

**History Guide
for
Adult Education or University Students**

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To accompany the novel

Laura's Story

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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 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.

B. Learning Outcomes

- Students identify and discuss changes that have affected the quality of life as described in the book (examples: the arrival of household appliances; methods of communication; ways of transportation; government programs; the arrival of the radio and television; the creation of the Canadian flag; advancements in medical research; adult education; and construction of the Canso Causeway).
- Students examine and compare contemporary customs and traditions to those portrayed in the book (examples: the fête of the *Mi-Carême*; foods such as **fricot*; and traditional songs).

**fricot* is a traditional Acadian dish made with potatoes, meat, onions and water.

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 myriads of changes caused shifts in attitudes and thinking.

Suggested activities:

1) Discuss the following questions:

- a) Which details do you notice in the book that indicate a historical period? 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 a living to keep her home and family together? What might she do today?
- c) George also suffers the consequences of war on his own. What could a returning veteran do today? What systems are now in place that could support him today?
- d) Sam's wife experiences shame, guilt, and grief after giving up her daughter for adoption and keeping it a secret. 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? Explain why.
- e) What kind of secrets might people keep today? Do you think they are similar or different from back then? Explain why.

2) Choose one of the following topics to research: modes of transportation; the construction of the Canso Causeway; adult education; creation of the Canadian flag; implementation of one of the following three government programs: the Employment Insurance System, Family Allowance, or Medicare; the arrival of the telephone, radio, or television in homes and the invention of certain household appliances. Present your findings in the format of your choice (power point, pamphlet, storyboard, website, video, etc.)

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

Suggestive activities: (continued)

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

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

5) 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 guest.

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

7) 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 with your peers.

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 in *Laura's Story* 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 reader's perspective 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?

Suggested 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 a 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 (designated homes) to visit family and friends. The *Mi-Carêmes*, known as “runners”, 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 lighthearted 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* (continued)

Suggested activities:

- 1) For more information on the fête of the *Mi-Carême*, visit (if possible) the museum *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême*, located in Grand-Étang, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. (telephone number: 902-224-1016)
- 2) Visit *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême* website: <http://www.micareme.ca/en/>
- 3) Research the history of the *Mi-Carême*. Present your findings to your group.
- 4) Create your own masks. If possible, plan an outing to *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême* to do so. Otherwise, kits can be purchased on their website.
- 5) Within your group, plan your own mid-lent event or fête of the *Mi-Carême* with “runners” and “watchers” along with food, music, song, dance, and fun.
- 6) Compare and contrast similar activities such as mummering in Newfoundland and Labrador and the Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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)

Traditional Acadian 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.

Suggested 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 homemade (and/or store bought) foods do you recall loving from your childhood?
- 3) Research a few Acadian recipes and prepare a menu. Include images of the dishes.
- 4) Have a class/group potluck of Acadian dishes – traditional and/or modified for our modern-day preferences (ex: vegetarian, vegan, gluten free, etc.)

Many sites offer examples of traditional Acadian recipes. Here is one link:

<http://www.acadian-explorations.ca/home/traditional-recipes/>



Meat pie

D. Culture and Community (continued)

Hooked Rugs and Rag Rugs

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

Suggested activities:

- 1) For more information on rug hooking, visit the websites:
www.lestroispignons.com and www.bettyannecormier.com
- 2) 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 artisans such as Élisabeth Le Fort.
- 3) Order a a kit online to hook your own rug:
<https://www.bettyannecormier.com/workshops/fiberarts/>
<https://www.bettyannecormier.com/workshops/fiberarts#kits>. To support you in this endeavour, you can make use of numerous online tutorials such as :
https://youtu.be/qkC_d7zP2nE
- 4) 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, metalworking or computer programming. Share your choice 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.

Suggested activities:

- 1) See the following page of this guide for the words of the traditional song *C'est la poulette grise*, which is featured in the novel. Ask someone to play/sing the melody or find a version online to listen to.
- 2) Search online to find information about traditional Acadian songs. Share the information you find.
- 3) Find a traditional song from another ethnic group. Present your findings. If possible, play, sing or demonstrate the song.
- 4) Either alone or with a classmate, write a song or a poem. Share your creation with others (if possible, add music notes, record a video, create a YouTube video or Tic Toc video, etc.)
- 5) In small groups, prepare a concert for an audience with some of the songs and/or poems you found or wrote.
- 6) Invite (if possible) an Acadian songwriter, composer and/or musician to visit and perform either in person or via Zoom, Teams, etc.

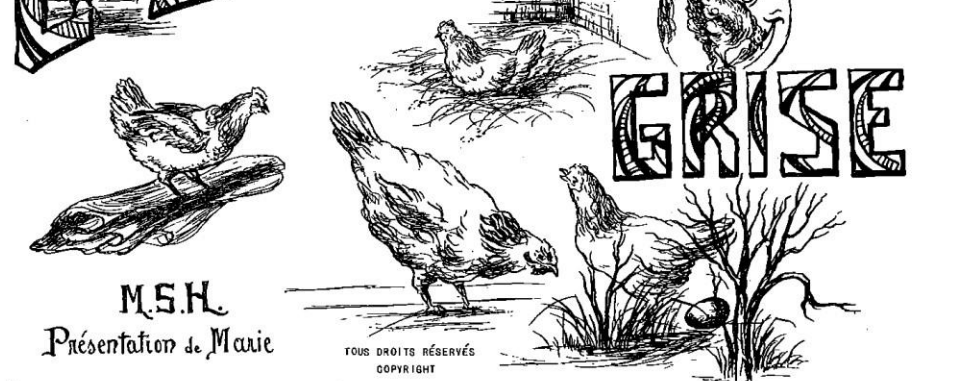
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Boudreau, Daniel (1996). 2e édition, *Chansons d'Acadie*, série 11, Moncton, Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton.

Chiasson, Anselme & Daniel Boudreau (different dates). *Chansons d'Acadie*, séries (variety of publishers).

Savard, Louis-Martin (2014). « Acadian Folklore Studies », <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/acadian-folklore-studies/>, consulted February 21, 2015

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.

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

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

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

C'EST LA CLOCHE DU VIEUX MANOIR
(Canon) *p* (écho) B
A
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.
P (écho) A

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.

Suggested 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 of your choosing and then compare and contrast it with an Acadian superstition of your choice. (*Conduct an interview with an elderly person in the community or contact the museum Les Trois Pignons 1-902-224-2642)
- 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.

Suggested activities:

- 1) Discuss how the weather and the landscape of east coast Canada has affected the characters in the novel.
- 2) Research the history behind our modern windmills using some of the following suggestions:
 - Where they are manufactured
 - Manufacture cost
 - Installation cost
 - Where and how sites are chosen
 - The number of windmills in your area, province, country
 - Effects on the environment and its inhabitants (pros and cons)
 - Compare and contrast the effects on the environment, with or without the use of windmills
- 3) Write a short essay of your findings and share.