

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

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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 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, is set in the Canadian Maritimes with a focus on Acadian culture and showcases a pivotal time in Canada's history.

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 Humanities (Culture and Community) curricula.

## 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 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 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.

The specific region of Nova Scotia and the Acadian culture play a significant role in the novel. The characters are influenced by the customs, beliefs, values, and traditions of the region; as a result, these things directly affect their choices and how they conduct their lives.

## **B. Learning Outcomes**

- Students critically examine what makes up a culture, with a specific focus on Acadian culture.
- Students examine how beliefs and traditions can continue unchanged, be adapted or change completely throughout time.
- Students compare the traditions and customs in the novel to those of the contemporary era.

## C. Culture and Community

### Fête of the *Mi-Carême*

In *Laura's Story*, we read about the mini carnival-like celebration during mid-Lent, called the *Mi-Carême*, a tradition that is still practised in the Acadian region of Chéticamp and Saint-Joseph-du-Moine, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. People disguise themselves by wearing costumes and masks. Then, alone or in small groups, the *Mi-Carêmes* or “runners” go from house to house (designated homes) 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

## C. 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.

#### 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-macWillie (2014). “Long Live *Mi-Carême*”, Section “In My Classroom”, *AVISO*, Halifax, The Magazine for the Nova Scotia Teaching Profession, pp. 3-7

## C. Culture and Community (continued)

### 2) 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.

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

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

\*\* meat pie is also a traditional Acadian dish known as *pâté*. It is first prepared with meat, onions, water, salt and pepper then baked inside a pie crust.

#### Suggested activities:

- 1) Why is the preparation of food important for Peggy? More broadly, how does food factor into your life as well as the life of your family and culture?
- 2) What dishes do she 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. 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/>

## C. Culture and Community (continued)

### 3) 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

#### Suggested activities:

- 1) For more information on rug hooking, visit the websites:  
[www.lestroispignons.com/](http://www.lestroispignons.com/)                      [www.bettyannecormier.com](http://www.bettyannecormier.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 artisans such as Élizabeth Le Fort.
- 4) Order 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 online tutorials such as: [https://youtu.be/qkC\\_d7zP2nE](https://youtu.be/qkC_d7zP2nE)
- 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 choice 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.

#### 4) 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

#### 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.

#### 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 (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 <sup>15</sup>



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 pondre ....etc.

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 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

P (écho) A

dit le re - tour du soir, le re - tour du soir. C'est la...etc.

## 5) 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.

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

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

You will find other examples on pages 47, 59, and 194-195.

### 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. How have they changed?
- 3) What did people who believed in the superstition(s) hope would happen to bring them good or bad luck?

## **C. Culture and Community** (continued)

### **6) 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 affect its inhabitants.
- 2) People have been arguing the merits of nature vs. nurture for many years with findings supporting both sides. Discuss what these terms mean and how nature can influence the character of a person.
- 3) Find characters in the novel whose personalities could be said to have been in some way affected by the world they grew up in and why.
- 4) a) 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)
- b) Compare and contrast the effects on the environment, with or without the use of windmills

## D) 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.

Discuss the following questions:

- a) When Laura is widowed, how does she provide for her family? What might she do today to support her family financially and otherwise?
- b) George suffers the aftereffects of war on his own. How might a returning veteran adjust to home life today 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 ...)?
- c) Sam's first wife makes a decision that affects her forever. What is it and why does she do it? What are its impacts? Would this happen today? Elaborate.
- d) Certain fêtes, holidays or other festivities in the book might be celebrated differently today. Choose a contemporary example. Compare and contrast with an example from the book. What needs are being met at these types of gatherings?
- e) Laura and members of her family faced assimilation during their lifetime losing their mother tongue and cultural traditions. The minority French-speaking Acadians living in Nova Scotia were mostly surrounded by villages populated by English speaking individuals. Discuss what other factors contribute to the assimilation process?
- f) What other \*communities face similar assimilation challenges? Compare and contrast. (\*In Nova Scotia, other provinces, even other countries if desired)

- g) The people of Chéticamp have faced a “second deportation.” Their lands situated along the Cap Rouge area were expropriated by the government of Canada when the Cape Breton Highlands National Park was created in 1936. Today, there is a revival to recapture the historical and cultural aspects of the Acadians who once lived there.

If possible, visit the Cape Breton Highland National Park to specifically familiarize yourself with the above history and beyond, at the new tourist attraction located at Cap Rouge campground. Furthermore, visit the Buttereau hiking trail where additional historical landmarks are displayed.