

Reader's Guide to *The Radiant City*

About *The Radiant City*

“Light is neutral and indifferent. It can blind as well as reveal. It can save someone who wanders too close to an unseen edge, but it can just as easily betray a person cowering in a hidden place.”

. . . So thinks Matthew Bowles, as he stares out his Paris window at the sun sparkling off a tiny fountain in the place du Dublin in the 8th arrondissement. Matthew, a traumatized war correspondent, has fled to the anonymity of Paris after himself becoming an international story for a failed act of heroism. He has been offered a book contract, but the ghosts of his past threaten to overtake him as he struggles to write his memoirs.

In a city of refugees, Matthew is a refugee from reality, as homeless as those whose shattered lives he records. Matthew resurrects a friendship with Jack Saddler—Vietnam vet, ex-mercenary, and sometime combat photographer—and is drawn into Jack's world of shadowy bars, calculating lovers, and booze-fuelled nights of forgetting.

But he is also befriended by Saida, the beautiful, scarred woman who fled Lebanon with her family and now runs a café on the place du Dublin. Matthew is drawn in by her kindness and her fierce love for Joseph, her sixteen-year-old son, who is growing into manhood on the treacherous streets of the North African quarter.

This is Paris far from the glimmer of tourist lights. It is here that secrets are divulged, guilt and passion are revealed, and Matthew is caught up in an inescapable final confrontation.

Shining light into the no-man's-land of war zones, Paris's unseen quarters, and the darkest corners of the human mind and heart, Lauren B. Davis delivers a novel of astonishing depth and power. *The Radiant City* is the story of a man rediscovering his humanity and the necessity of participating in life rather than simply observing it.

In Her Own Words ...

Lauren B. Davis speaks to HarperCollins on *The Radiant City*, inspiration, and the writing process.

HC: You were living in Paris when you conceived the idea for *The Radiant City*. How did your experience of Paris influence the themes of the novel? What aspects of Paris made it a natural fit for the themes you wanted to explore?

LBD: Paris is a city of grinding poverty and splendiferous wealth, harsh cruelty and highly developed etiquette. It has a national policy of tolerance, and publicly expressed racism and xenophobia; some of the best laws in the world protecting women against sexual harassment in the workplace, and a firmly held belief that no real woman would invoke them (for that would mean she doesn't know how to play “the game”).

Paris is a city whose inhabitants are largely inconsiderate of each other—they smoke in non-smoking areas, let their dogs foul the sidewalks, park their cars on the same sidewalks, are insensitive to the noise pollution they cause their neighbours—and yet these same people have created a city which by design is the most beautiful in the world, a pleasure palace for everyone who gazes upon it, from the sewer workers to the aristocracy. In short, Paris is a city of astounding contrasts.

It is also a unique city in the way it supports illusion, I think. People come to Paris to work out something, to try a dream that may very well have failed at home. They believe they can either forget themselves or find themselves. And with all its social programs and that Parisian attitude of superiority which insists that no truly sophisticated Parisian be ruffled by the behaviour of the gauche “other,” Paris supports illusions in a way that New York, for example, never would. In New York, if you’re not going to make it, you get chewed up and spat out fast; New Yorkers will offer their opinion of you in an instant—whether you like it or not. But in Paris you can hang around for years, flying under the radar, and survive, even if only barely, in glorious oblivion and anonymity.

And Paris has *always* offered that. People have been coming to Paris as political and psychological refugees for as long as anyone can remember, and Paris permits it, even if it doesn’t truly like it. It’s quite remarkable in that way. The French have an expression: “*Parce que j’ai le droit.*” Because I have the right. Which means they pretty much do what they want, when they want, how they want, where they want, and they expect you to do the same. It’s an attitude that can be infuriating if you’re expecting people to take your comfort into account, but on the other hand it permits the individual an unbelievable amount of personal freedom. This makes it a good place to get lost, as Matthew and Jack want to do, but it has its dangers, since it is easy to lose your way in the winding streets of Paris, both metaphorically and concretely.

And illusion is important to the culture. For example, crime is rarely reported. Rapes, break-ins, assault of varying kinds—none of it turns up in the newspapers because it would upset the tourists, and no one wants that. Beauty, grace, sophistication—these things are crucial to French society, and for the most part, they manage them with little apparent effort. Right under the surface, however, the uglier side is there, and what’s under the surface is what intrigues me. Not what is willingly shown, but what someone has attempted to hide.

While I acknowledge how breathtakingly beautiful parts of Paris are, and how stuffed with culture and pleasure of all kinds it is, Paris is also a tough city to live in. It’s crowded, polluted, and noisy. Apartments have little insulation and the noise from neighbours almost drove me crazy. The car horns (no horn in Paris can ever go unanswered), the constant construction—it’s exhausting!

I found the stress of Paris can push you to the edge. I have a friend in Paris who is a physician and he says that fully a third of his patients are dealing with stress-related issues. You better have your crap worked out when you come to Paris, because if you don’t you’ll certainly be forced to deal with it—and in a place where you don’t have your usual support system of friends and relations. In the midst of the stress you have the stupefying beauty of Notre Dame, the Champs

de Mars, the Pont Alexandre, Les Invalides--well, nearly any place your eye lands! It can make you dizzy, giddy, off-balance.

In terms of the novel, what better environment to explore the mind of someone already psychologically frayed, someone like Matthew, who is nearly skinless he's so raw. A city that is both beautiful and brutal--what better setting for a novel about someone who has suffered disillusionment as profoundly as that which Matthew experienced?

And so it was these extremes I wanted to explore, margins where cultures and beliefs collide. And because Paris is a place that attracts both those wanting anonymity and those wanting to escape something, I thought it would be a perfect setting for Matthew, who is seeking precisely that. Of course, because Paris is also a city with that "*parce que j'ai le droit*" mentality, it will also provide you with more than enough rope to hang yourself.

That's the thing about Paris: you may not be changed in the way you dreamed of, but you will certainly be altered.

HC: You seem to move easily from one character's point of view to another's. How did you prepare yourself to write about the experiences of a foreign correspondent who covers combat zones, or about a family fleeing oppression in the Middle East?

LBD: When I'm preparing to write about people whose lives are vastly different from my own, I try to do enough research to stimulate my imagination without overwhelming it. Since I write fiction, rather than non-fiction, the work is essentially a construction of my mind's eye, with facts as reinforcing bars. Of course, you do hard research, and you pray you get the big facts right—because if you don't it will detract from the story and people will write you unpleasant letters! I wandered through the streets, went to the Lebanese Cultural Center on rue d'Ulm near the Panthéon and spoke with people there, spent time in their church, wandered through the North African neighbourhood—Barbés and Belleville—taking photos and absorbing the smells and the sounds and the textures of the place, eating in restaurants, drinking innumerable cups of espresso. Then I went back to my little room and let it all flow out, clothing the characters.

I spoke to a number of journalists I knew, I read extensively (for every book I write I must read a hundred), both memoirs and reportage on the places I refer to. And there was one person in particular, Matthew Campbell, a journalist with the *Sunday Times*, who has been in a number of the places I write about. He was extremely helpful. And very funny. He told me one story about being on a training session just before he went to Baghdad. He was handed a pamphlet which said such useful things as, "If you find you are caught in crossfire, try not to run about," and "If you suspect land mines, try not to be first." I loved that. Just couldn't find a place for it in this book, though. The Medawar family from Lebanon, who own the terrific Le Pinede restaurant near our house, were wonderful to talk to, very open about their lives both in Lebanon and in Paris.

But really, at the heart of it is a lot of dreaming with eyes open. Hopefully, a writer has developed the ability to empathize, to *imagine* what another's life would be like, what their

feelings would be in this situation, or in that situation. You research what the facts of the event are, and then you sit quietly, close your eyes, and dream ...

HC: Do you find it ironic that, as a race, we are becoming more aware of the lasting psychological damage that results from violence and wars, yet we haven't stopped waging war against one another? How do the characters in the novel embody this irony?

LD: Rather an age-old question, there. Because of course war is not new. Violence and murder are not new. This is one of the things that impelled me to write this book, as a matter of fact. When I began writing *The Radiant City* it was about a bunch of rootless drifters in Paris, but after September 11, I found I wasn't interested in them any longer, I didn't care.

I had to rethink what I was obsessing about, since I can only write about what is really bugging me. And there I was, devastated by 9/11. I stood at my window in Paris and kept looking at the Eiffel Tower, wondering if it was going to come down. I was glued to any news media I could get. I cried on and off for months. I was inconsolable. And I felt guilty about that. Why? Because bad things have always been happening, right back to the beginning of history. Ravaging hordes, berserkers, Vlad the Impaler, the Holocaust, to name just a few, and closer to home, temporally at least, Rwanda. I kept feeling that I should have known! How could I not have known? I was disappointed in myself. Disillusioned not only with the world, but with my understanding of it.

So what was it about this particular event that crushed me? I'm still not sure, but I suspect it was that I felt closer to 9/11 than I did to Chechnya, or Yugoslavia, or Auschwitz, or Rwanda. I'm slightly ashamed to admit that, because I like to think of myself as someone whose mental borders are global, not national, and certainly not tribal. But for whatever reason, I now knew something, viscerally, profoundly, about the world's potential for barbarity, that I didn't fully recognize before. And it shocked me. And the fact that I was shocked, shocked me. So I began writing about different characters, with different problems.

To know this new thing about the world is one thing, but the question remains: what do you do with the knowledge? A friend in Paris who is an artist, writer, and retired neurosurgeon once told me that he thought the definition of "original sin" was humanity's inability to learn from our mistakes. It's the best definition I've heard. And that's precisely what these characters are struggling against—their inability to learn from their own devastating pasts. They are all battered, brittle survivors of violence in one form or another, and yet they still may be powerless to turn away from violence. Is that our fate? Or is there hope? Is there the possibility of redemption for our species? And if so, what form does that possibility take? How do we protect ourselves against the insidious cancer of cynicism? Ernest Hunt, who used to be the Canon at the American Cathedral in Paris, said once, "Cynicism is the last refuge of the broken-hearted." That idea stuck with me and formed a kernel of intent for this book.

HC: You seem to feel a great affection for all your characters. Jack, for instance, in spite of his faults and weaknesses and even the terrible things he reveals, is essentially a sympathetic character. What do you try to convey in your characterizations?

LD: Every character must be a human being, a fully formed, three-dimensional person. No one is utterly bad, or utterly good.

Jack is no different. He knows who he is, and what his flaws are, even if he isn't ready to admit them. That internal conflict moves me. Characters that are damaged, and struggling against their damage, against their limitations, are the most fascinating to me. I love them for their struggle. All my characters, I think when I look back at them, have a certain vulnerability that is almost childlike. They are leaning out for love, for acceptance, for understanding, even if they present themselves as tough and hard.

I want the reader to see beyond the facades they put up. I want the reader to look at them and understand them more than they even do themselves, and in understanding them, I want them to care. There's a line in the book where Matthew's mother explains why she loves a horse that is downright dangerous and ill-tempered. The animal has injured itself in its rage, and she says, "I can't help caring about the things I care for." That sums it up for me. I care for my characters, by which I mean I love them, but I also tend them, nurse them, and care for them in that way. My characterizations are intended to bring out the same feelings in my readers, even for the seemingly unlovable ones—no, perhaps *especially* for the unlovable ones.

HC: Matthew Bowles is a damaged human being whose current situation has been shaped by a profound early experience in his family, and by a more recent but equally profound experience in Israel. What contributes to his recovery? Could he have achieved it in a different way?

LD: There are several factors at work in Matthew's recovery, as you call it. One is that he first must fall into his own dark night of the soul and realize that his assumptions about the world are deeply flawed. This is a phase in development I think each of us goes through, although perhaps not as dramatically as Matthew does. He could just have easily have *not* recovered from this, and fallen into a complete psychotic break, or committed suicide, or lived his life in crippling cynicism and bitterness.

However, Matthew is fundamentally teachable, and this, for me, is the true definition of humility. He is also blessed with a natural compassion, which forces him out of himself. He cares what happens to other people, to Saida, to Joseph, to Anthony, and yes, to Jack. I believe that meaning can be found in the microcosm as well as the macrocosm. Sometimes it is in one, sometimes the other.

In his remarkable book, *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*—which was recommended to me when I was almost finished this book—Chris Hedges talks about our need for compassion, humility, and love, if we want to protect ourselves from the corrupting, corroding poison of nationalism, prejudice, and violence. He discusses how journalists in the field often gravitate to people in love, because they intuitively know being around such energy will save their sanity. He also talks about how, in times of war, the people who care about the specific, individual other—the child from a different tribe, the spouse from a different religion, the neighbour from a different racial group—and who care for them, are the ones who are inevitably saner, more psychologically protected, than others. I couldn't agree more. And I think it is exactly those qualities and decisions that contribute to Matthew's resurrection, if you will.

Do I think he could have achieved it in a different way? Probably not. At least, given the events in the book, his only option was to move into compassion, into humility, into love, or to move away from it.

HC: Do you think of this novel as a love story? Do you think of it as a political novel?

LD: I don't think of myself as being a political novelist. Neither do I think of myself as someone who writes love stories, although *The Radiant City* has aspects of them both. There is, certainly, an attraction between Matthew and Saida, but there are other kinds of love in the book as well—love of a friend, love of a child, love for the one in danger, for the one who cannot speak for himself. I think of the love in this novel as a larger love—the story of a man learning to love his world and his kind again, not with the idealized love of a child but a love that is fully informed and compassionate enough to embrace everything, both good and not-so-good. It is also the story of a man loving himself, if love can be described as a forgiving acceptance. There aren't enough words for love in English, sadly.

I write about what's obsessing me. I write about what's bugging the hell out of me on a daily basis. Sometimes (and more often these days) what's driving me bats is the political situation, the world situation, but I don't write about *that* per se. I write about a person, or persons, who are struggling with some of the same issues, who are trying to make sense of their world the same way I am. If the personal is political, then yes, I suppose it is a political novel, because what isn't? But the politics are incidental. That's why I was very careful not to make judgments on who I think is right or wrong on any given issue. I am not writing a book to use as a platform for my beliefs on what should happen in Israel, or how the Americans should behave abroad. If I wanted to do that I'd write non-fiction. Chekov said the job of the novelist is not to provide answers, but to properly phrase the question. The question I am phrasing here, about how one inoculates oneself against the disease of war, is essentially personal, although the implications, it might be argued, are political. I leave that up to the reader.

HC: Who would you credit as your greatest influences? What about your greatest inspirations? Are they the same thing for you?

LD: As far as literary inspiration, Graham Greene is one of my heroes. I don't know anyone who writes with more understanding of the human heart. Well, maybe that's not true—there is Alistair MacLeod. John Cheever. Alice Munro. Grace Paley. David Adams Richards. Carson McCullers. James Baldwin. Margaret Laurence. Morley Callaghan. I could go on. But the writers who influence me are those whose work is defined by their devotion to the humanity of their characters before all, before ideology, before language, before cleverness.

As for more general inspiration—the sort that helps you get into the writing “zone,” that state of dreaming with eyes open—I'm a music freak. I always write to music: Gorecki's Symphony No. 3, at the moment, and Patty Griffin and Tom Waits (the early stuff), and Hildegard of Bingen's

Symposium. Also, I'm blessed to have an office where I can gaze out on the back garden and watch the deer and cardinals and fox and hawks and rabbits and squirrels. The silver winter light slanting through the silhouetted trees is a stepping stone to the transcendent.

I also find inspiration in cups of tea. Endless cups of tea. C.S. Lewis once said that he could never find a book long enough or a cup of tea large enough to suit him. Not sure I agree about tediously long books, but the importance of a steaming cup of tea cannot be overestimated.

HC: Can you tell us what you're working on right now? Are you able to write when a new book is just being published?

LD: Honestly, my husband can tell you, if I don't write every day I'm not quite fit company at the dinner table. So, yes, even though I've got a book coming out, I am working on something new. It has something to do with what we owe to others, what our responsibilities to them are, and how our illusions about ourselves, and what we think our purpose is, often blinds us from meaning. I'm still wrestling with it, although I do know it is about a man who has defined himself by his love for a woman, sadly a woman who does not deserve his devotion, and another woman whose tidy, isolated life is split open when she is forced to open herself to someone she barely knows. At least, that's where I'm going with it today. It may very well change--I have yet to write a novel that didn't take a dog's-leg turn somewhere in the process. In fact, just this week I got to page 287 and decided the entire book was told from the wrong point of view! And the character I thought was the main character isn't the main character at all! I hate it when that happens.

So, it's back to the beginning on this one, but I'm not unhappy about that. It's a process, not a destination, and as long as I'm in the process, I am content.

Praise for *The Radiant City*

“With extraordinary compassion, insight, and intelligence, Davis illuminates the human aftershocks of senseless violence and in that cold light, somehow, astonishingly, rekindles hope.”
Marilyn Simonds, author of *The Convict Lover*

“[Lauren B. Davis's] superb new novel is set in present-day Paris, where the Montreal-born writer lived for years. An intimate knowledge of the City of Light shows in the novel's rich texture, packed with smells and sounds and street argot, the minutiae and contradictions of Paris life. ... The story is engrossing and convincing. Davis's question here is ... how can human beings look into a heart of darkness blacker than Mister Kurtz ever imagined and crawl back to the light again?” ~ *Quill & Quire*

Praise for *The Stubborn Season*

“A gleaming debut ... a terrific first novel ... compelling social history ... This is a wonderful novel ... every character is sincerely drawn; these sentences just gleam. *The Stubborn Season* is one of those rare novels I look forward to reading again.” ~ *The Toronto Star*

“*The Stubborn Season* is precise, polished ... bind[s] the attention through the excellence of its sharp, precise prose, generously laced with authentic history. Davis’s astute psychological observations render the two main characters insistently real ... Davis refuses to succumb to the predictable ... *The Stubborn Season* raises the bar for first novels.” ~ *The Gazette* (Montreal)

“Lauren B. Davis’s *The Stubborn Season* ranges through a wide landscape of history and intimacy, thwarted private dreams and public oppression ... a skilful weaving of emotion and event ... poignant and well-crafted. [*The Stubborn Season* is] an epiphanic hourglass for the harsh dust that trickled through one of the worst of times.” ~ *The Globe and Mail*

“Lauren Davis’s debut novel, *The Stubborn Season*, is as close as you’d want to get to the Depression without being there ... meticulous research informs everything ... The writing is clean, direct, and efficient ... Remarkably, in spite of such dire circumstances, Davis makes us believe that the following generation can come through the Depression with little damage, still trusting and resourceful, and stronger for having lived through this grim, stubborn season.” ~ *Quill & Quire*

Questions for Discussion

1. Whether you’ve been to Paris or not, were you surprised by the author’s depiction of Paris? What associations do you have with Paris that might have been challenged? Can you see why some people would describe the city itself as a character in the novel?
2. The theme of seeking refuge is evident in *The Radiant City*. What kind of refuge is Matthew seeking? Saida? Jack? For which of these characters do you feel the most empathy?
3. Do you see Suzi as an important character in the novel? What function does she serve, especially in light of the other characters?
4. What kinds of male friendship are portrayed through the conversations and events of the novel? Do these feel to you like authentic relationships, similar to those shared by men you know? If you are a man, how successful do you think the author has been in rendering the thoughts and inner voices of men, especially Matthew?
5. What role does writing play in Matthew’s “recovery” from despair? How did you feel as you read his descriptions of war zones and disasters? What do these passages add to the stories of the individual characters in the novel, particularly Matthew, Saida and Jack?
6. Discuss Matthew’s misguided act of heroism. How did you respond as you read his account of it? When you finished reading it, did you feel confident that the violence in the novel had reached an end?
7. Joseph and his mother have a relationship that grows increasingly strained throughout the novel. Could Saida have done anything differently? At the end of the novel, is Joseph ready to see that the path he’s chosen is self-destructive? If so, what makes him realize this?

8. How did your feelings about Jack change from the beginning of the novel to its end? Do you feel compassion or resentment for him? How do you think the author feels about him?