

**A.** Like any institution, science and academia has its issues. For one thing, the white male perspective and Western cultural bias predominate. My own experience within that institution revealed another shortcoming: the reductive research program. As Winona puts it, "[Liam] sees the world as an engineering project, an object you can disassemble into its constituent parts which, once identified, can be fully understood. But reductionism only works for objects that can be cleanly separated; it's an impractical method to apply to living, flowing, messy biology."

The best example I can give to illustrate the point is this: think of the person (other than yourself) who you know best in the world. Your spouse, your child, your best friend...

Now imagine your loved one is enrolled in a scientific study in which the researchers' aim is to understand everything about that person. They will spend 5 years on this project (a time-frame that is longer than many funded studies). Every day, scientists from many disciplines will take notes and measurements: blood pressure, cholesterol, hand preference, psychological questionnaires, dream diaries, food intake and exercise, a biographical sketch, you name it.

At the end of those 5 years, all the scientists pool their data and write a report describing all the metrics they collected and analyzed about your loved one (note that specialists across disciplines rarely collaborate in this way, preferring to work rather a lot in "isolation" within their respective niches). Their combined conclusion is that they now have a pretty good idea of who that person is. But would you say that at the end of those 5 years the scientists know your loved one better than you do? Probably not. Would you even be a little insulted if they claimed to know your loved one better than you do? Probably! Why? Because you are the one who has a relationship with that person. You've known them longer, you have a history together....

# IN CONVERSATION WITH EMILY GRANDY (CONT.)

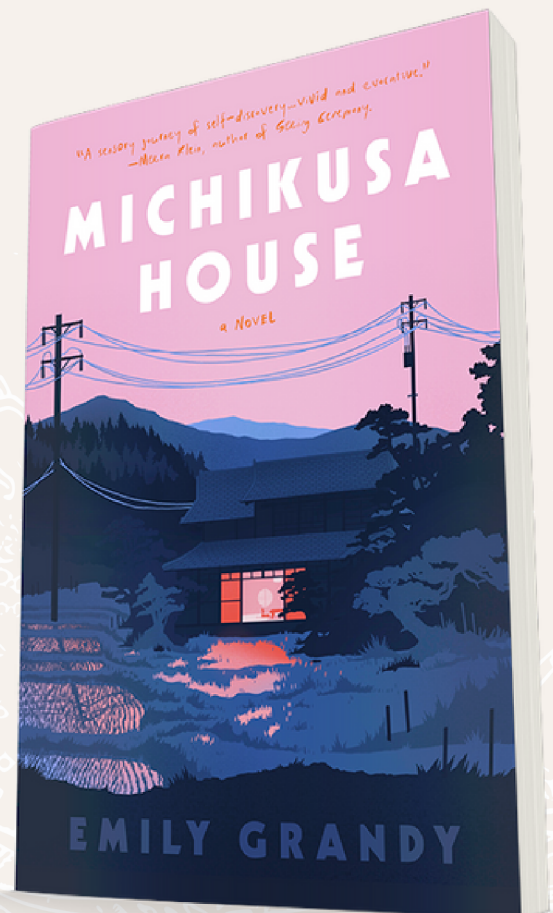
My point is this: Scientific knowledge, via numbers, rates, and metrics, though undeniably useful, forms an incomplete picture; it is just one way to know something. Forming a relationship is another way. Indigenous or generational knowledge is also increasingly recognized for its essential wisdom, and I touch on that in the foraging scene with Shoko. People, like all living things, are ultimately more nuanced than can be described by scientific understanding alone. Every-thing exists within a complex ecosystem that is just as nuanced as the life and spirit of your loved one. One thing this novel is championing and trying to address through a contemporary lens is how relationships facilitate knowledge, understanding, and respect for other beings, and how we can apply this lesson to the food we eat and the land it comes from.

Developing relationships enriches our lives and gives deeper meaning to our daily interactions. At first glance, it may seem counterintuitive to apply this lesson to food and nutrition. For in depth, poetic examples, I highly recommend the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

To learn more about the strengths and shortcomings of modern clinical science and the diet/nutrition conundrum facing the Western world, I recommend the highly digestible (and often humorous) book, *The Body: A Guide for Occupants*, by Bill Bryson. *Nourishment*, by Fred Provenza was, for this writer, the last word on the subject.

**Q.** Do you have a favorite Japanese dish?

**A.** Sushi, specifically pickled kampyo or shiitake maki. At the time of this Q+A, I've dined at more than 50 sushi restaurants across three countries, but less than 5 have really impressed me. The secret is in the rice.





# MICHIKUSA HOUSE

EMILY GRANDY

AVAILABLE IN TRADE PAPERBACK AND EBOOK FROM AMAZON, HOMEBOUND PUBLICATIONS, AND BOOKSTORES

RELEASE: SEPT 2023

PUB: HOMEBOUND PUBLICATIONS

PRICE: \$19.99

ISBN 13: 978-1953340603

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-953340-55-9

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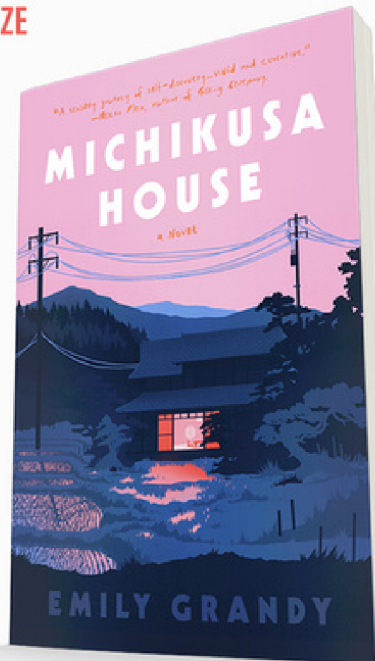
For fans of *Norwegian Wood* and *Unsheltered*, a charming, smart, and compulsively enjoyable exploration of love, friendship, and food culture.

"A sensory journey of self-discovery and the restorative power of food."

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