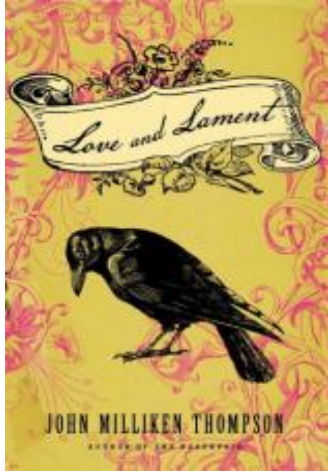


Love and Lament

by John Milliken Thompson



About the Book

A dauntless heroine coming of age at the turn of the twentieth century confronts the hazards of patriarchy and prejudice, and discovers the unexpected opportunities of World War I

Set in rural North Carolina between the Civil War and the Great War, *LOVE AND LAMENT* chronicles the hardships and misfortunes of the Hartsoe family.

Mary Bet, the youngest of nine children, was born the same year that the first railroad arrived in their county. As she matures, against the backdrop of Reconstruction and rapid industrialization, she must learn to deal with the deaths of her mother and siblings, a deaf and damaged older brother, and her father's growing insanity and rejection of God.

In the rich tradition of Southern gothic literature, John Milliken Thompson transports the reader back in time through brilliant characterizations and historical details, to explore what it means to be a woman charting her own destiny in a rapidly evolving world dominated by men.

Discussion Guide

1.) *LOVE AND LAMENT* is set in the decades following the Civil War. What impact does this have on the characters? How does Thompson evoke this historical period, and in what ways are the characters a product of their time?

2.) The Devil continuously reappears throughout the novel, in dreams and superstitions. What is the Devil's role in this novel? Is there something in the novel that represents the opposite? perhaps like a messenger of good fortune?

3.)What kind of God is in LOVE AND LAMENT? How does he judge man? What are Cicero's and Mary Bet's relationships with this God? How do these relationships change throughout the course of the novel?

4.)Cicero begins seriously to question his fate after the death of his daughter Myrt. On page 116, he exclaims that he does not deserve the fate God has given him. This is a crucial development in Cicero's character. Does Mary Bet ever reach a similar realization after reflecting on her life, and if so, at which point?

5.)The Hartsoe family's history influences each of its generations. Discuss the fate of the Hartsoe family and its origin. How does this history influence Mary Bet's? What is the significance that, at the age of nine, Mary Bet's mother gives her the family Bible and defines her role as the keeper of family history? What makes Cicero's fall into madness such a fitting turn of events?

6.)At the moment when Mary Bet aims her gun at her father's horse, "She was just as scared of failing her father as of shooting the horse" (pg.125). For her entire life, Mary Bet maintains an intense sense of responsibility toward her father. She covers for him whenever he slips from a sane or moral path, and for a long time does not wish to marry or leave home. Why does Mary Bet hold such devotion to him?

7.)After Mary Bet puts down her father's horse, she wishes Siler were there to comfort her: "he was the only one who would understand and there would be no need for words, or signs either. Just his presence, and his deep, knowing eyes, looking for something long gone" (pg. 126). Why didn't Mary Bet cry after she pulled the trigger? Does this act cause a shift in her character?

8.)Siler goes through a significant transformation as he enters adulthood. What initiates this change? How do you interpret Siler's death and his final message, "I have made a terrible mistake" (pg. 343)? Mary Bet considers the grammatical error to be an intentional attempt to place himself halfway between the past and the present. Do you agree?

9.) Upon moving to Williamsboro and getting to know her fellow tenant, Amanda Tomkins, Mary Bet regarded her friend, hidden behind her deformities and her suffering, and decided there was something noble about her? (pg. 228). What does Mary Bet learn from Amanda? What does Mary Bet learn from her friendship with Flora, and what makes each of these friendships equally important?

10.) Towards the end of the novel, Mary Bet visits her father and learns from him not to throw her life away because of the things she remembers from her past. Discuss the significance of Mary Bet's final dream, which contains the last appearance of the Devil, and her inability to recall its details in the morning.

11.) Before Leon returns home, Mary Bet has a premonition that he will die in the war. Yet, he makes it back safely and they marry. In what ways is this a turning point against the Hartsoe curse and against the idea of fearing one's own memories?

12.) How does LOVE AND LAMENT compare to Thompson's previous novel, THE RESERVOIR? Discuss similar themes, character traits, and use of style.

Author Bio

John Milliken Thompson is the author of *The Reservoir* (Other Press, 2011). His articles have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Washington Post*, *Islands*, and other publications, and his short stories have been published in *Louisiana Literature*, *South Dakota Review*, and other literary journals. He holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Arkansas and lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

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