Two Dollar Radio Books too loud to Ignore





At the Edge of the Woods

A NOVEL BY

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Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

- 1. We are first introduced to Laura with a detailed description of her early morning hiking routine, which is followed by her trip into the village for necessities: In what ways is Laura different in these two contrasting settings? What do we learn about her situation from these early chapters?
- 2. Discuss what time period you believe this novel is set within; what clues did you notice to help inform your answer? What effect does this choice of era have on the story? In what ways would this tale have been different if it was set in our modern day?
- 3. Of *il mostro*, the previous tenant of Laura's cabin, Vincenzo says: "Conscientious objectors, they call it... I do understand why they do it, from an ethical standpoint. But there's nothing conscientious about leaving your fellow soldiers behind. When you sign up, you swear an oath." (p. 34) What do Laura and the former soldier have in common? Discuss the reasons you believe each of them were drawn to live here. In what ways does *il mostro* remain present for Laura, throughout the book? Why do you think this is?
- 4. "Although the years have transformed me, remnants of my beauty flash through on occasion... I am aware that I must use its power wisely, before it leaves me altogether. If I move to another village once those flashes have gone, I'll have a different power, that of invisibility." Using this passage from page 20, discuss whether you believe a woman's physical appearance may affect perception and treatment from others. In what ways does Laura change her appearance before leaving the woods to go into the village? How does this change over time? What does Laura mean by the word "power" in reference to beauty, as well as to older age?
- 5. Juxtapose what we see of Laura's life before arriving in the woods, and after: How do her daily "rituals" differ? For whose benefit are the various rituals performed?
- 6. Laura refers to laudanum—a previously legal medicine that contained opium—as her "liquid ally" (p. 108): When did Laura start taking laudanum? In what ways does Laura benefit from consuming the drug? What role do you think the mind-altering substance has in this novel?

- 7. Talk about how this novel investigates issues of class: What was Laura and Julien's early relationship like? Consider the characters Pierre and Marie, introduced to us on page 52: how are they treated differently by Laura and by Julien? When Laura first arrives to the woods, what assumptions do the villagers make about her, and how is she treated by them, based on their perceptions? How does Laura's relationship with the Barbieris change over time?
- 8. Early on, Laura encounters a lone gray wolf who is lying down and seems to be alone; later, while facing possible imminent danger from this same lone wolf, Laura's reaction surprises even herself: "I feel compelled to stand still, precisely the opposite of what I had read. Gazing into the eyes of the creature in front of me, I am filled with a pervasive sense of peace." (p. 119) Of Laura's different options in this situation, why do you think she gravitated so quickly toward this one, of calmness? What do the pack-less wolf and Laura have in common?
- 9. Discuss how this novel interrogates the relationship between humans and nature. How do the villagers feel about the wildlife in the woods, and about a person wanting to live there alone?
- 10. After Laura discovers her home graffitied with words meant to offend her, she concludes: "They appear to believe, from what I can decipher, that I exert a degree of control over the elements, which I must say I find rather complimentary." (p.143) Would you say that Laura has power over nature? Is it control, or is she simply more in-tune with her surroundings? What evidence is there that the woods are communicating with Laura? How does Laura's relationship with the natural world around her evolve over the course of the book?
- 11. Laura is spending time with books that she would not have been able to openly read in her previous life: "strange, subversive novels by tortured Russian existentialists, Gothic stories in which there is no division between life and death, mystical poems that reconfigure reality to their will, Eastern scriptures, political and philosophical treatises that call for revolution in thought and action..."

 (p. 15) Discuss why Laura is attracted to these texts in particular. Do you think the ideas within them have an effect on Laura's ways of thinking?
- 12. Talk about why Laura abandoned her lavish lifestyle with Julien. How does the story of Laura and her husband investigate ideas of womanhood?
- 13. What do Laura and Vincenzo have in common? What do you think Laura gained from their relationship? How and why did their love affair come to an end?
- 14. What are the different traumas that Laura endured in her previous life? Has she been successful in her quest to leave her past behind and start anew: in what ways has she been/not been?
- 15. After her visit, Laura concludes that her mindscape has been fundamentally changed by Héloïse's presence: Do you think it would have been best for Héloïse—a caring and sympathetic friend from Laura's past—to *not* try to find her? Discuss whether you think it is possible for a person to leave behind something toxic from their past while retaining the positive parts; share examples from your own lives to illustrate your opinions.

- 16. On page 148: "Beyond a certain point, when sympathy has fallen away, pain becomes distasteful to others, as if by venturing too close they might be caught in a vortex they will not be able to escape." Do you agree with Laura's conclusion? What does Laura do to "hide" things about herself from others, in order to maintain various relationships? How does this change over the course of the book?
- 17. Talk about the benefits and drawback of Laura living her life in isolation: What does she like and what does she miss? Why do the villagers eventually label her *strega*, a witch? Do you believe there is anything Laura could have done that would have prevented that outcome?
- 18. After suffering an attack on her home, Laura concludes: "I must show them I am not afraid. As much as I would like to live my life out here, it appears that I cannot completely sever my link to humanity... I shall attend [the village festival] with my head held high, be civil and charming." (p. 149) What are the pros and cons of this reaction; what does she hope to gain? What do you think Laura would have to do in order to live in peace here? Do you believe that being accepted into any community inherently requires denying of the self on some level?
- 19. Starting on page 79—in the section titled "Interlude," when Laura is gravely sick with a fever—the narrative voice changes from the first to the third person. Why do you think the point of view is unique in this section? What is different for Laura after she recovers from this dangerous illness?
- 20. Consider this from page 131: "I inspect my reflection. In the mirror, I am a goddess: my face glows like a Greek deity, hair curled and regal, my outline surrounded by a halo of quivering golden thread. I watch the reflection for a few moments longer, trying to find myself under the veneer, but I can't untangle the two; they appear to be one and the same." How does this description contrast with Laura's reaction to seeing herself in the mirror at the beginning of the book? Discuss what has changed for Laura over the course of the story and how she sees herself, and why.
- 21. Laura's double vision or twofold vision, becomes pronounced after she wakes from a night of sleeping out in the forest: "When the details of my identity finally come into focus again, the spell is not broken, but redoubled, as though I were seeing the forest through two sets of eyes." (p. 128) How does Laura react to her new situation? How does this new way of seeing affect Laura's reality? What happens at the second village festival, related to Laura's vision?
- 22. The last chapter begins with the thought: "I have read, somewhere, that a great deal of suffering might be spared if we were taught to expect nothing from the world in the first place. This had struck me as impossibly bleak at first, but the more I think of it, the wiser the proposition appears." (p. 172) What expectations do you think Laura had earlier in her life that led to suffering? Describe the evolution in Laura's ways of thinking which resulted in her change of heart. How does Laura live out this idea?
- 23. Focusing on the elements of the final chapter: Why do you think Laura leaves her cabin in this manner? As a group, take turns explaining your interpretations of what happens when she is at the top of the pass. What do you think will happen next? Share whether you were surprised by this conclusion to *At the Edge of the Woods*, and if you think it is a fitting ending to Laura's story.