

READING GROUP GUIDE

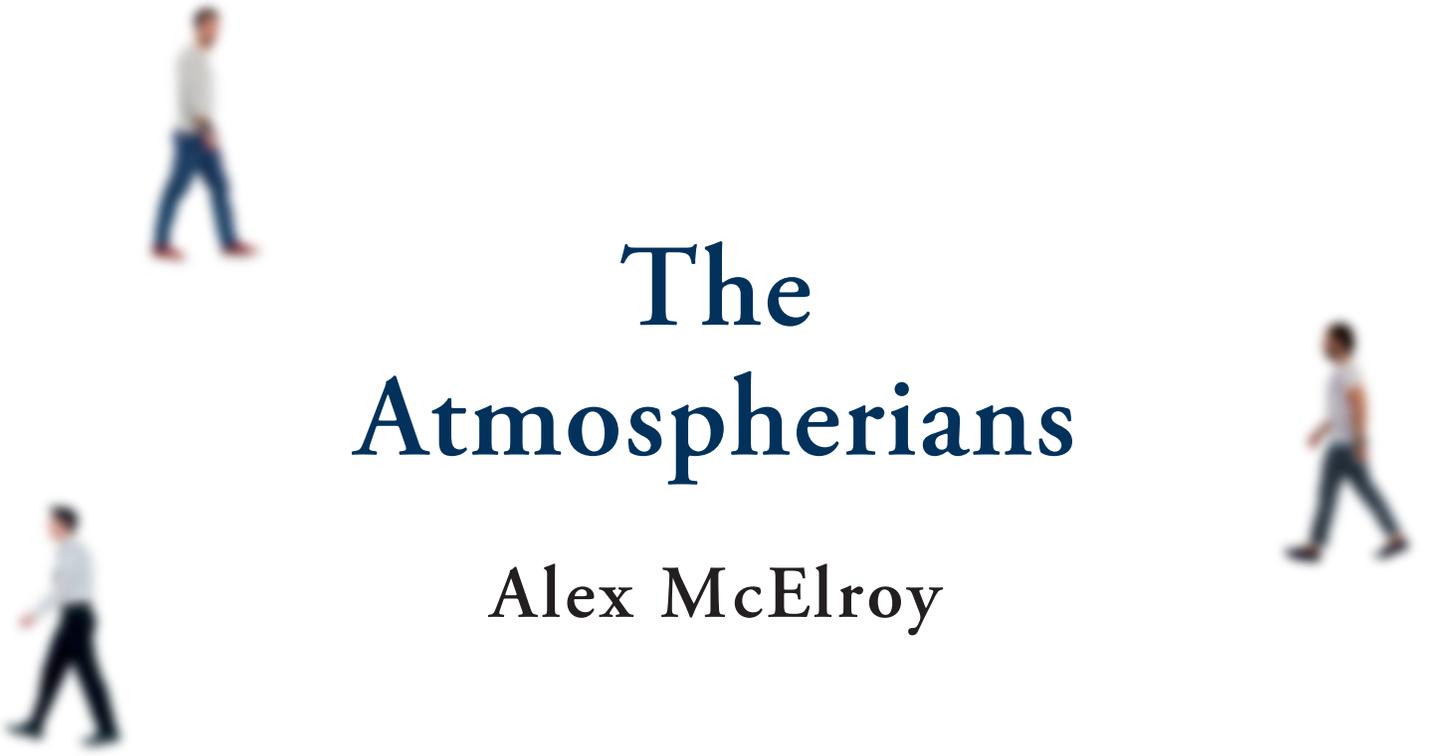
The Atmospherians

a novel 

Alex McElroy



"This is exceptional writing: McElroy's world-building is artful, funny, and bracingly resonant."—*THE NEW YORK TIMES* (editors' choice)



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This reading group guide for THE ATMOSPHERIANS includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Alex McElroy. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

Sasha Marcus was once the epitome of contemporary success: an internet sensation, social media darling, and a creator of a high-profile wellness brand for women. But a confrontation with an abusive troll has taken a horrifying turn, and now she's at rock bottom: canceled and doxed online, isolated in her apartment while men's rights protestors rage outside.

Sasha confides in her oldest childhood friend, Dyson—a failed actor with a history of body issues—who hatches a plan for her to restore her reputation by becoming the face of his new business venture, The Atmosphere: a rehabilitation community for men. Based in an abandoned summer camp and billed as a workshop for job training, it is actually a rigorous program designed to rid men of their toxic masculinity. Sasha has little choice but to accept. But what horrors await her as the resident female leader of a crew of washed-up, desperate men? And what exactly does Dyson want?

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Upon meeting Sasha, we discover she is a disgraced social media personality, blamed for the death of Lucas Devry. Do you believe Sasha was rightfully or wrongfully accused? How responsible are we for the words we say or post online? Are we responsible for intent or impact?
2. Sasha shares a tenuous relationship with Cassandra that constantly straddles the line between friend and enemy. Yet Sasha never entirely cuts her off, despite Cassandra's constant attempts to undermine her. What prevents them from building a genuine connection? Do you have relationships that mirror their complicated dynamic?
3. Both Sasha and Dyson have jobs that require major audience and media attention in order to attain success. How does that attention shape their perceptions of themselves before, during, and after their experience with The Atmospherians?
4. Sasha and Dyson's strong friendship comes into question in part because of Dyson's belief that Sasha "stole" his story to create her lifestyle brand. Was Sasha wrong to speak about him while promoting ABANDON? How does this compare to the credit she ends up receiving for The Atmospherians later on?
5. Dyson outlines twelve types of problematic men who need rehabilitation in order to better help society. Do Dyson's archetypes accurately capture the dangers of masculinity? Rank the twelve types of horrible men on order of how urgently you think they need to be reformed.
6. On p. 43 Dyson says, "I'm doing this...for men like my father. For men so depleted by shit luck and terrible jobs and depression they can't stay awake on the road." Yet, on p. 172 Sasha thinks "The men ran faster, enamored of Dyson. This is, perhaps, what he wanted all along." What do you believe were Dyson's true intentions for starting The Atmosphere?
7. In the novel, man hordes, groups of men suddenly possessed to perform tasks together, are a terrifying epidemic sweeping the nation. What about this concept stuck out most to you?
8. While in the woods, Dyson isolates the men from Sasha and has them perform their deepest insecurities in front of each other. Each is then denied the forgiveness or healing he is looking for. Why do you think shame is a tool in Dyson's work? Is his method effective? Would it work as effectively among women?
9. On p. 93 Sasha thinks "These men didn't know desperation. They knew inconvenience, annoyance, frustration." How does Sasha's perspective on the men and their suffering change throughout the book? Were you able to empathize with the men?

10. Much of this story occurs on the grounds of an abandoned summer camp, with no authority overseeing Sasha and Dyson's project. How does privacy and isolation play a role in the way Sasha, Dyson, and The Atmospherians behave? And how does their private behavior contrast with the public perception of the Atmospherians in the end?
11. On p. 218 Roger says of DAM, "It's the future of life in America. People need to come together. I hate how fractured we all are, always at each other's throats. The problem is not that we hate each other—and I truly believe, deep down, it's impossible to hate someone once you understand them—the problem is communication. No one communicates." Do you agree with Roger's assessment of society?
12. The word cult usually has a negative connotation. *The Atmospherians* has several types of "cult" followings: Sasha's and Cassandra's online followings, The Atmospherians project, and DAM's housing. Which of these most align with your conceptions of a cult? Did you view any of the aforementioned groups as cults? Why or why not?
13. Despite unsafe conditions and bouts of violence, The Atmospherians ultimately prove to be a success, with Sasha taking the reins at the end. Why do you think it is successful? What do you think the men find in The Atmosphere that they cannot find in the real world?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. The definition of *masculinity* has evolved over time. Have everyone in your group write down their own definition of *toxic masculinity*. Share them, and note which aspects of your definitions are similar and which are different. Next, try to come up with a definition the whole group agrees on.
2. Sasha, Cassandra, and Dyson's relationship with the idea of celebrity is deeply contrasted by the isolation and harassment Sasha faces after her encounter with Lucas Devry. What is your relationship to the idea of celebrity? Is it something you desired growing up? How have you reacted to celebrities in the face of their public reckonings?
3. Mat Johnson, author of *Pym*, called *The Atmospherians* "*Fight Club* for the millennial generation." Read the article that Alex McElroy wrote for *The Cut*, "*Fight Club* Spoke to Me: Twenty-Five Years Later, a Novel That Shouldn't Have Resonated Still Does," about the book. What elements of *Fight Club* do you recognize in *The Atmospherians*? What other pop culture references did Alex McElroy's book conjure up for you?

A CONVERSATION WITH ALEX MCELROY

Q: AS THIS BOOK IS ALL ABOUT A CULT, I'D LOVE TO KNOW WHAT CULTS YOU GOT INSPIRATION FROM TO WRITE IT. REAL-LIFE CULTS, TV CULTS? ALSO, WOULD YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A CULT FAN OF ANYTHING?

A: There were so many cults on my mind when I was writing *The Atmospherians*. I read *The Road to Jonestown* while drafting, and that book—and the Peoples Temple—was a huge influence for my book. I even read books like *When Prophecy Fails* and the early pages of Dianetics to get a read on how cults in the past formed. Many cult documentaries fascinated me during the writing process, but especially *Wild Wild Country* and *Holy Hell*. And I can't recommend the work of Jennings Brown enough—he's a podcaster who has done two long-form podcast series about cults, both of which are amazing.

As for cult fan, does a podcast count? I'm a huge fan of *Straightiolab*, which I find hilarious and loved listening to during the long days of the pandemic.

Q: SASHA STRUGGLES WITH A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA, WHICH MANY OF US SHARE. ON ONE HAND, SHE'S FOUND SUCCESS AND SUPPORT IN HER BRAND, ABANDON, BUT ON THE OTHER SHE FACES CRITICISM AND HARASSMENT AFTER HER ENCOUNTER WITH LUCAS DEVRY. WHAT HAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA BEEN LIKE? HAS IT EVOLVED SINCE YOU WROTE THIS BOOK?

A: I wish I could tell you that I have completely sworn off social media—but the truth is that writing and publishing a book has only deepened my relationship with it. I rely on social media a lot to promote my book, and it has been really wonderful to connect with readers and other writers online. I have been fortunate that the only things I've really lost due to social media are countless productive writing hours. And for me, the benefits of meeting new friends and connecting with readers has outweighed negative aspects.

Q: A LARGE PART OF WHAT DYSON STRUGGLES WITH IS THAT HE ENJOYS THE ATTENTION, BUT NOT THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES, BROUGHT ON BY HIS ACTIONS. WHY DOES HE CONTINUE TO SEEK ATTENTION FOR HIS WORK WITH THE ATMOSPHERIANS DESPITE THE HARM IT CAUSES HIM PERSONALLY?

A: Dyson is someone who has a very hard time recognizing when he is actually hurting. He grew up in an environment where his concerns were minimized, and because of that, he can't tell how running *The Atmosphere* is harming him. So, he focuses on what he believes will make him feel better: gaining attention. It made sense to me that Dyson, someone who was neglected as a child, would assume attention would fix everything wrong in his life. But even if attention feels good, it's a shortcut for healing.

Q: IT SEEMS THAT EVERYBODY IN THIS BOOK-FROM SASHA TO DYSON TO ROGER-DESPERATELY WANTS CREDIT AND ATTENTION, AND IT IS QUITE FRIGHTENING HOW FAR MANY OF THESE CHARACTERS ARE WILLING TO GO TO GET IT. WHY DOES THE NEED FOR ATTENTION DISTRACT THEM FROM THEIR ORIGINAL WELL-INTENTIONED GOALS?

A: It's true that these characters are all well-meaning, even if they aren't always likeable. But they live in a world where what is popular is often conflated with what is good. They believe that if they receive the most attention for their actions, then that means their actions were worthy of accolades. For me, this is how it often feels to be online. Ideas seem good because they receive a lot of attention (social media likes and shares), and in my own life, I often need to decide whether I believe in something because I think it's true or because a lot of other people believe in it. I'm pretty susceptible. So this is an ongoing work in progress for me.

Q: BETWEEN WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING THIS BOOK IN 2014 AND ITS DEBUT IN 2021, SO MANY CULTURAL SHIFTS THAT THIS STORY TOUCHES UPON HAVE OCCURRED. *THE ATMOSPHERIANS* CAPTURES MANY OF THE ANXIETIES OF OUR CULTURAL MOMENT-INCLUDING SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AND THE #METOO MOVEMENT'S HOLDING HARMFUL MEN TO ACCOUNT. DO YOU HAVE ANY HOPES FOR HOW THIS BOOK WILL PLAY A ROLE IN CONVERSATIONS AROUND THESE TOPICS IN THE FUTURE?

A: My hope is that *The Atmospherians* will serve as a cautionary tale for what might happen if these issues persist—the man hordes, for example, take the phenomenon of toxic groupthink and carry it to its most dangerous extreme. The novel engages with serious topics but in an absurd manner. I don't agree with how Sasha and Dyson go about trying to reform men, but the desperation they bring to the project is proof, to me, that something needs to be done, and I hope the book might spur conversations toward a middle ground between their actions and doing nothing.

Q: THE MAN HORDES ARE AN INTERESTING AND SCARY CONCEPT, BECAUSE DESPITE PERFORMING "HELPFUL" TASKS, THEY'RE STILL DANGEROUS TO THE COMMUNITY. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO MAKE THEM HELPFUL, AND DID THAT HELPFULNESS CONNECT TO THE IDEA OF "GOOD" MEN?

A: Rage is often terrifying because it is unpredictable. That the man hordes might be innocuous or helpful makes them even more terrifying, in my mind, because when they form, you don't know what to expect from them. You might tense up, preparing for an attack, and then feel like you overreacted when they merely take out your trash. Similarly, I think just about all men are capable of both good and bad actions, and bad men are just as likely to horde up to do good things as good men might horde to do bad things.

Q: HOW MUCH OF THIS STORY DID YOU TAKE FROM YOUR OWN LIFE?

A: I can't break the novelist's code and reveal this! Though I will say that I did grow up in New Jersey.

Q: DYSON AND SASHA'S PLATONIC INTIMACY IS SUCH A BEAUTIFUL ASPECT OF THIS BOOK. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO GROUND THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN FRIENDSHIP RATHER THAN ROMANCE?

A: While writing the book, I felt inundated with stories about friends who eventually become romantic partners—in books, TV shows, movies. But that was just never the case in my life and the lives of so many people I know. And I was curious whether I could capture what is interesting about platonic relationships, which are vital for so many reasons—chiefly, one of the oldest toxic-men traits is that they can't accept being friends with a woman. By writing about platonic friendship, I was writing about a dynamic that is both common and overlooked. We already know what happens when friends fall in love. But we rarely get to experience friends who remain friends while maintaining their unique sense of intimacy.

Q: *THE ATMOSPHERIANS* IS BOTH SERIOUS IN TONE AND SUBJECT AND ALSO ABSOLUTELY HILARIOUS. HOW DID YOU STRIKE THE BALANCE OF HUMOR AND EARNESTNESS? WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE SATIRE AS THE BEST VEHICLE FOR THIS STORY?

A: I am naturally drawn to satire as a reader and as a person. Some of my first experiences of storytelling came from watching stand-up comedians when I was a kid, and I always admired the comics who could talk about serious subjects before unveiling a punch line. Satire is also a classic vehicle for cautionary-tale-style literature—think of *Catch-22* or “A Modest Proposal.” These texts imagine everyday life through a lens of absurdity and help show us things about the world we might not otherwise see. Sometimes we need to laugh at an issue in order to understand how serious it is.

Q: THE ENDING OF *THE ATMOSPHERIANS* IS QUITE SURPRISING, AS IT CHANGES THE WAY WE PERCEIVE EVERYTHING WE'VE BEEN TOLD. CAN WE TRUST SASHA'S REPORT OF EVENTS? DO YOU?

A: Sasha is an expert at crafting narratives. I can't say whether or not I trust her—I worry that would give something away! But I will say that at the end of the book, the reader has to decide what is more important to them: the truth or a good story.