La’s Orchestra Saves the World

by Alexander McCall Smith

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About the Book

The story is mainly concerned with the day-to-day life and concerns of a young widow named Lavender ("La") Stone, a promising Cambridge student who, like many women of her class and generation, finished school, married well, and led a comfortable and respectable life. In La's case, things go awry when her philandering husband unexpectedly leaves her, and dies shortly thereafter in a freak accident. In 1939, she retreats to her in-law's country house to sort out the emotional wreckage of her failed marriage and premature widowhood. In this self-imposed exile, she finds solace in contributing to the war effort --- tending to the hens on a neighbors farm, cultivating a victory garden, and conducting an orchestra composed of local amateur musicians.

In this quiet and intimate book, La’s rural life might seem inconsequential or perhaps even quaint, but her predicament and pathos are moving. And, her daily battles represent important generational and social struggles among women to lead independent and dignified lives in the face of hardship, moral ambiguities, burdensome class and social conventions, and isolation. La Stone may be rendered with softer lines and contours, yet she bears many of the memorable and inspiring qualities of McCall Smith's well-known heroines.

Discussion Guide

1. Who are the two brothers in the beginning of the novel? Why are they visiting La's former house in Suffolk? And why does Alexander McCall Smith commence the novel with them? Why does he purposely make their background vague?

2. Why does La marry Richard? Are they compatible in any way? How does time and place influence their decision to get married? Do you think they would have gotten married if they were dating in 2009? At one point later in the novel, La says to Mrs. Agg, "People are the products of their time." What does this mean? Do you agree?

3. In this novel, what are the differences, both obvious and subtle, between life in the city and life in the country in the days before and during World War II? Where would you have preferred to live?

4. Why is Suffolk life so therapeutic for La when she's single again? Do you think she really likes gardening? How is a wartime garden different from a peacetime garden, according to La?

5. There are many references in the novel to suffering in life and the power of music to heal and to provide hope and joy. What is it about music that gives it these properties --- and in this novel, particularly classical music? How is different music good for different things, according to the novel? Do you agree?

6. How is music the antithesis of war?

7. How does La's orchestra raise morale and provide a diversion and hope to those playing instruments as well as to the townspeople in the audience?

8. What is the importance of Henry Madden in the novel? Why is he so stubborn and bitter? After being blamed by his wife for the death of his son, why does he, in the absence of any proof, accuse Feliks of being a thief?

9. What do you think the author is saying about xenophobia --- the suspicion and hatred of foreigners and "others" --- especially during wartime? How do you think things have changed from the 1940s to the present?

10. How did the war transform lives in this novel, turning some upside down in a negative way and others in a positive way?

11. Do you think this is an antiwar novel or do you think it says that war is inevitable?

12. Why does La betray Feliks although she acknowledges that she is in love with him? Do you think she was scared of her feelings for him and this exacerbated her suspicions?

13. Why is La also suspicious of Lennie (who is different from most boys his age), and why does she accuse him to the police with no proof? Does the heightened atmosphere of war cause her to not trust anyone?

14. Describe La's relationship with her Cambridge tutor, Dr. Price. Why is it so fraught with tension? Do you think if La hadn't married, she would have turned out more like Dr. Price?

15. Why does the author, near the end of the book, suddenly switch from the third person to the first person, so that we suddenly hear the story in La's voice? How does this affect your reading of the novel?

16. In the book, "people took pleasure where they could find it, and with gratitude." How are people able to do this, especially when things are in short supply?

17. By the end of the novel, how does music bring love back into La's life?

Author Bio

Alexander McCall Smith is the author of the beloved, bestselling No. 1 *Ladies' Detective Agency* series, the *Isabel Dalhousie* series, the *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* series, the *44 Scotland Street* series and the *Corduroy Mansions* series. He is also the author of numerous children's books. He is professor emeritus of medical law at the University of Edinburgh and has served with many national and international organizations concerned with bioethics. He was born in what is now known as Zimbabwe and taught law at the University of Botswana. He lives in Scotland.

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