



STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

The Enchantment of Lily Dahl by Siri Hustvedt

About This Book

Lily Dahl, the young heroine of Siri Hustvedt's riveting novel, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, is a strong, beautiful and daring nineteen-year-old girl poised on the brink of womanhood. In the small town of Webster, Minnesota, Lily's life revolves around the Ideal Café. She lives above the café in a rented room and works there as a waitress. This is the stage Hustvedt sets for a bizarre cast of characters who frequent the café and populate Lily's life.

Weaving a fascinating spell of mystery and suspense, Hustvedt recounts the erotic adventures, unexpected friendships, and inexplicable acts of madness that usher Lily into womanhood. By skillfully mixing reality and dreams, fact and fiction, past and present, Hustvedt creates a powerful world not quite real, but altogether truthful

Discussion Questions

1. Hustvedt makes great use of Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, referring both to its lines as well as its themes. How does this play relate to the unfolding story of *Lily Dahl*? Does it have a double meaning within the story?
2. Spying and voyeurism both have a presence in *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. In the beginning of the novel, Lily spies on Ed from her window. Mabel spies on the dark, shadowy character who lurks outside the Stuart Hotel, himself spying, and Martin's later voyeurism becomes obsessive. Why are the various characters driven to spy? Does Hustvedt make a connection between voyeurism and modern society?
3. Lily Dahl steals a pair of white shoes from the Bodler farm. "She liked the curve of their stacked heels and the softness of the leather" (p. 30). Many things happen to these shoes during the course of the story. They prompt Lily to undress in front of her window for Ed Shapiro. When she feels guilty for having stolen them, she tries to return them to the Bodler farm, but finds that she cannot. When she throws them into a fire to burn them, she ends up retrieving them only to hide them under her bed. What do the shoes mean to Lily? What do Lily's actions regarding the stealing, wearing, and returning of the shoes indicate about her character? Why is it so important to her to return them? What does she hope to bury when she finally wraps the shoes in white cotton fabric and buries them near the Bodler farm?
4. Discuss the eroticism in *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. For example, Mabel has a very erotic drawing of Japanese lovers that Lily notices. Inspired by the stolen shoes, Lily strips in front of her uncurtained window for Ed. What are some other examples of eroticism? What role does it play in the novel?
5. Lily says that she is attached to the small town of Webster, even though she feels she might one day escape it. "I feel close to this place," Lily says. "It must be in my bones" (p. 93). What does she mean by this? How is Lily a part of this community? In what ways does she finally stand apart from it? How does Hustvedt use the small town of Webster to contribute to the novel's blurring of illusion and reality?
6. Ed is a stranger in the town of Webster. Discuss his "otherness" in terms of the various characters' perceptions of him. What effect does his presence have on the events that unfold?
7. Who are the Bodler twins, and what do they represent? How is the secret of their mother's death important to *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*?
8. One of the most striking images in the novel is that of Martin Petersen crossing the river in a fairy costume, carrying a doll in his arms. Explain the symbolism of the elements of this image: the doll, Martin's costume. What, in his performance, is he acting out or reenacting? How does this experience forever change the way Lily views the world?
9. The idea of what is real and what is illusion permeates the novel, particularly through the character of Martin Petersen. He says to Lily, "I'm looking for the way in, I want to find an opening. Do you ever feel that nothing's real?...it's like there is a skin over everything" (p. 64). How does Martin serve to represent this world between reality and illusion? Once he's drawn Lily into this world, what distinctions, if any, does she make about reality and illusion?
10. Ed paints the portraits of various disreputable characters in Webster. What is he interested in capturing or uncovering in his paintings of them? What do his subjects have in common? It is said that there is something "aggressive" in his paintings, and that he is painting privacy itself. What does this mean?
11. How is Lily transformed by the bizarre events into which she is drawn? What about Lily's character leads her to become involved with the strange people and situations that she encounters? What changes do the other characters experience? How are these characters different at the end of the novel?
12. What is the enchantment of Lily Dahl?

Author Biography

Siri Hustvedt was born in 1955 and, like her character Lily Dahl, grew up in a small town, namely Northfield, Minnesota. Her father was a



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professor of Scandinavian literature and her mother emigrated from Norway at the age of thirty. Northfield is the model for Lily's hometown, Webster, and many of the locations in the novel were borrowed from this real town. There is an Ideal Café in Northfield. There used to be a Stuart Hotel. Heath Creek Arts Guild is a long-standing local institution. In an interview, Ms. Hustvedt says of her experience of small town life: "One of the things about growing up in a small town, perhaps because of a rather strong religious community, was that people were very accepting of the terrible things that happen in the world. I never grew up with that feeling of astonishment that people did terrible things or that there was death and sickness and accidents." This is clear in her novel, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. The book's central event, Martin Petersen's suicide, was borrowed from real life and served as the seed for the novel's story. Hustvedt recalls, "A young man went into a café, ate breakfast, took out a gun and blew his brains out. That story haunted me for a lot of reasons."

Like *Lily Dahl*, Siri Hustvedt worked as a waitress after college before moving to New York in 1978 with "one suitcase and five boxes of books" to study literature at Columbia University. After receiving her Ph.D. on the nineteenth-century novel, she supported herself by working as an editor and translator. She met her husband, Paul Auster, the novelist and filmmaker, in 1982. Some critics have linked ideas in Auster's and Hustvedt's novels: particularly the complex theme of human identity, which appears in the work of both. Of the literary connection between herself and her husband, Hustvedt has said, "If contemporary fiction is a city, Paul and I live in the same neighborhood, but not the same house." Hustvedt's interest in the minutiae of social intercourse, as well as her fascination with eroticism, however, are among the subjects distinctly her own.

Siri Hustvedt began as a poet. The first poem she ever submitted for publication was accepted by *The Paris Review*, and in 1982, a small collection of Hustvedt's poems called *Reading to You* was published by Station Hill Press. After a time, she began to suffer over the poems and found herself blocked. A professor of hers at Columbia who is also a poet, David Shapiro, recommended that she try the surrealists' method of automatic writing. "In one night, I wrote thirty pages," she recalled. >From that moment forward, Siri Hustvedt wrote only prose.

In 1990, she published her first novel, *The Blindfold*, which had taken four years to write. The novel received enthusiastic reviews. *The New York Times* called it "an impressive and dexterous debut." Like *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, *The Blindfold* is also pervaded by a strange sense of the ominous and the unknown. Hustvedt's success has put her in the company of such writers as Marguerite Duras and Jean Rhys, both known for tracking the feminine experience in the twentieth century. A reviewer of *The Blindfold* wrote that Hustvedt "pulled off nothing less than a re-mapping of the modern feminist psyche." *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* was also praised by the international press. A reviewer in the London newspaper *The Observer* wrote of the book "Hustvedt's real triumph...is to take the ordinary and make it strange while showing how all strangeness is rooted in the ordinary." Siri Hustvedt's two novels have been widely translated and are now published in sixteen countries.

Hustvedt lives with her husband and daughter in a row house in Brooklyn. She writes five days a week from about 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. "I revise hysterically," she says. "I don't mean I spend years polishing the prose, I mean it can take me years to find the story. It takes me a long time to feel I've reached the bottom of the pit. It's like always going down, closer and closer to some awful, nameless thing."

Extras

Recommended Further Reading

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Jean Rhys
The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath
Emily L, Marguerite Duras
An Experiment in Love, Hilary Mantel
The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton
A Midsummer Night's Dream, William Shakespeare
The Nowhere City, Alison Lurie
Orlando, Virginia Woolf
Portrait of a Lady, Henry James
The Summer House, Alice Thomas Ellis
Written on the Body, Jeanette Winterson