Laura Rider’s Masterpiece

by Jane Hamilton

About the Book

Laura and Charlie Rider have been married for 12 years. They share their nursery business in rural Wisconsin, their love for their animals, and their zeal for storytelling. Although Charlie's enthusiasm in the bedroom has worn Laura out, although she no longer sleeps with him, they are happy enough going along in their routine. Jenna Faroli is the host of a popular radio show, and in Laura's mind is "the single most famous person in the Town of Dover." When Jenna happens to cross Charlie's path one day, and they begin an e-mail correspondence, Laura cannot resist using Charlie to try out her new writing skills. Together, Laura and Charlie craft florid, strangely intimate messages that entice Jenna in an unexpected way. The "project" quickly spins out of control. The lines between Laura's words and Charlie's feelings are blurred and complicated, Jenna is transformed in ways that deeply disturb her, and Laura is transformed in her mind's eye into an artist. The transformations are hilarious and poignant, and for Laura Rider, beyond her wildest expectations.

Discussion Guide

1. Laura muses that “she could only be her ultimate self when she was alone.” She isn’t the only one who has a clear “real” self and a constructed self. In what ways do the characters create new personas? Are these personalities convincing? Are they necessary?

2. Does Laura have the talent to be a writer? Are there rules that writers must follow, as she believes? Is Jenna correct when she suggests that it’s impossible to write without a historical knowledge of what has come before you?

3. How does the first interaction between Charlie and Jenna at the side of the road set the tone for their relationship? What changes and what remains the same once Laura is involved?

4. It is made clear during her interview with Jenna and again at the writers’ conference that Laura is not terribly knowledgeable about books and writing. Was she also naïve to involve her husband with another woman? What other characters display inexperience or ignorance?

5. Charlie and Laura are similar to Jenna and Frank in that both couples’ passion for one another has cooled after years of marriage. In what other ways are the couples similar? How are they different?

6. How has e-mail affected correspondence? How has it affected writing in general? What opinions would Charlie, Laura, and Jenna each have on the topic?

7. When Charlie thinks back to his childhood and his life with Laura, he recognizes that Prairie Wind Farm

“had never been his goal, in part because he’d never had any particular goals.” If not his job, what else drives Charlie? What other examples are there of the gap between desire and reality?

8. Is a “conscious romance” possible? What kind of relationship would that be like?

9. Is it possible that Laura did, in fact, mean to paste Jenna’s e-mail, whether Laura realizes it consciously or not? Why would she have done it intentionally? Why is her reaction to the e-mail being sent out so different from Charlie’s and Jenna’s reactions?

10. Laura Rider starts a list of what women want. What would be on your list?

11. Who, in the end, has the upper hand in the Jenna Faroli Radio Show interview with Laura Rider? Or do neither or both have the upper hand?

12. Is any character responsible for Jenna and Charlie’s affair? Who or what would be the cause according to Laura? Jenna? Charlie?

13. What is the attraction, either romantic or not, between Charlie, Laura, and Jenna? What does each of them provide to each of the others?

14. In this satire, are all the characters skewered equally?

15. What does Hamilton seem to be saying about the writing life? Are writers necessarily ruthless?

Author Bio

I was born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1957 which seemed to me as I grew up to be the luckiest place and time to live as a child. There were 85 children on the block, each block a kind of intentional community, with mothers whose sole purpose was to care for us. Frank Lloyd Wright loved the village enough to design many houses there, and Earnest Hemingway hated the place so much he made the oft quoted remark: “Oak Park is a place of broad lawns and narrow minds.” Oak Park was one of the first communities to develop a plan for integration, so much for Hemingway’s slur.

I wanted to be a ballet dancer and studied seriously downtown for several years. I had big thighs, a big rear, breasts, no turn-out, and no extension. But I could turn on a dime and jump. I wrecked my feet doing point-work and was told by the podiatrist that I should quit if I wanted to walk when I was thirty. That made an impression. I was often the worst in the thing that I loved to do: I was a lousy dancer, I had a weak voice in the choir, and in the theater group, because I couldn’t act I did the backstage jobs: Chairman of the Prop committee, Student assistant, Make up girl. During Arsenic and Old Lace the apricot Danishes for Act II were so delicious I ate most of them, and in my role as a dead body during one performance, I started to laugh and could not stop.

In short, I was ill-equipped to do much of anything. I studied English at Carleton College because I loved the freedom from the horrors of real life that a good book provides. When I graduated I was still unfit for any real profession. I hadn’t gotten into any of the writing programs I’d applied to, and I ended up picking apples in the fall at a friend’s farm in Wisconsin. A few years later I married one of the owners. As I student, my English teachers had told me I had some talent but that it wasn’t practical to expect to make a living as a writer. It was sound advice. I wrote to myself, for myself, and in a deep privacy. My writing was good company, and allowed me the same kind of freedom reading gave me. That I have been able to spend my adult life living other people’s lives has been a great privilege and a luxury. People sometimes ask me what my goals are. Goals? I want to keep writing books, and I want there always to be a world in which people read books.

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