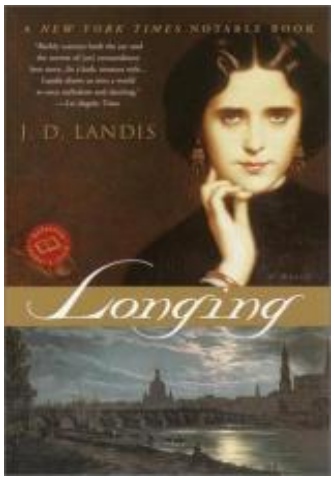
ReadingGroupGuides
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Longing

by J. D. Landis



About the Book

Robert Schumann and Clara Wieck. These brilliant and complex people enrich this sweeping story of a love that could not be denied. Set amid an enthralling rich era with creative genius, Longing explores the nature and danger of passion with precision, sympathy, and wisdom. J. D. Landis has encompassed madness, genius, and passion that propelled characters, and he re-creates their lives with surpassing depth, wit, and intelligence. . . .

Discussion Guide

1. The author's note reads, in its entirety, "The epigraphs are archival. The characters are historical. The dates of events and correspondence are, when verifiable, authentic. The rest is fiction masquerading as fact, and the reverse." What does he mean by this, and what does the last sentence suggest?

2. The epigraph to the novel's Prologue reads, " 'If you want to penetrate the mind of an artist, you must visit him in his studio.' Robert Schumann." In this case, the artist's studio, however, was an insane asylum. What does this suggest? Is the juxtaposition here merely ironic, or does the author posit a direct relation and even an equation of the two?

3. In what ways does this novel rely on local color and period costume? How crucial is the European setting and the nineteenth century Romantic mentality to the feel and flavor of the whole? Would it make sense in a contemporary context? What would have to change?

4. Imagine a present-day version of their story: Elvis Presley with a child-bride, Madonna with her husband, and see in what ways the plot-lines are similar. Take the proposition that Robert and Clara were rock stars of the Romantic period and agree or disagree. In what ways does Romanticism survive in today's culture?

5. Can you think of other books about musicians (Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus, Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through

Slaughter, etc.) or other historical figures to which Longing can be fruitfully compared?

6. Consider the motives of Friedrich Wieck. In some sense he was correct to have opposed the marriage, since it brought his daughter to poverty's edge as well as the edge of despair. Try to justify his behavior in terms of paternal responsibility, then take the opposite side--almost as though in a law court--and argue that his behavior was misguided if not malign. Reach a verdict: should the romance have been prevented or the preventor have been stopped?

7. Since the book and its main characters, as well as the historical record, suggest this marriage could not in fact have been stopped, discuss the role of fate and love-at-first-sight. Shakespeare called Romeo and Juliet "star-crossed lovers." How does this apply to Robert and Clara, the actual as opposed to the imagined pair?

8. In a note to this interviewer, J.D. Landis writes, "In one finished draft, this novel consisted of three main parts, so I thought I might pass it off structurally as a kind of concerto. In a later finished draft, it had become four parts, so I thought I might pass it off as a kind of symphony. It was at that point that I even called the Prologue a Prelude and the Epilogue a Coda. Finally, when it became the present five parts, I came to my senses and dropped the pretense that my structure was consciously musical. It wasn't and isn't. This is a book." Find ways in which the author uses devices exclusive to fiction--descriptive prose, flashback and flash-forward, etc.--to support this claim.

9. Find some of Schumann's piano music alluded to in the novel, (Kinderscenen, Fantasie, Carnaval) and listen and discuss. How do the two forms of expression, language and music, the language of music, interconnect if at all? Does Clara Schumann's piano trio have anything literal to do with the romantic triangle in which she found herself ?

10. Imagine Longing as a play, an opera, or a TV series. What would be gained and what lost?

11. Exercises: Write a love letter from Robert to Clara, an answer from Clara to Robert. Write a passage in their marriage journal describing (a) their first night of married love, (b) the birth of their first child, and, (c) the decision to send Robert off to Endenich.

12. Because of the limited point-of-view, we cannot know what Schumann does not know about what goes on between Clara and Brahms. Imagine a scene in which the two of them (a) become lovers, or, (b) decide not to. Which scene do you think is more probable, and why?

13. During the years of Schumann's incarceration in Endenich, Clara distanced herself from her husband. Why do you think she chose to stay away?

14. When Robert Schumann is asked in the novel whether he wants to be popular as an artist, he responds that he might, but "I just don't want to have to write popular work." Is it an artist's job to please first his audience or himself ? What differences, if any, are there between artists and entertainers? What did one of Liszt's biographers mean when she wrote, "Romanticism did not survive by virtue of having created artifacts acceptable to the masses (which would have destroyed it) but because it didn't"?

15. Imagine you could bring one--and only one--of the major characters here (Robert or Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms) into your own family. Which would you select?

16. Why would the author have made Part Four of Longing, Marriage, one of its shortest sections? Why is it the only part of the novel not strictly chronological? Indeed, why does it end with the Schumanns' wedding night? Discuss also the role of the kind of memory mentioned on the first page of "Marriage: An Interlude."

17. The art historian Anna Jameson called all artists "like children-- essentially immature." Eugenie Schumann wrote of her father that he was "the biggest child of all." Did Robert Schumann ever really grow up? Why did he remain behind in Maxen and allow his pregnant wife to return to a war-torn Dresden to retrieve their children? Are artists necessarily self-centered, and, if so, can their work ever justify their behavior?

18. Transpose any of these scenes into the first person--from Robert's point-of-view, from Clara's, from Mendelssohn's, etc. What changes and what stays the same?

19. These were nineteen questions. Formulate twenty more.

Author Bio

J. D. Landis is a published author of children's books. Published credits of J. D. Landis include Cars on Mars: And 49 Other Poems for Kids on Earth, Daddy's Girl, The Sisters Impossible.

Critical Praise

"Richly conveys both the joy and the sorrow of the Schumanns' extraordinary love story...In a lush, sinuous style...Landis draws us into a world at once turbulent and dazzling. "

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