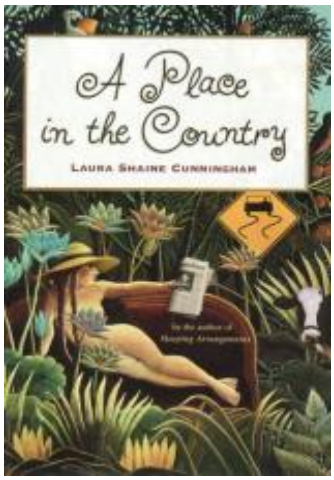
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A Place in the Country

by Laura Shaine Cunningham



About the Book

A Place in the Country marks the welcome return of this beloved writer. Like an American **A Year in Provence** or **Under the Tuscan Sun**, this winning memoir speaks to the universal dream of escape, the yearning for what **Mary Lennox** in **The Secret Garden** called "a bit of earth." **A Place in the Country** describes Cunningham's transformation from urban dweller to country sophisticate and takes the reader from the cramped spaces of her Bronx youth to the rolling greenery of the upstate New York farm she eventually settles on.

Cunningham's negotiations with the land, the local gentry (English aristocrats, a swami and his followers, and dairy farmers, among others), and the wildlife (holsteins, deer, chickens, geese, snakes, and pigs) are related with acuity, novelistic grace, and wry humor. Along the way, we revel in some of the most evocative writing about place in recent memory. **A Place in the Country** is an immensely satisfying book that at once captures the rustic dreams of every city child and the poignant passing of the old-fashioned pastoral life.

Discussion Guide

1. In **A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY**, the country and country life holds different associations for Cunningham and her family and neighbors. What significance does the country hold for Cunningham? How about for her husband and daughters? The Bowerses? The Hodgsons? The Swami and his followers?

2. Cunningham, a granddaughter of a Russian immigrant, speaks of her move to the country as both a homecoming and as a venture into a new land. How does Cunningham's move to the country both echo her grandmother's immigration and acculturation to America and signal a return to her "roots"? Discuss the culture clashes between the city and country people in this book. How do they mirror clashes between immigrants and native-born Americans?

3. Houses, as much as people, are characters in this memoir. Cite examples from the book of how Cunningham

anthropormorphizes her various houses, especially Willowby? Additionally, how do the houses in this book reflect their owners ambitions? What does Cunningham's ownership of The Inn say about her ambitions and aspirations? How about the dentists (the "dentocracy") who buy baronial castles in Tuxedo Park?

4. In many ways, **A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY** is a love story. Discuss how different kinds of love are illustrated in this book, from romantic love to mother love to a homeowner's love, and the circumstances under which she falls in and out of love over the course of the book. (Like houses, Cunningham outgrows certain relationships in this book.) What might Cunningham be trying to say, however implicitly, about the nature of love itself?

5. At one point (page 107), Cunningham says she never wants to become a prisoner to her house like her Tuxedo Park neighbors have. Does she succeed in this? How is her situation at Willowby different, if at all? Can the Bowerses be called "prisoners" of their house as well? (Think of Kelly and Nate's experiences and difficulties on the dairy farm.)

6. A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY is, among other things, a story about class, and how money can buy a homeowner both social standing and privacy. For Cunningham, "a place in the country" means solitude, freedom, and peace. For her neighbors who make their living from the land, the country means something different, their livelihood, for example. Contrast the Bowerses' experience with Cunningham's own. In what ways do their experiences in and perceptions of the country differ from her own? Why? Why is their departure from the country so significant and devastating an event in Cunningham's life?

7. Cunningham cheerfully admits her tendency to overromanticize country life. Is she still a romantic by the book's end? Which of her opinions change (and which remain) by book's end? Do you think Cunningham's dreams and romanticism keep pace with the reality of her life at Willowby?

8. Contrast Albin and Jeanie (the Tuxedo Park caretaker and his wife) with Willowby's Cecil Green and Stewart Lee. How are they, and their relationship with the land they maintain, different? How are they treated differently by the people whose property they repair? How dependent are the homeowners on their caretakers?

9. Like A Sentimental Journey and other 18th-century novels, **A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY** is, perhaps above all, a story about the education of its hero. How, and by whom, is Cunningham educated over the course of her story? What do you think are the most significant lessons Cunningham learns over the course of this book?

10. There are numerous examples in these pages of man trying to tame nature, from Cunningham's neighbors' pricey stone wall to Uncle Gabe's Pioneer Country Club to the bulky, grim Ulster Community College. How does Cunningham convey her opinions about the attempts to raze and Harness nature? Do you think Cunningham is optimistic about the future of her beloved countryside at book's end? What is Cunningham's own opinion about nature, and how does it change over the course of her story?

11. At the conclusion of **A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY**, Cunningham says that she's ended up "smack in the center of the circuit of memory." What does she mean by this? How has her life looped around to come full circle from childhood?

Author Bio

Laura Shaine Cunningham is the author of the acclaimed memoirs A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY and SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS, and the novels DREAMS OF RESCUE and BEAUTIFUL BODIES. She is also a playwright and journalist. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New York Times*. Ms. Cunningham was born and raised in New York, where she now lives with her two daughters. This is her first novel for young readers.

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