About the Book

From the bestselling author of Montana 1948 comes the explosive story of an artist, his muse, and the staggering price they pay for their chance at immortality.

Ned Weaver, an internationally acclaimed painter, is famous in Door County, Wisconsin, for his luminous work—and for his affairs with his models. His wife, Harriet, has learned to accept these dalliances in the belief that his immense talent will ultimately make up for his shortcomings as a husband.

Sonja Skordahl, a Norwegian immigrant, came to America looking for a new life. Instead, she married Henry House, only to find herself defined, like so many other mid-twentieth-century women, by her roles as wife and mother. As circumstances and destiny land Sonja in Ned's studio, she becomes more than his model and more than an object of desire—she becomes the most inspiring muse Ned has ever known. When both Ned and Henry insist on possessing her, their jealousies threaten to erupt into violence, and Sonja must find a way to placate both men without sacrificing her hard-won sense of self.

With the stark, lyrical prose that Larry Watson is known for ("as fresh and clear as [a] trout stream" —The Washington Post Book World) and vivid characters who seem to breathe on the page, Orchard explores the lives of four very different people bound together by beauty, art, obsession, and betrayal.

Discussion Guide

1. The author compares the novel's form to an Impressionist painting. Where do you think this idea comes from? Does the form work?

2. How might Orchard's nonchronological form be justified? How would the novel change if it were structured
differently?

3. Much is made of possession and ownership in this novel; we see shifts in power among almost all of the characters. Discuss some of its manifestations or variations of the theme.

4. Why do you think Harriet Weaver stays with her husband? Do you understand her motivations? What would you do in her position?

5. Throughout Orchard, paintings are portrayed in vivid detail. How do these descriptions function in the novel?

6. It is clear that several of Watson’s characters undergo emotionally draining experiences. How do these characters change over the course of the novel?

7. What does Orchard say about the responsibility of the artist? Ned Weaver has a very definite view on the matter. Are readers likely to share his opinion?

8. What inspires Sonja to pose for Weaver? Do you think her reasons change? Does she harbor any regrets about her decision?

9. Is it enough to say that Henry House is jealous that his wife is posing for Ned Weaver, or are his feelings more complex?

10. What are some of the different attitudes toward art in the novel? Toward artists?

11. Would you pose for an artist?

12. How is a muse different from a model?

**Author Bio**

Larry Watson was born in 1947 in Rugby, North Dakota. He grew up in Bismarck, North Dakota, and was educated in its public schools. Larry married his high school sweetheart, Susan Gibbons, in 1967. He received his BA and MA from the University of North Dakota, his Ph.D. from the creative writing program at the University of Utah, and an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Ripon College. Watson has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1987, 2004) and the Wisconsin Arts Board.
Larry Watson is the author of the novels AS GOOD AS GONE, LET HIM GO, MONTANA 1948, AMERICAN BOY, IN A DARK TIME, WHITE CROSSES, LAURA, ORCHARD, and SUNDOWN, YELLOW MOON; the fiction collection JUSTICE; and the chapbook of poetry LEAVING DAKOTA. Watson’s fiction has been published in ten foreign editions, and has received prizes and awards from Milkweed Press, Friends of American Writers, Mountain and Plains Booksellers Association, Mountain and Plains Library Association, New York Public Library, Wisconsin Library Association, Critics’ Choice, and The High Plains Book Award. The movie rights to MONTANA 1948 and JUSTICE have been sold to Echo Lake Productions and WHITE CROSSES and ORCHARD have been optioned for film.

He has published short stories and poems in Gettysburg Review, New England Review, North American Review, Mississippi Review, and other journals and quarterlies. His essays and book reviews have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Sun-Times, the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel and other periodicals. His work has also been anthologized in ESSAYS FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURE, IMAGINING HOME, OFF THE BEATEN PATH, BASEBALL AND THE GAME OF LIFE, THE MOST WONDERFUL BOOKS, THESE UNITED STATES, WRITING AMERICA and WEST OF 98.

Watson taught writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point for 25 years before joining the faculty at Marquette University in 2003 as a Visiting Professor. He has also taught and participated in writers conferences in Colorado, Montana, Arizona, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Wisconsin, St. Malo and Caen, France and elsewhere.

He and his wife Susan live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They have two daughters, Elly and Amy, and two grandchildren, Theodore and Abigail.

Critical Praise

"Marvelous...Showing a deep maturity and craft, Watson surpasses himself in [Orchard]."

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**Orchard: A Novel**

by Larry Watson

**Publication Date:** August 12, 2003

**Hardcover:** 256 pages

**Publisher:** Random House

**ISBN-10:** 037550723X

**ISBN-13:** 9781402565373