

Activities for Grade Twelve Students: Language Arts

prepared by
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for 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 of them are tested through addiction, poverty, and the restraints of the period (1938 to 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.

Laura's Story lends itself very well to many outcomes in high school curricula. We have chosen outcomes from the Language Arts program or Literature curriculum as one example.

Each teacher or facilitator can choose one or more of the activities offered in this booklet as well as implement other ideas to interpret and enrich the reading experience of the novel. Activities suggested in the following pages can be also adapted to other grades.

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, Quebec. She then 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. General Learning Outcomes (an example): Grade Twelve Language Arts

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

1. Students will be expected to select and read, with understanding, a range of Canadian literature. (p.12)
2. Students will be expected to respond personally and critically to a range of Canadian literature, applying their understanding of language, form, and genre. (p.12)
3. Students will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of identity, diversity, and voice as portrayed in Canadian literature, including their own writing. (p.12)

<https://www.ednet.ns.ca/files/curriculum/canlit12webdp.pdf>

C. Literature Aspects

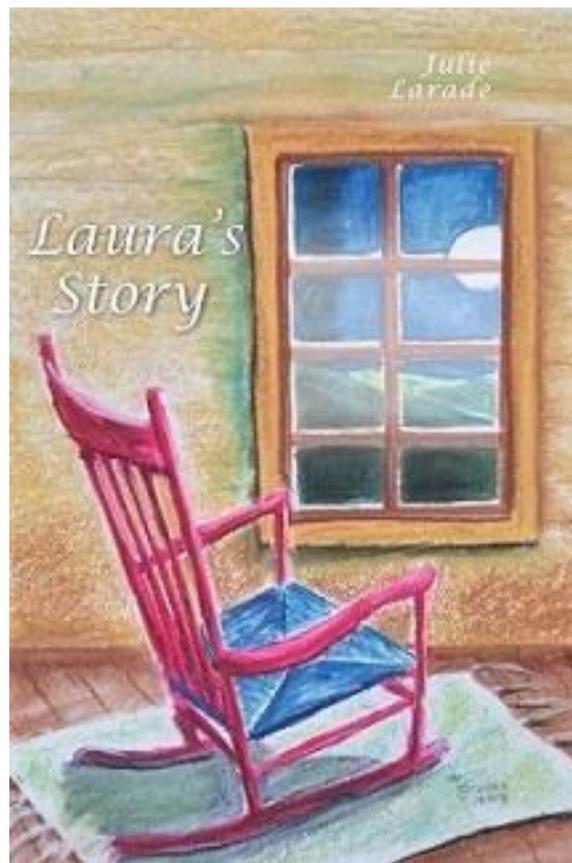
Interpretations: The Book Cover

Specific Outcome Students will be expected to:

2.3 examine how responses and interpretations reflect different reader perspectives. (p.12)

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

Look at the cover of the book.



Interpretations: The Book Cover (continued)

Pre-reading Activity

- 1) Based on the cover, predict what you think the story will explore?

Post-reading Activities

- 1) Here is an example from the book where Laura is 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

What are some examples of how the moon influences our culture, behaviour or beliefs? To get you started, here are some potential topics to explore:

- a) cutting your hair by the moon phases
 - b) predicting weather
- 2) Create your own cover that you feel would give the reader an idea of what the book might explore.
 - 3) Prepare an art gallery of the book covers created and present them to others.

Interpretations: The Opening Sentence

Specific Outcomes Students will be expected to:

2.4 reflect on what their own responses reveal about their personal values and attitudes. (p.12)

2.5 examine how texts work to reveal and produce values, identities, and positions. (p.12)

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

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 line 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, Nova Scotia. 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?

Interpretations: The Opening Sentence (continued)

Activities

- 1) How do you interpret the first sentence of the book?
- 2) Write down some of your favourite lines from *Laura's Story*. Why do you like them?
- 3) What are some other first lines in books you admire? Write them down and share. Why do you think they are successful?
- 4) Write one first line that could be the start of a new story and share with the class.
- 5) 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.

Writing: Crafting Characters and Themes

Specific Outcomes Students will be expected to:

3.1 identify recurring themes, values, and attitudes in texts. (p.12)

3.3 explore text by entering imaginatively into the lives and situations of characters. (p.12)

3.4 explore and examine characters' development and characters' understanding of themselves. (p.12)

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

There are many characters in the book. Some examples are: Laura, Peggy, George, Johnny, Joe, Tom, Ben, Sadie Mae, old Patrick, Esther, Sam, Robert, Rosalie, Louise, Pierre Bergeron, the gardener, the innkeeper, Charlotte, Delores, Bella, Caroline, Bill, Father MacKay, Anne, Sara, the neighbouring farmer, Pierre in Chéticamp, Barbara, Mr. Ray, and Dooly. See the activities on the following page.

Writing: Crafting Characters and Themes (continued)

Activities

- 1) Discuss the following questions:
 - a) Who is your favourite character? Why?
 - b) Who is your least favourite character? Why?
 - c) Consider the Laura-Peggy relationship. What difficulties arise between them in the first half of the novel? Which character do you prefer and why?
 - d) “Medical issues” are one of the themes in the novel (for example, tuberculosis, cancer, addictions, dementia). Treatments and awareness of different diseases have changed over time. Discuss these changes.
- 2) Place your favourite character in a present-day situation. Describe the scene. Write a dialogue involving another character. Present it as a role-play.
- 3) Choose one of the following scenes. Write alternative choices that the character(s) could have made in the situation.
 - a) Johnny’s decision to hide his infirmity from Laura.
 - b) Choosing to leave her two older sons with her sister, Peggy, Laura takes her youngest child, Ben, to Montreal where she works in a convent.
 - c) Sam’s wife is cold and unfriendly to Laura, even belittling her in front of her friends.
 - d) Tom drowns his sorrows in alcohol. Then without any warning, runs away from his family. He stays away for over two years without a word.

Novel Structure: Its Arc

Specific Outcome Students will be expected to:

2.6 describe, discuss, and evaluate the language, ideas, and other significant characteristics of a variety of texts and genres. (p.12)

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

“A narrative arc provides a visual map of a story showing how writers typically build up tension to a climactic moment and then allow the tension to decrease to the story’s resolution.” Susan Blau

Source: “Arc”, “What are story arcs in fiction writing?”
www.freelancewriting.com consulted March 6, 2015

Activities

With the definition of “arc” in mind, discuss the following questions:

- 1) Discuss one or more events in the story that move from a problem (tension) to a resolution (a release of the tension).
- 2) Create a new scene, using one of the characters from *Laura’s Story*. Write a minimum of one-page. Follow the “arc” model: beginning, challenge (problem), tension building, climactic moment and resolution. Create a role-play of the scene.
- 3) Analyse the changes that occurred in Laura’s character.

Literary Devices

Simile, Metaphor, Alliteration and Foreshadowing

Specific Outcome Students will be able to:

2.6 describe, discuss, and evaluate the language, ideas, and other significant characteristics of a variety of texts and genres. (p.12)

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

The author uses a variety of writing techniques in *Laura's Story*. For example, she uses simile, metaphor, alliteration and foreshadowing.

Simile

Definition:

“A figure of speech in which two fundamentally unlike things are explicitly compared, usually in a phrase introduced by like or as.”

“Simile”, grammar.about.com, consulted February 13, 2015

Examples:

- a) fit as a fiddle p.117
- b) like a shock of cold water p.126

Activity

Find a few examples in the novel and/or create your own. Share with others.

Metaphor

Definition:

A metaphor is a figure of speech that identifies something as being the same as some unrelated thing, for rhetorical effect, thus highlighting the similarities between the two. It is therefore considered more rhetorically powerful than a simile. While a simile compares two items, a metaphor directly equates them, and so does not apply any distancing words of comparison, such as "like" or "as".

"Metaphor", en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor, consulted February 18, 2015.

Example:

Laura opened her mouth to protest, not wanting to be mothered, but she realized resting was for the greater good and more productive than arguing with her bull in a china shop sister. p.129

Activity

Create a few examples of metaphors. Share with others.

Alliteration

Definition:

"The repetition of the same sounds or of the same kinds of sounds at the beginning of words or in stressed syllables of a phrase."

"Alliteration", Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia; consulted February 13, 2015

Examples:

- a) perfect parallel parking p. 339
- b) fall's first frost p. 352

Activity

Find a few examples in the novel and/or create your own. Share with others.

Foreshadowing

Definition:

“Guessing ahead is a literary device by which an author hints what is to come. It is used to avoid disappointment, and sometimes used to arouse readers.”

“Foreshadowing”, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, consulted February 13, 2015.

Example:

Peg’s face was awash in heat spots beneath her blazing freckles. “He’s probably out in the barn, smoking. I give him hell for it, but it goes in one ear, out the other. Tom smokes with him, you know!” she looked accusatorily at Laura. p. 228

Activity

Find other examples of foreshadowing throughout the novel, moments that indicate something is about to happen. Share with others.

D. Historical, Social and Cultural Aspects:

The activities in Section D help us understand some of the historical, social and cultural aspects in *Laura's Story*.

Specific Outcome Students will be able to:

1.3 demonstrate knowledge about the geographic, historical, social, and cultural contexts of literary texts. (p.12)

Source: Atlantic Canada Curriculum Canadian Literature 12

Section D explores the following topics:

Superstitions

The Traditional Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

Acadian Traditional Dishes

Hooked Rugs and Rag Rugs

Acadian Songs

A reference that can help you with the themes in Section D:

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

D. Historical, Social and Cultural Aspects (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 take on meaning.

Many people cross their fingers for good luck or believe a black cat is a sign of bad luck. What superstitions do you know?

Here is a definition of the word “superstition”:

“A belief or way of behaving that is based on fear of the unknown and faith in magic or luck: a belief that certain events or things will bring good or bad luck.”

“Superstition”, <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/superstition> consulted February 20, 2015.

Here is an example in the book:

“Laura felt this was a wonderful sign; spiders were good luck. And at long last, they were free. She smiled and hugged Ben tightly.” p. 59

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. Historical, Social and Cultural Aspects (continued)

The Traditional Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

In *Laura's Story*, we read about the mini-carnival-like celebration during mid-Lent, called in French, the *Mi-Carême*. The word "Mi" stands for "mid" and the word "Carême" means Lent. The *Mi-Carême* fête is still practised in the Acadian region of Chéticamp and Saint-Joseph-du-Moine, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. People don costumes and masks. Then, alone or in small groups, they go from house to house to visit family and friends. The *Mi-Carêmes* change their voices and mannerisms. In turn, the householders or 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

The Traditional Fête of the *Mi-Carême* (continued)

Activities

- 1) Visit (if possible) the museum/interpretation centre *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême*, located in Grand Étang, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.
- 2) Visit the Website of *Le Centre de la Mi-Carême*. <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 *Fête 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

References:

- Arsenault, Georges (2009). Translated from French into English by Sally Ross, *Acadian Mi-Carême: Mask and Merrymaking*, Charlottetown, Acorn Press.
- Le Blanc, Barbara and Mireille Baulu-Willie (2014). "Long Live *Mi-Carême*", Section "In My Classroom", *AVISO*, Halifax, The Magazine for the Nova Scotia Teaching Profession, pp. 3-7.

D. Historical, Social and Cultural Aspects (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.

Here is a quote that refers to traditional Acadian food in the book:

Laura's stomach rumbled. She suddenly craved her mother's Acadian dishes of *fricot* and meat pie. Their whole lives were gone now, their quiet childhood afternoons skating on the pond or fishing in Chéticamp, the tang of the sea air. Nights knitting by the fire in Inverness singing Acadian songs and lullabies, all gone. p. 4

Activities

- 1) Why is the preparation of food important for Peggy?
- 2) What dishes do she and Laura remember fondly?
- 3) Research a few Acadian recipes and create a menu with pictures for a meal (or have a class potluck!).

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

D. Historical, Social and Cultural Aspects (continued)

Hooked Rugs and Rag Rugs

Laura is quite taken with the famous Chéticamp area hooked rugs and rag rugs. In *Laura's Story* we discover some information about these rugs. Here is an example:

“Oh my, Laura, how beautiful,” she murmured.

Peggy pulled out a hooked rug, displaying intricate colourful details of a rough sea where the high waves lashed against imposingly large rocks and in the corner, a lighthouse meant to guide any lost ship. The tears in her sister's eyes told Laura that this gift was anything but inconsequential; she'd clearly derived a very personal meaning from the scene given what was happening to her.

Laura breathed out. “I bought it in Chéticamp. They have the most marvellous rugs and what's most intriguing is each stitch is made by hand. Sam and I talked to a few 'hookers',” Laura giggled into her hand, “but really we were quite overwhelmed at how genuinely enthused they are about their work. A real labour of love.” p. 228

Activities

- 1) Visit the following 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, Nova Scotia that highlights aspects of the history of hooked rugs and showcases such artisans as Elisabeth Le Fort.
- 4) Create your own design for a hooked rug.
- 5) Do you have a passion for an activity? If yes, what is it? If not, chose 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.

If you wish to learn more about hooked rugs of Chéticamp, see the following book:
Chiasson, Anselme and Annie Rose Deveau (1985). *History of Chéticamp Hooked Rugs and their Artisans*, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, Lescarbot Publications.

D. Historical, Social and Cultural Aspects (continued)

Acadian Songs

In *Laura's Story* we see the importance of singing. Here is an example:

The night soon grew cool, a sure sign fall was upon them. When Laura tucked the boys in, she started to sing, *C'est la poulette grise*. The boys did not understand a word. "You hardly sing anymore, Mother. Where did you learn these songs?"

"My mother used to sing them. Both my parents were Acadians, you know. My mother's last name was Chiasson and my father was a Boudreau." p. 43

Activities

- 1) See the following page for the words of the song *C'est la poulette grise*. Ask someone to play/sing the melody or find a version online and listen to it.
- 2) Search online for other Acadian traditional songs. Share the information.
- 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.
- 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.

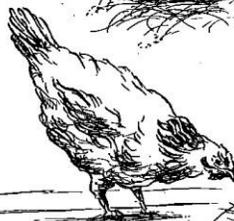
References:

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 1-11 (variety of publishers).

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

C'EST LA POULETTE ¹⁵



GRISE

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
C'est la clo-che du vieux ma - noir, du vieux ma- noir Qui nous



P (écho) A
dit le re - tour du soir, le re - tour du soir. C'est la...etc.

E. Change and Continuity: Then and Now

Identifying Shifts over Time in *Laura's Story*

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. Because of these changes, attitudes and thinking shifted.

Activities

- 1) Discuss the following questions:
 - a) Which details do you notice (clothes, transportation, behaviour, landscape) which the writer uses to indicate changes between 1938 and 1987. Compare the similarities and differences of these periods with present-day life.
 - b) When Laura is widowed, how does she provide for her family? What might she do today?
 - c) Laura felt an important connection to her Chéticamp Acadian roots. Her youngest son, Ben, also felt a pull towards his Acadian roots. What was Laura looking for as she explored her Acadian ancestry? What did Ben discover once he moved to the Chéticamp area to work at the Cape Breton Highlands National Park?
 - d) Laura and members of her family faced assimilation during their lifetime. The minority French-speaking Acadians living in Nova Scotia were mostly surrounded by villages populated by English speakers. What other factors contribute to the assimilation process? What other communities face similar assimilation challenges?

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

Identifying Shifts over Time in *Laura's Story*

Activities (continued)

- 2) Choose one important change that took place during Laura's lifetime. Explain the positive and negative aspects as well as the impacts of the example chosen.

- 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 of the community to speak about the changes that she/he has lived in her or his lifetime.

- 5) In small groups, discuss how attitudes and behaviours have changed towards women. What were the expectations of a woman's role in Laura's day compared to present-day?

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