

## Reading Guide to *THE STUBBORN SEASON*

### Inside *The Stubborn Season*

*Irene knew she was changing, and this was a strange thing to know. As her mother became more and more nervous, as her father referred to it, Irene became very good at several things. She made a list of them as she walked along. She was good at being small. At being quiet. And it was as though she had another set of eyes and ears, attuned to things outside the range of normal seeing and hearing. Like cats who could see ghosts or dogs that could hear whistles too high-pitched for humans. She was getting very good at being able to detect, from even the smallest signals, what sort of mood her mother was in. Because she wasn't always unhappy. She wasn't always mean. Sometimes she laughed and laughed and wanted to dance to jazz music on the radio. But when she was nervous it was important to know as quickly as possible, so that Irene could adjust herself accordingly.*

*Irene also knew that she must not speak to her friends about what was the matter at home, because, as her father kept telling her, nothing whatsoever was the matter. He'd made that very clear. Should anyone ask, nothing was wrong.*

Where does one person end and the other begin? That's the question that haunts Irene, a girl growing up in Toronto during the Great Depression. Living with her father, a pharmacist who finds comfort in the bottle, and her mother, a woman teetering on the edge of her own depression, Irene's crumbling family situation mirrors the economic and social turmoil just beyond the front door of their respectable, working class neighbourhood. As she grows into a young woman, Irene finds herself consumed by her mother's increasingly erratic moods and isolated in a world where unemployment, poverty and bigotry have taken firm root. Yet in the midst of lives that seem lost, Irene finds strength in the unlikely form of David, a young man from the Jewish farming community of Sonnenfeld, Alberta, who is fighting his own battle for dignity, hope, and a place in the world.

### In Her Own Words ...

#### **Lauren B. Davis speaks to HarperCollins on *The Stubborn Season*, inspiration, and the writing process.**

HC: What inspired you to write *The Stubborn Season*?

LD: For me, inspiration is like little pulls on my sleeve, small obsessions that keep me awake at night, whispers ... I don't know where they come from—I suppose the subconscious—and it doesn't really matter. What matters is paying attention. So, for a long time I'd wanted to write about madness in the family and how the sane people in such a family survived (or didn't) the terrible tyranny of that disease. But I just couldn't seem to find a way to begin. I didn't want to write just another story about a dysfunctional family as I had the sense there was something larger waiting to be written. Then one day I was visiting my mother and she told me the story of

a little girl she'd known when she was growing up during the 1930s in Winnipeg. The girl's mother was "odd" and never let her out of the house. She was permitted to go to school, but other than that she was forced to remain closed up with her neurotic, paranoid mother, behind closed curtains and locked doors. It felt as though a door had been opened on a whole new landscape. The metaphor of The Great Depression was the perfect vehicle for the story I wanted to tell. Set in that era, the story became larger, more meaningful, layered in just the way I wanted.

HC: Tell us about the process of *writing The Stubborn Season*. How close is the finished product to your original vision?

LD: That's always an interesting question and the answer may seem odd, because it is both exactly as I wanted it to be and yet greatly altered from the first draft I wrote. When I write I have a *sort* of ending in mind. Not so much the exact scene, but a mood, a quality, an atmosphere that I'm working toward; and in that sense the finished product is very much like my original vision.

I write in a direct line for the first draft. Start at the beginning, muddle through the middle and come out at *an* end. Some writers I know storyboard everything—I can't do that. Margaret Atwood once said that working everything out in advance would be like painting by numbers—boring! And I share that sentiment. I can never see more than two or three scenes ahead. I need the feeling of discovery to excite me and keep me fresh as I work. In fact, the first draft had far more of the Harry character and David didn't appear until somewhere around Chapter Twenty. I then realized that Harry was too heavily weighted and, as I wrote more about the politics of the Depression itself, was no longer needed as such a grand symbol of wealth and security. David, on the other hand, became more and more important. He needed to come in much, much earlier, and so I went back and wrote all of what I call "The David Bits," and added them as a sort of reverse echo through the book.

HC: In *The Stubborn Season*, the politics of the era, especially the rise of Hitler and the virulent anti-Communist sentiment of the authorities, becomes as integral to the book as the human relationships. What did you hope your readers would take away from them after reading about these issues?

LD: History passes so quickly and our memories are so short. For eighteen-year-olds today facing the possibility of war with Iraq, the last Gulf War was their father's war. I find that staggering. But I also realize that although I was born a scant ten years after the end of World War II, it is to me *my* father's war, and so there is a part of me that feels I don't have to look too closely at what permitted it, what led up to it. This is a serious error, for it denies me the perspective I need to come to informed decisions about the present. The story of the 1930s is a cautionary tale. If it intrigues people, particularly younger people, and makes them look at current events a little differently, comparing them with historical events, if it makes them think; *and* if people my own age and older remember and look around them with a renewed sense of understanding, then I am very pleased indeed. Anton Chekov said that "the writer of fiction should not try to solve such questions as those of God, pessimism and so forth." He said that what was "obligatory for the artist is not solving the problem, but stating a problem correctly."

My job as a writer is not to draw conclusions for the reader, but to ask the correct question, and to spur the reader to do the same thing for themselves.

HC: Obviously, an immense amount of social and political research went into your recreating the turbulent 1930s. What was the most surprising thing you learned during your research? What was the most disturbing?

LD: Although I think that as Canadians we have much to be proud of, we can be pretty smug. We like our international reputation as polite, kind, inoffensive, peace-loving, immigrant-welcoming folk. But during the 1930s (and other times as well, I have no doubt) we were politically oppressive, racially discriminatory, ruthless in our treatment of those we considered "other." I was shocked to learn the degree of popularity the Nazi Party had in Quebec especially, but also in Toronto, where gangs of Swastika-waving youth terrorized the Jewish community in the Beach and downtown. I was shocked to learn that if you were an immigrant and had the audacity to apply for relief—something you would only do if you were truly desperate, such was the social stigma attached—you would be given your meager bag of groceries only after you signed a request for voluntary deportation for you and your entire family. My understanding is that tens of thousands of immigrant Canadians were deported in this manner. I was shocked at the violence and duplicity of the infamous "Red Squad" within Toronto's police force—created to deal with Communists. It goes on and on.

I believe that in order for either an individual or a nation to grow into full, healthy maturity, it must take responsibility for its actions, not shy away from its own dark side, if you will. Jung tells us that if we deny the shadow side it will jump up and bite us in the rear-end when we least expect it, and that it will ultimately define us—this is as true for countries as it is for individuals.

HC: As the world around the characters crumbles, they do too—shutting themselves off from its realities, or simply succumbing. Why does David make it through? Would you characterize him as the hero of the novel?

LD: I think David makes it through partly because of his youth, and his naïveté, at least in the beginning of his travels. He's only a boy when he leaves home, healthy, full of life and enthusiasm and expecting mostly good. He's not a fool, he knows—and quickly learns—that life is very hard indeed, however at his core is a sense of his own worth. Some people are like that. They are born with an inner security, a sort of skeleton of confidence. One's upbringing helps, of course, and unlike Irene, David's family has been loving and supportive even though they have had their share of tragedy. Also, David doesn't have the luxury of cutting himself off, he's out there in the world. Although he might have shut himself away given the chance, he has to keep moving just to get his next meal.

But I think you are right in asking if he is the hero, for he does show courage in the classical sense. He rises above. Even when he is at his lowest ebb, when his friend has died and he is deeply shaken, profoundly wounded, he is also wise enough to turn toward whatever kindness there is: the couple in Chicago who let him sleep in their bath, Maria who makes love to him in her barn. I believe it's this sense of embracing life, of reaching towards the positive even in the face of bleak despair, that he imparts to Irene and that ultimately saves them both.

HC: Tell us a little bit about your next project.

LD: I'm working now on a novel set in Paris during the fall and winter of 1996–97. It's called *The Radiant City* and is told from the point of view of Matthew Bowles, a thirty-eight year old journalist who has spent more than a decade immersed in the violent, morally ambiguous epicentres of the world's war zones; and Saida Farhat, a Lebanese woman, who runs a small shop across from Matthew's apartment above which she also lives with her fourteen year old son, Georges.

Matthew Bowles's last assignment was in Hebron, where he and a cameraman were both shot. The cameraman did not survive. Matthew finds himself in Paris, trying to make sense of his life. The city of Paris itself, in all its shining, often illusory splendour, is the final character in the book. Brilliant, lovely, glittering, sordid, squalid and sublime, it is the metaphor for accepting life on life's terms, both the beautiful and the bestial.

*The Radiant City* is about guilt, forgiveness, and redemption—if we're lucky and brave. It's about trying to stem the tide of personal cynicism when all evidence points us in that direction. Someone here in Paris once told me, "Cynicism is the last refuge of the broken-hearted." It was the seed idea for this novel.

### **Praise for *The Stubborn Season* and Lauren B. Davis**

"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. *The Stubborn Season* is a vivid depiction of life during the Great Depression. What was it like to be a woman at this time? What was it like to be a man?

2. Does Lauren B. Davis imply that the Depression brings out how people really are, or that it forces them to behave contrary to their natures?
3. Discuss religion in the novel. What significance does it have in the lives of the characters?
4. Lauren B. Davis exposes a darker side of Toronto's history-that of anti-Semitism and intolerance. What do you know about the history of your own community in regards to the issues discussed in *The Stubborn Season*?
5. Examine Irene's relationship with her mother. By the end of the novel, Irene feels like she has been manipulated and betrayed. Was she? If yes, was Irene complicit in this manipulation?
6. Discuss the sexual experiences of the characters in *The Stubborn Season*. Why is sexuality, especially her daughter's, so abhorrent to Margaret?
7. What role does Uncle Rory play in the novel? What does he represent to Margaret? To Irene?
8. David questions whether the life Irene has is her own. What do you think? To what extent did their friendship change Irene?
9. How does Lauren B. Davis use Margaret and Douglas's entropy to mirror the breakdown of society? Was this effective? What causes Margaret's apparent revival?
10. Hope-or lack thereof-is a strong theme throughout the novel. Does *The Stubborn Season* end on a hopeful note?