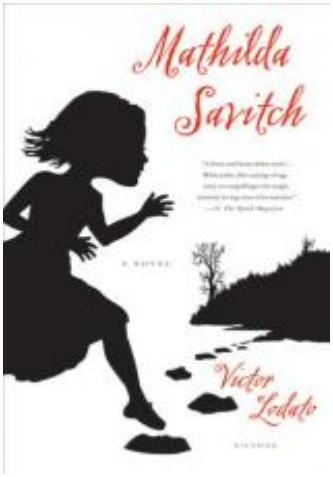
Mathilda Savitch

by Victor Lodato



About the Book

Fear doesn?t come naturally to Mathilda Savitch. She prefers to look right at the things nobody else can bear to mention: for example, the fact that her beloved older sister is dead, pushed in front of a train by a man still on the loose. Her grief-stricken parents have basically been sleepwalking ever since, and it is Mathilda?s sworn mission to shock them back to life. Her strategy? Being bad.

Mathilda decides she?s going to figure out what lies behind the catastrophe. She starts sleuthing through her sister?s most secret possessions --- e-mails, clothes, notebooks, whatever her determination and craftiness can ferret out. But she must risk a great deal --- in fact, she has to leave behind everything she loves?in order to discover the truth.

Startling, funny, touching, odd, truthful, page-turning, and, in the end, heartbreaking, **Mathilda Savitch** is an extraordinary debut.

Discussion Guide

1. What was it like to read Mathilda?s story in her own words, with phrases directed at you? Why does Mathilda sometimes lie to the reader? Do you think she is consciously manipulative, or do you believe she is lying to herself?

2. Reread the book?s epigraph. Do you agree with G. K. Chesterton?s statement that the desire for justice is related to innocence, while the desire for mercy is related to wickedness? How do Mathilda?s feelings about justice and mercy evolve over the course of the book?

3. What makes Mathilda?s friendship with Anna so unpredictable? Who was your best friend when you were their age? How was that relationship different from the friendships you have now?

4. What do you think lies behind Mathilda?s desire to be ?awful?? What does she seem to want? Do you sympathize with her? What were the most irrational thoughts you had as a teenager?

5. What does the current relationship between Ma and Da, combined with the legacy of their passionate younger days, teach Mathilda about love?

6. Mathilda has heard a lot about sex and has many beliefs about its power and pleasures. How does she want to use sex? What type of gratification is she looking for when she pursues Kevin? Discuss Mathilda?s understanding of Helene?s sexuality. In your opinion, how accurate are her perceptions about her sister?

7. Is Mathilda wise to stop trusting adults? What kind of role models are they in regard to dealing with her sister?s death? Do you believe, as Mathilda states, that ?Grief is an island??

8. Why is it important for Mathilda to believe that Helene was pushed? What do you think lies behind Mathilda?s brutal fantasies?

9. What drives Mathilda?s compulsion to save strands of hair? Discuss other instances of her magical thinking. How do these thoughts serve her? Are they helpful or debilitating?

10. An award-winning playwright, Victor Lodato makes his debut as a novelist with Mathilda Savitch. Does it affect your reading to know that a man created Mathilda?s voice? Can you think of other instances where a male writer convincingly renders a female interior life?

11. Try to see the adults in this novel --- including parents, teachers, and the Tree --- apart from Mathilda?s views and judgments. Are they doing the best they can? Do you think Mathilda misunderstands, at times, their behavior and intentions?

12. Discuss Mathilda?s feelings of responsibility in regard to her sister?s death. How much does self-blame drive her actions?

13. How did your image of Helene change throughout the novel? Why does Mathilda have such mixed feelings in regard to her sister? Do you think her version of Helene?s life is a fantasy, or did she know her sister better than anyone else in the family did?

14. What do you think Mathilda is looking for when she decides to go to Desmond? How is she different when she returns?

15. Why doesn?t Mathilda tell Louis the truth? What is she trying to accomplish in her last moments with him? Why doesn?t she tell her parents what she uncovered about Helene?

16. Discuss the backdrop of terrorism running throughout the novel. How does it affect Mathilda?s perception of the world? How does it shape the emotional state of a new generation of teenagers?

17. How does dark comedy enhance Mathilda?s storytelling? What passages made you laugh out loud (even if laughter

seemed inappropriate)?

18. Discuss the final scene between Ma and Mathilda. What common ground do they share? Why are they silent when they are reunited? What do they communicate to each other without words?

Author Bio

Victor Lodato is a playwright and the author of the novels HONEY, EDGAR AND LUCY and MATHILDA SAVITCH, winner of the PEN USA Award for Fiction. The recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and The National Endowment for the Arts, his stories and essays regularly appear in *The New Yorker, The New York Times, Granta* and elsewhere. His novels and plays have been translated into 18 languages. Born and raised in New Jersey, he now lives in Oregon and Arizona.

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