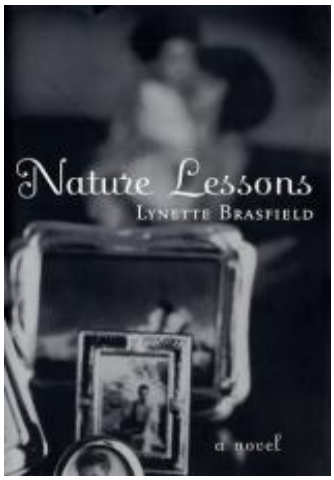
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Nature Lessons: A Novel

by Lynette Brasfield



About the Book

As fearless as J.M. Coetzee, as compelling as Nadine Gordimer, as engrossing as Bryce Courtney, Lynette Brasfield in her debut novel, **Nature Lessons**, offers readers an accessible window into two equally tumultuous landscapes: South African society and mental illness in the family. Kate Jensen's identity is shaped by a childhood that resonates with pain and promise, much like the country in which it takes place.

Dysfunctional relationships are plentiful in contemporary literature, but the impact of mental illness on the fragile bonds of family is not commonly examined in fictional form. In **Nature Lessons**, Lynette Brasfield explores this territory in a mother-daughter story that is thoughtful, candid, and always engaging, as a young girl finds herself caught in the quagmire of her mother's delusions, which may be rooted in reality. Renamed Kate Jensen after her father's sudden death and displaced from Johannesburg to Durban, Kate as a child?and later as a grown woman?grapples with issues of identity, social consciousness, and personal responsibility in her relationships with friends, potential life partners, and peers, both black and white.

Nature Lessons weaves back and forth between 1960s apartheid South Africa and post-apartheid 1995, and Brasfield deftly maneuvers between the changing politics of a racially divided country and the personal story of a daughter struggling to make her way in a puzzling world. As the story unfolds, **Nature Lessons** provides glimpses into a spectrum of racial perspectives over time. But it is Kate's relationship with her mother that embodies the heart of this novel: Violet Jensen is an intriguing, subtly drawn character who illustrates the complexity of mental illness and the shadowy line between sanity and insanity. Kate's denial, guilt, and then acceptance of her mother's condition and her own childhood in a troubled country serve to shape her adult identity.

Though its subject matter can be searing, **Nature Lessons** is ultimately a hopeful story, laced with wry humor, about the enduring nature of family bonds even under the most difficult of circumstances.

Discussion Guide

1. Brasfield explores the overlap between the nature of mother-daughter love, obligation, and abuse. In what ways do these relationships both intersect and collide?

2. Kate's life is uprooted at the age of eleven. How might this age be important for such a dramatic turn of events?

3. Many important caregivers seem to abandon Kate at a critical time in her life. Who leaves, who is left behind, and who remains? Discuss the issue of abandonment in Kate's life and how it impacts her adult relationships.

4. Building on the topic of Kate's adult relationships, Patrick Osch makes the comment that it is Kate who leaves men behind. Discuss the truth of this statement.

5. Brasfield examines the nature of guilt and responsibility. How do Kate's feelings about her mother relate to her feelings of guilt and responsibility for her white racial background?

6. How do the transformations in Kate and Violet's physical appearances parallel their emotional changes?

7. How do Violet's relationships with Kate's father and Winston impact both her independence and growing paranoia?

8. Kate is surprised to learn that her mother may have been correct in her assessment of Oom Piet. What do you think really happened between Oom Piet, Kate's father, and Winston?

9. Nature Lessons is principally a bildungsroman, or coming of age novel. What are the most significant lessons Kate learns about the human condition?

10. Kate's relationship with Simon seems an imperfect relationship at best. What might the future hold for her in such a relationship?

11. Animals are a driving symbol in **Nature Lessons**. How do they function in terms of Kate's character development?

12. Discuss how the stars and the moon serve as powerful metaphors for perception and renewal in Kate's life.

13. In the end, Kate contemplates her "younger self." How do Kate's childhood voice and adult voice merge at the end of the novel? Why do you think the author structured the novel this way?

14. How has this novel impacted your understanding of Apartheid and Post-apartheid South Africa?

Reader's Guide created by Jennifer Tedford

Author Bio

Born in Durban, South Africa in the fifties, and now an American citizen, Lynette Brasfield is the author of **Nature Lessons**, a novel that evolved out of her short story "Suits, Spines and Spikes" and is rooted in her experiences as the

daughter of a mentally ill woman. **Nature Lessons**reflects also the volatile climate of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the beauty of its land, and the diversity of its people. She is now at work on her second novel, **Anyhow in a Corner**, which is set in Zimbabwe in part during the War of Liberation.

In 1985, Lynette Brasfield left her home in Johannesburg to live in the States, settling in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, where parts of **Nature Lessons** are set, until she relocated to California in 1988. A former corporate communications consultant, she has also been a high school teacher, toy salesperson, journalist, and library assistant at the University of Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). She enjoys books, cats, wine, conversation, independent movies, travel, and good food, especially Indian cuisine.

Lynette earned a Bachelor of Arts degree at Rhodes University in the Cape and a graduate degree in English Literature at Natal University, South Africa. She now lives in Orange County, California with her husband Bill. She has two sons. A member of PEN West and NAMI, Brasfield's literary influences include Penelope Lively, Jean Rhys, Margaret Atwood, James Thurber, Patrick McGrath, Julian Barnes, and Jane Austen.

A portion of Lynette's advance and five percent of her future American royalties from sales of **Nature Lessons** funds an annual Get Involved for Mental Health Scholarship (GI4MH), a nonprofit 501 (c) 3 organization, to benefit a child with a mentally ill parent or sibling. Five percent of her foreign royalties will go to the Centenary Fund of Rhodes University, her South African alma mater.

More information about Lynette Brasfield can be found at http://www.literati.net/Brasfield.

Critical Praise

"The world of the novel is lovingly and beautifully detailed, which makes it completely credible and engaging; the prose is polished and luminous."

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Publication Date: May 1, 2003
Hardcover: 288 pages
Publisher: St. Martin's Press
ISBN-10: 031231034X
ISBN-13: 9780312310349