

Readers' Guide for Book Clubs

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for the novel

Laura's Story

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Author's Note

The Readers' guide for the novel *Laura's Story* was designed to help book club groups who wish to discuss this work of historical literary fiction. The story addresses numerous elements that may spark vibrant discussion about Maritime and/or Acadian culture, feminist perspectives in history, family roles as well as Canada during the 1900s and changes in its society. It also offers the possibility to discuss how the book is structured as a work of literature.

You may wish to add your own discussion questions to best engage your group. If topics arise that aren't included in this guide, feel free to contact me to share your feedback and ideas.

I hope you enjoyed reading the book as much as I loved writing it.

All my best to you,

Julie Larade

Synopsis of the Book

Laura's Story is a novel about the life, struggles and triumphs of an Acadian woman born in Chéticamp, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in 1920. On her own at age eighteen after both her parents have died, Laura must make her way in the world. When she is widowed, penniless and alone with three small children, she takes a job at a convent in Montreal. She returns with a beleaguered body and spirit but with a firmer resolve than ever to keep her family together. Yet, when she develops tuberculosis, she is taken away again, this time for two and a half years to the sanitorium in Kentville, NS.

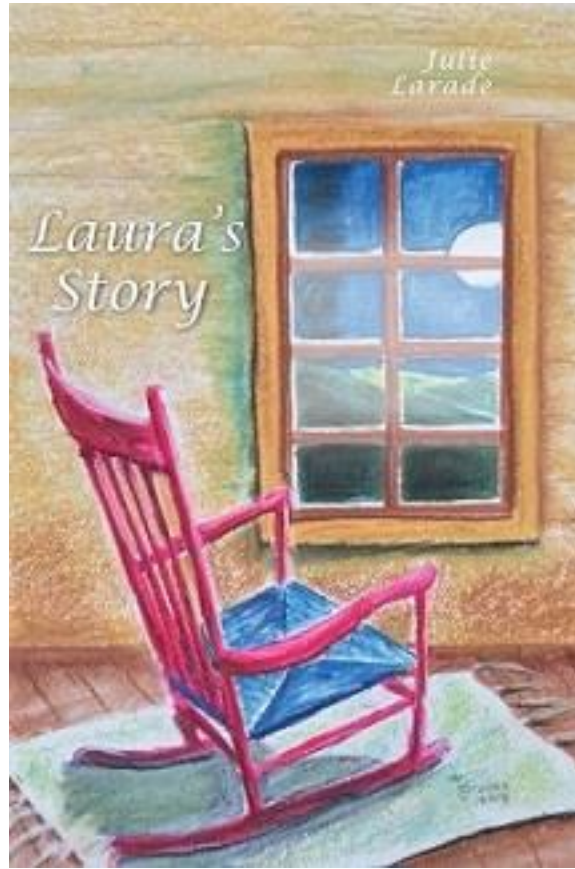
Over the course of her nearly 80 years, she struggles to find herself, seeking wholeness through God, through her children, through her two marriages, and through nature. Laura and her sister Peggy fight to find their love beneath all their jealousies and differences. In the end, we see a woman who has held so many titles, who has been so many things to so many people, but who finds her peace because of and in spite of them all.

The time in which *Laura's Story* takes place was a difficult one for women. It was a time where increased equality in many areas wouldn't be seen until decades later. Many, like Laura, were illiterate as they had to leave school to help raise their siblings and assist in running the family home. Birth control was largely unheard of in those days. Large families, poverty as well as infant and maternal death were commonplace. Women often laboured physically, morning to night, first as children in their own homes and later as adults with their husbands.

Discussion topics

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Interpretation – The Book Cover



Suggested pre-reading activities:

1. What metaphors, symbols or other ideas does the cover evoke in your mind? Based on the cover, predict what you think the story will explore?
2. The moon is an important symbolic figure and has inspired poetry, music, and great discussion of the cosmos. What do you think the moon symbolizes on the cover?

Interpretation – The Book Cover (continued)

Suggested post-reading activities:

1) Here is an example from the book of Laura looking at the moon:

Once the stove was checked for the night, Laura sat in her rocking chair looking out the window. Full moon again tonight...full moon, full of beans, full of people, full of love. She chuckled at herself. She blew out the lamp and slowly climbed into bed. pp. 43-44

-Find other examples of Laura looking at the moon. What do you think the moon represent/mean for her?

4) What are some examples of how the moon influences our culture, behaviour or beliefs? Optional extension: Research this phenomenon and present your findings in the format of your choice. To get you started, here are some potential topics to explore:

- a) cutting your hair by the moon phases
- b) cutting firewood by the moon phases
- c) predicting weather

General Impressions

1. What was your overall reaction to the book? How did it make you feel?
 2. What did you learn about Canadian and Acadian history, the people and culture of Cape Breton, or human nature in general?
 3. What aspects of the story did you find most moving or engaging? Elaborate.
 4. Could you relate to some of the characters? Why or why not?
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Theme & Sub-themes

Laura's Story weaves together the themes of finding meaning in one's life with the challenge of holding a family together, often under the most trying circumstances. As the characters evolve and age, many are tested through addiction, poverty, and the cultural restraints of the time period (1938-1987).

1. Discuss the main theme of finding meaning in one's life. Give examples from the book and from your own experiences.
2. What are some sub-themes in the novel (for example, addiction, poverty, illiteracy)? Elaborate.

Setting, Culture, Time Period (1938-1987)

Set in 20th century Cape Breton, part of mainland Nova Scotia (specifically Antigonish and Kentville) as well as Montreal, Quebec, *Laura's Story* covers a period of nearly 100 years.

1. Which details do you notice (clothes, travel, behaviour, landscapes) that the writer uses to indicate the historical period and the geographical region?

Compare and contrast with contemporary life.

2. When Laura is widowed, how does she provide financially for her family?

-What might she do today to support her family?

3. George suffers the aftereffects of war on his own. How could a returning veteran adjust to home life after being at war? How would he or she deal effectively with the potential trauma and/or PTSD from their experience being away at war? Where would they go for support (agencies, government programs ...)?
4. Sam's wife feels shame, guilt, and grief because she gave up her daughter for adoption and kept it a secret. Discuss how she might have lived the same situation in today's society.
5. Numerous Acadian traditions are mentioned or described in the book: the Fête of the *Mi-Carême*, (mid-lent celebration), hooked and rag rugs, regional foods, and music.

-Did you know about any of these cultural traditions before reading the book? If so, explain. If not, what traditions were new to you? What did you find most intriguing, surprising, captivating? What aspect of Acadian culture and history would you like to learn more about?

Symbolism and Historical Context

The opening line of the book establishes the historical period, the place, and the situation as well as introduces the main character. For some readers, this first line of the book might be understood as simply about Laura's mother, a woman, who falls off a ladder. However, for other readers, the following line might be interpreted as symbolic.

It could have been fate, or an accident, but while climbing a ladder to wash her English employer's second story windows during the summer of 1938, Laura's mother, Joséphine Boudreau, slipped and fell hard onto the ground, slipping quickly into delirium, then coma, and finally death.

Here is one reader's perspective of interpreting the symbolic nature of the first sentence in the book:

Laura Boudreau, a young Acadian woman, was the descendant of Acadians who had been deported from the colony of *Acadie* between 1755-1763. In the book, which begins in the year 1938, Laura's mother is working for an English master, a descendant of the group who had deported the Acadians from their original homeland in the 18th century.

As a result of the Deportation, some Acadians, after the 1763 Peace Treaty of Paris, had been permitted to settle in what is today called the Maritime Provinces. One of the communities where these exiled wandering Acadians settled was the Chéticamp region located on Cape Breton Island. What symbolic irony that Laura's mother, descendant of the Acadian deportees, was working for a descendant of the group who had sent her ancestors into such a tormented exile.

Laura's mother falling from a ladder while working for her English master, going from delirium to coma and finally to death could be seen as a symbol of what her ancestors had lived. Their Deportation and exile could be seen as a falling into a surreal delirium, a coma and a death of their life as they had known it. Fate? Accident?

1. Research and find three facts about present-day Acadian history and culture? Share your findings with the group.
2. Compare and contrast changes and continuity for the Acadians over the years.

Literary craft

Characters

1. Who are your favourite characters? Why?
-Who are your least favourite characters? Why?
2. In what way do the characters change by the end of the book?
-What did Laura learn over the course of her life?
3. Discuss the following situations and choices made by the characters:
 - a) Johnny's decision to hide his infirmity from Laura.
 - b) Sam's wife giving up her child for adoption and for keeping it a secret.
 - c) Tom drowning his sorrows in alcohol. Then, without any warning, running away from his family.
 - d) George experiencing trauma from fighting in the war, suffering alone and in silence.
 - e) Sam's wife being cold and unfriendly towards Laura, even belittling her in front of her friends.
 - f) Laura playing word games or keeping a journal once she learned to read and write.

The writing

1. What are some of your favourite lines from the novel? Why?
2. What other aspects of the writing or dialogue did you like most? Why?

On A Final Note

1. Has this novel changed your perspective or offered any insight about the years 1938 to 1987 and the Acadian people, especially the women? Elaborate.
2. If you had the chance to speak with or to meet the author of *Laura's Story*, what question(s) might you ask her?
3. If it was possible to meet Laura, what question(s) might you ask her?
4. As you read the book, how did it relate to your personal life? What aspects of the storyline might have inspired and/or challenged you? Feel free to elaborate and share with the group.