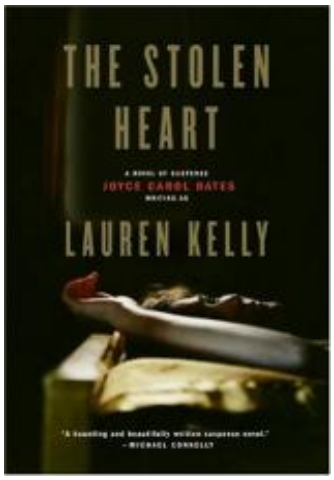
The Stolen Heart

by Lauren Kelly



About the Book

Merilee Graf is still haunted by the terrible events of sixteen years ago, when a vivacious fifth-grade eleven-year-old "gypsy-looking" classmate of hers was abducted from a park in Mt. Olive, New York -- a disappearance that has never been explained.

Now Merilee is returning home to keep a bedside vigil for her dying father, a prosperous importer of exotic goods and the former popular mayor of a small town on the Chautauqua River. But the troubled, dutiful daughter is about to find herself an "heiress" in more ways than one, drawn by dread and fascination to two very different men from her Mt. Olive youth: the enigmatic older brother of the classmate who vanished without a trace and Merilee's own seductive "Uncle Jedah," executor of her father's estate. And as past and present mysteries chillingly converge, what will ultimately be revealed could prove too painful and shocking for Merilee to handle -- unless she can find the sudden act of reckless courage to free herself forever from the dangerous, suffocating obsessions of the past.

Discussion Guide

1. The glass heart, Merilee's gift to her father, is the central image of the novel. It is beautiful, and is also a magnifying glass. Why is it so important to Merilee? It what ways is it effective as a symbol?

2. Merilee wants very badly to see her father as a good man. She works very hard to create him as a living presence in her life, and to imagine his feelings. Does Kelly give us any clues as to how Dennis Graf actually feels about his daughter?

3. We first see Edith Graf through the eyes of a child, her daughter. As Merilee's experience changes, so does her view of her mother. How did your view of this character change over the course of the novel, and at what points did it change?

4. Both Edith and Merilee are afraid of Dennis's disapproval and criticism. How does this fear factor into their love for him?

5. Merilee to seems envy Lilac Jimson, and wishes she could be her friend. Lilac is exotic and likable, outgoing and friendly, but ignores Merilee. How does this make her disappearance both more frightening and fascinating for Merilee?

6. Discuss the meaning(s) of Merilee's gift giving, from the gifts of her possessions to her classmates, to her gift of the glass heart to her father. Merilee says, "I'm a gift-giver who gives the gift of myself knowing that I can take it back at any time" (Page 25). What does she mean? How do gifts work in this story?

7. What is it that Merilee wants from Roosevelt Jimson? Why is she attracted to him?

8. The glass heart reminds Merilee of something her father had said. "If you look too closely at people, we are all alike -- material. And if you look yet more closely, we are all atoms in the void -- energy" (Page 53). What might this statement reveal about Dennis Graf's character, and about the nature of this story?

9. Were you disturbed by the seeming ease with which Merilee is seduced by Jedah Graf? What might contribute to her passivity?

10. Discuss the ending of this novel. Is it a satisfying ending? How did you feel about Jedah's punishment?

Author Bio

Lauren Kelly is one pseudonym of **Joyce Carol Oates**, a recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. Oates' most recent novel, THE FALLS, was a *New York Times* Notable Book, a Washington Post Best Book of 2004, and a *Chicago Tribune* Top Ten Book of 2004. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978. In 2003 she was a recipient of the Common Wealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature.

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