Plain Seeing

by Sandra Scofield



About the Book

Plain Seeing is the story of Lucy, a woman whose childhood loss of her mother, Emma Laura, has kept her from fully seeing her own life. The novel chronicles the young adulthood of mysterious Emma Laura, telling the reader the very story that Lucy can never know, and subsequently tells of Lucy's marriage and motherhood, and the events that eventually lead her to search for the meaning of her mother's life.

Discussion Guide

1. Emma Laura's story is firmly embedded in the story of her time. The Depression has a tragic impact on her family. The beginning of World War II gives the family a fresh start, but by then Greta's character has been irrevocably shaped by her losses. Emma Laura, on the other hand, looks at life with the insouciant optimism of youth. Remembering her youth, discuss her self-centeredness, the way it affects her family, and the ways it isolates her.

2. Scofield says Emma Laura is a kind of "myth" for her daughter. Discuss the ways that Lucy's idea of her mother is influenced by actual events in her childhood or stories she has been told, a slim string that ties her to the past.

3. How does Lucy's idea of her mother influence the way Lucy connects to other people? How does she act out the mythic characteristics she attributes to her mother? Did you lose patience with her? Sympathy?

4. Lucy believes Laurie is very much her father's daughter. Why does she think so? Do you? How does this serve to create distance between Lucy and her child? Lucy's accident serves as a turning point in her life. How does her attitude as a mother change? How does she try to reach her daughter? Is it too late?

5. Scofield says she envisioned the novel as a kind of "figure 8," in which two stories intersect and flow into one another. Note that the opening pages are the only text in the first person. Who is this narrator? Reread the passage on pp. 4-5 that

begins, "I was born on August 5, 1943..." Now consider: which interpretation of the structure do you prefer: Emma Laura's story is the one that happened and that Lucy can never know--or is it the story Lucy constructs to satisfy her longing for a cohesive narrative?

Author Bio

Sandra Scofield is the author of seven novels, most recently ***Plain Seeing***and ***A Chance to See Egypt***. Her work has received wide critical praise, including nominations for the National Book Award (1991) and for the Oregon Book Award (1994, 1996), awards from the Before Columbus Foundation (1992) and the Texas Institute of Letters Award for Fiction (1997). Her essay, "Writing from Love and Grief and Fear" was included in the National Book Foundation anthology, ***The Writing Life***.

Sandra was born in Wichita Falls, Texas, and now lives in Oregon. She has taught numerous workshops and short residencies, and has spoken at the Iowa Center for the Book, Des Moines; and visited the Spokane Reservation, both on behalf of the National Book Foundation. She also participated in the NBF's "Pleasures of Reading" writer residency program in 1998. She is a regular contributor of book reviews to the Portland Oregonian, Chicago Tribune, and Newsday, and writes frequently for other newspapers, including the Boston Globe.

Critical Praise

"Quite original...[Scofield] shows an extraordinary understanding of the power of absence...Redolent of Mary Karr's memoir, The Liar's Club."

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