

Discussion Guide for Book Clubs

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for the novel

Laura's Story

by
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Author's Note

The Discussion Guide for the novel *Laura's Story* was designed to help book clubs discuss this work of historical literary fiction. The story addresses subjects such as Canadian Maritime lifestyle, Acadian culture and the role of the family in the 1900s. The book also offers the possibility to discuss literary devices used by the author.

You may wish to add other discussion questions. 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 enjoyed 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. When she is widowed, penniless and alone with three small children, she takes a job at a convent in Montreal, Quebec. She returns with a beleaguered body and spirit but with a firmer resolve than ever to keep her family together. When she develops tuberculosis, she is taken away again, this time for two and a half years to the sanatorium in Kentville, Nova Scotia. While Laura struggles to hold on to her boys and find her place in the world, the family members' stories develop, weave and unfold. Over the years of their lives, we see courage and perseverance firsthand, and we are moved by the true meaning of family and love.

Discussion topics

- General Impressions 4
- Theme and Sub-Themes 4
- Geographical Setting, Culture, Time Frame (1938-1987) 5
- Symbolism and Historical Context 6
- Literary Craft 7
- A Final Note 7

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 and/or human nature in general?
- 3) What aspects of the story did you find most moving or engaging? Elaborate.
- 4) Could you relate to the characters? Why or why not?

Theme and 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 age and their personalities evolve, many are tested through addiction, poverty, and the cultural restraints of the period (1938-1987).

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

Geographical Setting, Culture, Time Frame (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, transportation, behaviour, landscapes) which the writer uses to indicate the historical period and the geographical region? Discuss similarities and differences with contemporary life.

- 2) When Laura is widowed, how does she provide for her family? What might she do today?

- 3) George suffers the after effects of war. What would a returning veteran do today to return to his life and get support?

- 4) Sam's wife feels shame, guilt, and grief because she gave up her daughter for adoption. Discuss how she might have lived the same situation in today's society.

- 5) Numerous Acadian traditions are described in the book. Some examples are Fête of the *Mi-Carême*, hooked rugs and rag rugs, regional foods, and music. Did you know about any of these cultural traditions before reading the book? If so, explain. Which were new for you? Discuss.

Symbolism and Historical Context

The opening chapter of *Laura's Story* establishes a geographical setting, a time frame and introduces several of the main characters. The first sentence of the chapter might be understood simply as Laura's mother falling off a ladder. However, it could also be interpreted in a symbolic manner.

The Opening Sentence:

"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 an example of one interpretation of the sentence:

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.

After the 1763 Peace Treaty of Paris, Acadians were permitted to settle in what is today called the Maritime Provinces. However, they were not allowed to return to their original villages. One of the communities which these exiled wandering Acadians established 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 doing work for her English master, going from delirium to coma and finally to death could be interpreted as a symbol of what her ancestors had lived. Their Deportation and exile might be considered as falling into a surreal delirium, a coma and a death of their life as they had known it. Fate? Accident?

- 1) How do you interpret the first sentence of the book?
- 2) Research an Acadian symbol, such as the flag or an aspect of Acadian culture, such as traditional food. Write a short essay about your findings. Be sure to answer the questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

Literary craft

The Characters

- 1) Who are your favourite characters and 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) Choose one of the following scenes. Discuss an alternative choice that the character(s) could have made in the situation.
 - a) Johnny's decision to hide his infirmity from Laura.
 - b) Sam's wife giving up her child for adoption.
 - 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.

The Writing Style

- 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) You could visit the author's website: <https://www.julielarade.com/>