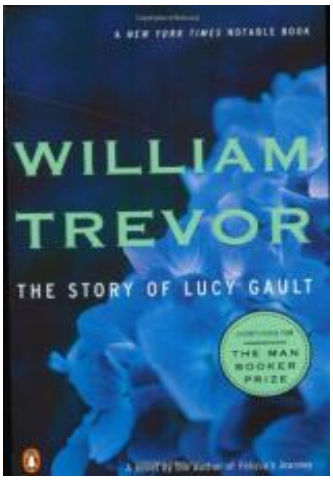
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The Story of Lucy Gault

by William Trevor



About the Book

William Trevor has long been regarded as one of Ireland's most evocative writers, a prose stylist of the highest order with a Chekhovian awareness of the emotional undercurrents of his characters' lives. And in **The Story of Lucy Gault**, Trevor lives up to, perhaps even surpasses, that reputation in a novel that explores the tragic consequences for one family of Ireland's deep-seated political strife.

The Story of Lucy Gault is set in provincial Ireland in the early 1920s at the height of civil turmoil and anti-English violence. Everard Gault, a retired Anglo-Irish army captain married to an Englishwoman, shoots and wounds one of the boys who has come in the night to set their house afire. This act sets in motion a chain of events that are to have grievous effects on the Gault family. Convinced their attackers will return, Everard and Heloise decide they must leave Ireland. But their daughter Lucy, heartbroken at such a prospect, runs away. When some of her clothes are found by the ocean shore, her parents assume she has committed suicide. In their grief they decide to travel, aimlessly at first, before settling in Italy and then Switzerland, losing touch entirely with Ireland. They remain unaware that Lucy did not die but has lived out the years waiting for their return, unable to forgive herself for her youthful recklessness. And, indeed, the problem of forgiveness lies at the heart of **The Story of Lucy Gault**?forgiveness for the act of terror that drove the family away, for Everard and Heloise's mistaken conclusion that their daughter had drowned, and for all the words left unspoken that might have changed their fates.

With a subtlety and emotional insight rarely matched in contemporary fiction, **The Story of Lucy Gault** follows the inexorable unfolding of a few chance events that alter the lives of a family and unforgettably illuminate the contours of the human condition.

Discussion Guide

1. The Story of Lucy Gault is as much about what doesn't happen, or what almost happens, as what does. Lahardane is

almost set afire, Lucy comes close to marrying Ralph, Everard writes letters to Ireland but does not send them. What other instances reveal the significance of things *not* happening? Is the novel saying that what we *do not* do shapes our lives as much as what we *do* do?

2. What role does chance play in the novel? What crucial turning points are brought about by chance occurrences? Does this preponderance of chance events suggest the hand of fate directing the characters' lives, or rather a meaningless randomness, the absence of fate?

3. Lucy blames herself, her rash decision to run away, for her parents' leaving; her parents blame themselves for not being more sensitive and honest with their daughter. "We told her lies," Everard says (p. 31). How should the blame be apportioned between Lucy and her parents? To what extent are larger historical and political forces to blame for what happens to the Gault family?

4. Lucy's mother and father conclude that Lucy is dead when they find some of her clothes along the ocean's shore. What are the tragic consequences of this misreading? Why aren't they able to search the woods, to think of other possibilities? What is the novel saying about the role of misinterpretation in our lives?

5. Why does Lucy reject Ralph's impassioned marriage proposals? What are the consequences of this rejection, for her and for Ralph? Was she mistaken to turn Ralph down, or was her rejection her only real option, given her peculiar history, her character, and the circumstances of her life?

6. Heloise Gault imagines uncovering her feelings to her husband: "She heard her voice apologizing, and talking then of all she didn't want to talk about; before she closed her eyes she found the sentences came quite easily. But when she slept, and woke after a few minutes, she heard herself saying she couldn't have that conversation and knew that she was right" (p. 84). Why can't she have that conversation? How might it have helped her? Where else in the novel does the inability to communicate openly and directly have disastrous consequences?

7. Why does Lucy visit Horahan, the man who as a boy helped set in motion the events that caused so much pain, after he's gone insane and been confined to the asylum? Are her visits an act of forgiveness? What effect do these visits have on Horahan? On Lucy herself?

8. In retelling the story of the Gault family, travelers and people in the surrounding towns embellish the narrative. "In talk inspired by what was told, the subtleties that clogged the narrative were smudged away. The spare reality of what had happened was coloured and enriched, and altogether made better. The journey the stricken parents had set out upon became a pilgrimage, absolution sought for sins that varied in the telling" (p. 70). What are the subtleties that clog the narrative? Is the parents' journey a kind of pilgrimage? Have they sinned? Why are subtleties so important in truly understanding a story?

9. Compared to much contemporary fiction, **The Story of Lucy Gault** is an uneventful, quiet book. How does it achieve such power in the absence of dramatic action? How does Trevor draw out the spiritual implications of his story? What are those implications?

10. At the end of the novel, the nuns visit Lucy, drawn by her extraordinary peacefulness. "Her tranquility is their astonishment... Calamity shaped a life when, long ago, chance was so cruel. Calamity shapes the story that is told, and is

the reason for its being: is what they know, besides, the gentle fruit of such misfortunes' harvest? They like to think so...." (p. 224). Are the nuns right in sensing a transcendent calm in Lucy? If so, how has she achieved this peace? Can her life be said to have been, on balance, a good life?

Author Bio

William Trevor was born in Mitchelstown, County Cork, in 1928, and spent his childhood in provincial Ireland. Among his books are **Two Lives**, **My House in Umbria**, **The Collected Stories**, **Felicia's Journey**, **After Rain**,**Death in Summer**, and **The Hill Bachelors**. He is a member of the Irish Academy of Letters and lives in Devon, England.

Critical Praise

"Beautifully drawn and revelatory."

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