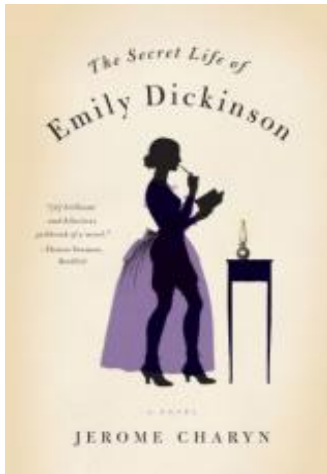

The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson

by Jerome Charyn



About the Book

What if the old maid of Amherst wasn't an old maid at all? Her older brother, Austin, spoke of Emily as his "wild sister." Jerome Charyn, continuing his exploration of American history through fiction, has written a startling novel about Emily Dickinson in her own voice, with all its characteristic modulations that he learned from her letters and poems. The poet dons a hundred veils, alternately playing wounded lover, penitent and female devil.

We meet the significant characters of her life, including her tempestuous sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert; her brooding father, Edward; and the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, who may have inspired some of her greatest letters and poems. Charyn has also invented characters, including an impoverished fellow student at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, who will betray her; and a handyman named Tom, who will obsess Emily throughout her life.

Charyn has written an extraordinary adventure that will disturb and delight, an astonishing novel that removes Emily Dickinson's own mysterious mask and reveals the passions and heartbreak of America's greatest poet.

Discussion Guide

1. Emily Dickinson is not the only character in this novel with a secret life. What are some other secrets that come to light? How do secrets --- and their unveiling --- move the novel forward?
2. Miss Rebecca is the first woman poet whom Emily ever meets, and her yellow gloves take on an almost mythical power over the course of the novel. What do these gloves come to mean to Emily, in relation to both her self-identification as a poet and her experiences with Zilpah and Miss Rebecca?

3. The novel opens in the midst of a religious revival, yet Emily seems much more fascinated by Satan, demons, and witches. Why do you think that she is so interested in these figures?
4. Tom is not at all the sort of man who should attract a daughter of the "earl of Amherst." Why do you think that Tom has such a hold over Emily's imagination?
5. What do Emily and Zilpah's experiences at Holyoke reveal about women's education at the time the novel is set? Why do you think that Emily's father pokes fun at her for having gone to a "nuns" school? but respects Zilpah for her learning?
6. Why do you think that Emily becomes a recluse in this novel? Is there a single cause or several?
7. In many respects, Emily's relationship with her father defines the course of her life. How would you characterize this relationship? Why do you think that it becomes difficult for her to write after his death?
8. This novel is haunted by madwomen: Evelyn O'Hare, Zilpah Marsh, and even Mr. Rochester's first wife in Jane Eyre. What do the experiences of Evelyn and Zilpah teach us about 19th-century attitudes toward women and mental illness?
9. Why is Lavinia so elated when she finds Emily's secret cache of poems?
10. What do we learn about Sue from her attitudes toward marriage and motherhood? Did your opinion of her change over the course of the novel?
11. Why does Emily decide not to marry Judge Lord?
12. "Somehow it was easier to scribble when I thought of myself as Daisy rather than Miss Dickinson," Emily tells us. She enjoys having nicknames, aliases, and noms de guerre for herself --- everything from "Daisy the Kangaroo" to "Jumbo." Do you think that she is hiding behind these aliases, or are they somehow linked to her creativity?

Author Bio

"One of the most important writers in American literature" (Michael Chabon), Jerome Charyn is the award-winning author of more than 50 works, including *THE SECRET LIFE OF EMILY DICKINSON*. A renowned scholar of 20th-century Hollywood, he lives in Manhattan.

Critical Praise

In this brilliant and hilarious jailbreak of a novel, Charyn channels the genius poet and her great leaps of the imagination, liberating Dickinson from the prim and proper cameo image of a repressed lady in white, and revealing just how free she truly was.

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