

Activities for University Students: Canadian and/or Acadian History

prepared by
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for the novel

Laura's Story

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Table of Contents

A. Introduction	3
B. Learning Outcomes	4
C. Change and Continuity: Then and Now	5
D. Culture and Community	7
Symbolic Interpretation of the Opening Line	7
Fête of the <i>Mi-Carême</i>	8
Acadian Traditional Dishes	10
Hooked Rugs and Rag Rugs	11
Acadian Songs	12
Superstitions	14
Landscape	15

A. Introduction

Laura's Story weaves together the themes linked to 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 restraints of the period (1938-1987). If compared to our contemporary era, these challenges and their potential solutions, illustrate how far we have progressed, or perhaps, how much we have not advanced, as a people, a community, and a society.

The work is literary historical fiction with a clear, clean writing style. It has a strong female protagonist. Set in the Canadian Maritimes, it focuses on Acadian culture.

Because of its applicability to young people and its accessibility in theme, character, and tone, the novel is a valuable educational resource and would lend itself well to a course on Canadian and/or Acadian History.

Synopsis

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, Québec. 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 sanitorium 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.

B. Learning Outcomes

- Students identify and discuss changes that have affected the quality of life as described in the book (for example, the arrival of household appliances such as washing machines; methods of communication such as telephones; ways of transportation such as motorized vehicles).
- Students examine and compare contemporary customs and traditions to those portrayed in the book (for example, the fête of the *Mi-Carême*; foods such as a *fricot*; traditional songs).

C. Change and Continuity: Then and Now

Over the nearly 100 years of the novel, the characters see numerous changes introduced: modes of transportation; construction of the Canso Causeway and the Trans-Canada Highway; adult education; advancements in medical research; creation of the Canadian flag; implementation of government programs such as the Employment Insurance System, Family Allowance, and Medicare; arrival of the telephone, radio and television in homes; and the invention of certain household appliances. These myriad changes caused shifts in attitudes and thinking.

Activities

- 1) Discuss the following questions:
 - a) Which details do you notice that indicate an historical period and a geographical region? Compare the example you have chosen with a present-day one.
 - b) When Laura is widowed, what does she do to earn money in order to keep her home and family together? What might she do today?
 - c) George suffers the after effects of war alone. What would a returning veteran do today?
 - d) Sam's wife experiences shame, guilt, and grief after giving up her daughter for adoption. How would society treat someone in her position today? Do you think a woman nowadays in her situation would do what she did or make different choices?

C. Change and Continuity: Then and Now (continued)

Activities (continued)

- 2) During the time of the book, the minority French-speaking Acadians were mostly surrounded by villages populated by English speakers which often resulted in assimilation. Discuss what other factors play a part in losing one's mother tongue. Compare with other communities that face similar challenges?

- 3) Prepare five questions pertaining to changes that occurred during Laura's lifetime. If possible, use them to interview an elder in your community.

- 4) Invite an elder from the community to speak about the changes that she/he has lived in her/his lifetime. You can use the questions you prepared in activity three for your guests.

- 5) In small groups, discuss how women's roles today compare to women's roles during Laura's and Laura's mother's lifetime.

- 6) Write a short essay about what you have learned from the book, from the interview, from the visit of an elder, or from the discussion about the changes in the role of women. Share in groups or with the class.

D. Culture and Community

Symbolic Interpretation of the Opening Sentence

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 is: 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 way of interpreting the symbolic nature 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?

Activities

- 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.

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

The mini carnival-like celebration during mid-Lent, called the *Mi-Carême*, is a tradition still practised in the Acadian region of Chéticamp and Saint-Joseph-du-Moine, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Alone or in small groups, people disguise themselves and go from house to house to visit family and friends. The *Mi-Carêmes* change their voices and mannerisms; in turn, the “watchers,” as they are called, try to guess the identity of the people behind the masks and costumes. The fête is light-hearted with music, song, dance, food and fun. The following quote from the book refers to the *Mi-Carême*:

“Our gift to you, Mother, on your homecoming, from the whole family!”

“Where did you get the outfits?”

“Ben brought them up from Chéticamp. They have an annual tradition in the middle of Lent where people disguise themselves and go from house to house hoping they won’t be recognized. He says it’s a lot of fun.”

“I’d bet it is. We should go next year!”

“Will do, Mother.” p. 350



Logo: Le Centre de la *Mi-Carême*, Grand Étang, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

Activities

- 1) Visit (if possible) the museum *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême*, located in Grand-Étang, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.
- 2) Visit *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême* Website: <http://www.micareme.ca/en/>
- 3) Participate in the activity *The Battle Between Lent and Carnival* which shows the extreme behaviours of the joys of Carnival (as well as *Mi-Carême*) and the austerity of Lent, portrayed in the painting by Pieter Bruegel, the elder (1525-1569). Find the activity at the following link: <http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/the-battle-between-carnival-and-lent/the-battle-of-carnival-and-lent-painting/#prettyPhoto>
- 4) Participate in the activity *Fêtes and Celebrations, Event Planning: The Fête of the Mi-Carême*. By doing this activity, you become an event planner of the *Mi-Carême* fête, giving the opportunity to celebrate this festivity in your school or other venue. Find the activity at the following link: http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/wp-content/uploads/UNIT_Event_Plan1.pdf

Reference:

Arsenault, Georges (2009). Translated from French into English by Sally Ross, *Acadian Mi-Carême: Mask and Merrymaking*, Charlottetown, Acorn Press.

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Acadian Traditional Dishes

Peggy prides herself on her cooking and is reputed to have the best biscuits in the region. When she and Laura think about happy memories of their childhood, it's their mother's traditional Acadian cooking that first comes to mind.

Activities

- 1) How does food factor into Peggy's life? More broadly, how does food factor into your life as well as the life of your family and culture?
- 2) What dishes do Peggy and Laura remember fondly and why? What foods do you recall loving from your childhood?
- 3) Research a few Acadian recipes and prepare a menu. You can add images of the dishes.
- 4) Have a class/group potluck.

Many sites offer examples of traditional Acadian recipes. Here is one link:
<http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/home/traditional-recipes/>

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Hooked Rugs and Rag Rugs

Laura is quite taken with the famous Chéticamp area hooked rugs and rag rugs.

Activities

- 1) Visit (if possible) *Les Trois Pignons* Website. www.lestroispignons.com/
- 2) Invite (if possible) a person who makes hooked rugs or rag rugs to visit your class and demonstrate how to make them.
- 3) Visit (if possible) the museum located at *Les Trois Pignons* in the village of Chéticamp, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia that highlights aspects of the history of hooked rugs and showcases such artisans such as Elisabeth Le Fort.
- 4) Create your own design for a hooked rug.
- 5) Do you have a passion for a handicraft or an activity? If yes, what is it? If not, choose a potential one. Some examples are writing, dancing, biking, cooking, sewing, knitting, playing a musical instrument, wood-working, metal-working or computer programming. Share your choices in a small group discussion.

For more information about hooked rugs of Chéticamp, see:

Chiasson, Anselme and Annie Rose Deveau (1985). *History of Chéticamp Hooked Rugs and their Artisans*, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, Lescarbot Publications.

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Acadian Songs

In *Laura's Story* we see the importance of singing in Acadian communities.

Activities

- 1) Read the words of the traditional song *C'est la poulette grise* that are on the following page. Ask someone to play/sing the melody or find a version online.
- 2) Search online to find information about other Acadian traditional songs. Share the information you find.
- 3) Find a traditional song from another ethnic group. Share your findings. If possible play, sing or demonstrate the song.
- 4) Write a song or a poem. Share with the group.
- 5) Prepare a concert for an audience with some of the songs and/or poems you found and/or wrote.
- 6) Invite an Acadian songwriter, composer and/or musician to visit and perform.

C'EST LA POULETTE ¹⁵



M.S.H.
Présentation de Marie

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C'est la pou-let-te gri-se Qui pond dans l'é - gli - se, Ell' va pondre
un beau p'tit co-co Pour son p'tit qui va fair' do-di-che, Ell' va pondre
un beau p'tit co-co Pour son p'tit qui va fair' do-do. Do-di-che, do- do.

2
C'est la poulette blanche
Qui pond dans les branches,
Ell' va pondreetc.

3
C'est la poulette noire
Qui pond dans l'armoire
Ell' va pondreetc.

4
C'est la poulette jaune
Qui pond dans les aulnes
Ell' va pondre etc.

5
C'est la poulette brune
Qui pond dans la lune
Ell' va pondre etc.

C'EST LA CLOCHE DU VIEUX MANOIR

A (Canon) p (écho) B
C'est la clo- che du vieux ma - noir, du vieux ma- noir Qui nous
dit le re - tour du soir, le re - tour du soir. C'est la...etc.

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Superstitions

Laura sees signs of good and bad luck in everyday life. Spiders, a clear blue sky, a flock of crows, and a lone fawn all take on meaning.

Activities

- 1) Find another example of a superstition that existed and/or still exists in the Acadian community. Find a similar superstition in another ethnic group and compare it with the Acadian superstition.
- 2) Research some superstitions to find out their origins, if possible. What did people who believed in the superstition(s) think would happen to bring them good or bad luck?

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Landscape

The land influences its people and their outlook, behaviour, personality and even physical body.

Activity

Discuss how the weather and the landscape of east coast Canada has affected the characters in the novel?