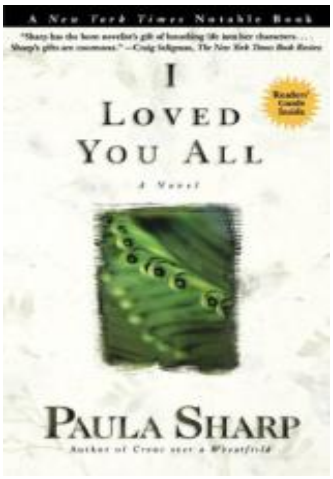
ReadingGroupGuides
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I Loved You All

by Paula Sharp



About the Book

Marguerite Daigle is a free-spirited widow raising two daughters, Penny and Mahalia, in a bleak upstate New York town. Describing herself as a "seventh generation lapsed Louisiana Catholic" who has become "a displaced person in the middle of nowhere," Marguerite holds her family together passionately and creatively, if unconventionally. All that unravels in the summer of 1977 when Penny is eight and Mahalia is fifteen and the pressures of life as a single mother begin to weigh too heavily on Marguerite's shoulders. Her only relief comes in the form of more alcohol than is good for her?enough alcohol to make her forget her troubles as well as her responsibilities.

Penny runs wild, and Mahalia flees into the arms of strange Isabel Flood, a local babysitter and religions right-to-lifer who provides Mahalia with the structure that she has been craving. When marguerite goes away to dry out, Isabel's influence over Mahalia grows stronger than her own mother's. After Marguerite returns from cleaning up her life, she finds that her life is no longer entirely her own.

With a tension that builds from the first pages, **I Loved You All** is a lyrical, funny, and moving portrait of family likfe and of the peculiarly American politics of abortion rights. With her extraordinary talent for blending the political with the personal, Sharp demonstrates once again that she is a writer of formidable abilities.

Discussion Guide

1. What elements in Isabel Flood?s personal history make the right-to-life cause particularly important to her? What is Isabel?s attitude toward the mothers of the unborn children she is determined to save?

2. Does Isabel harbor animosity against Marguerite? Does she knowingly compete against her for Mahalia?s affections?

3. Some critics described Isabel as ?affectionately? portrayed and well-intentioned, while others proclaimed her

?impossible to like? and even ?strident.? She is described by the novel?s characters in very different ways: as ?a jewel? by Mrs. Groot; ?a saint? by Mrs. Wroblewski; a savior by Mahalia; ?a one-woman police force? by David; a ?one woman-circus? by Mr. Brewer -- and ?a cake made with one ingredient,? by Marguerite. Do you see Isabel as sympathetic? Does she have a beneficial or harmful effect on the Daigle family?

4. Why is Mahalia initially drawn to Isabel? What psychological features of the right-to-life cause allows Mahalia to use it as a vehicle for expressing feelings about her family?

5. Why does Marguerite ?fall apart? and start drinking so heavily? Why do her problems have a different impact on Mahalia than on Penny?

6. Who deals more effectively with Penny? Sister Geraldine or Isabel? How does David view Penny?

7. What advantages are there in having Penny narrate the novel? Is it important that Penny is a girl and not a boy?

8. Penny describes Isabel in retrospect, saying, ?Isabel often brought food, inquired abut every child?s health, and never reacted to violence or poverty or squalor with even a flicker of the kind of condescension or horror that would have added a burden of shame to the homes of the people she visited. In this way she insinuated herself into people?s lives, always half-invited by that variety of misfortune that leads people to call out fervently and indiscriminately to anyone.? Is this description accurate? How would you characterize Isabel?s relationship to people she serves through her missions?

9. To what extent is Mahalia?s conflict with her mother an attempt to define herself as someone who is not marginal, but instead part of the mainstream? How does Mahalia?s relationship with Isabel both aid and thwart such a desire?

10. Is Isabel in love with Mahalia? Does she see her as a friend or daughter? As an aspect of herself?

11. What is Isabel?s relationship with Stein Evangelical? To Mrs. Esselborne and Reverend Bender? In the end, do you think that Isabel betrays her church and cause, or that the church betrays her?

12. Do you see the Gwendolyn Brooks poem, ?the mother,? as being for or against abortion? What is it about the poem that makes Isabel so angry and leads to her obsession with eradicating it from the school curriculum? Do you think Isabel reads a lot of poetry? Books other than the Bible?

13. What is Isabel?s attitude toward language generally? Does she it as a means of expression, or as a potential vehicle for the devil? How do Isabel?s religious beliefs dovetail with her willingness to censor literature? Do you think she is right in wanting the poem removed from the high school curriculum? How do the high school students see Isabel?

14. Why does F.X. send Isabel letters signed by ?Fetus Elegante?? What are Fetus Elegante?s beliefs, as expressed in F.X.?s letters? What point is F.X. trying to make when he has Fetus Elegante tell Isabel to refrain from speaking for the unborn? Why does Fetus Elegante become a maverick at the end of the novel, and defect from the Fetal Committee?

15. Would it be fair to say that the adolescent characters in the novel are operating according to a set of concerns and rules different from the adults?? Why do Roberta and Lucy run away in the end? What motivates Nicky to participate in the arson?

16. Is Nicky likeable? Why does Penny approve of him? What is special about Isabel?s relationship with Nicky?

17. Does Isabel relate to teenagers differently than the other adults do? Why does Isabel show an interest in adolescence that she does not bestow on adults?

18. What emotional reasons, unrelated to the right-to-life cause, does Mark Coker have for committing a crime at the end of the novel? Does Isabel unwittingly lead Mark and Nicky into involvement with Mr. Petty and in the arson? Or do Mark and Mr. Petty involve Isabel in an act she was unable to foresee?

19. What factors drive Mahalia away from Isabel in the end? Do you think Mahalia?s obsession with ferns is her way of biding her time until Marguerite returns to help Mahalia deal with her budding sexuality?

20. What factors drive Mahalia away from Isabel in the end? Do you think Mahalia?s obsession with ferns is her way of biding her time until Marguerite returns to help Mahalia deal with her budding sexuality?

Author Bio

Paula Sharp was born in San Diego, California in 1957. The daughter of a nuclear physicist and an anthropologist, Sharp was raised by her mother in North Carolina, New Orleans and Ripon, Wisconsin. During Sharp?s childhood, her mother excavated pyramids and ruins in Mexico, and Sharp?s sister, Lesley, later became a prominent anthropologist and scholar of Malagasy history. In her early twenties, Sharp spent a year in the Brazilian Amazon, where she wrote her first novel, **The Woman Who Was Not All There**, which was published to critical acclaim in 1988, and won the Quality Paperback Book Club New Voice Award. Through her mid-thirties, Sharp lived in Jersey City and worked as a catholic school teacher, Spanish-English translator, secretary, and criminal investigator, and after graduating from Columbia University law school in 1985, she served as a public defender for the Legal Aid Society in Manhattan. She is also the author of the novels Crows over a Wheatfield and Lost in Jersey City, both New York Times Notable Books, and of the short story collection, The Imposter, which won the Wisconsin Library Association?s BANTA Award. She has received numerous literary honors, including an NEA fellowship and the New Jersey Distinguished Author Award. She now resides in New York State, and writes full time.

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