

**Jean Stafford** (1915–1979) was an award-winning American short-story writer and novelist, whose works were published in *The New Yorker* and various other literary magazines. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her *Collected Stories*.

**Kathryn Davis** has received the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize, the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is the author of many novels, including *Labrador*, *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf*, *Hell*, *The Walking Tour*, *The Thin Place*, and *Versailles*. In 2006 she received the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction. She teaches at Washington University in St. Louis and lives in Vermont.

# THE MOUNTAIN LION

by Jean Stafford

Afterword by Kathryn Davis

\$14.95 US / \$17.95 CAN / 978-1-59017-352-7

“*The Mountain Lion* is one of the best novels about adolescence in American literature.”  
—Guy Davenport, *The New York Times*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*The Mountain Lion* is a novel unlike any other about coming of age. With a distinctive, unsentimental voice, Pulitzer Prize winner Jean Stafford tells the story of Ralph and Molly: smart, imaginative, unruly siblings growing up in suburban Los Angeles. After Ralph and Molly’s grandfather dies, they’re sent for the summer to their uncle’s Colorado mountain ranch—and at first, they couldn’t be happier to get away from their mother and older sisters’ vapid chatter and stifling politesse.

Sent to spend summer after summer, and finally a whole year on the ranch, Molly and Ralph begin to grow apart. For Ralph, the first stirrings of adolescence are accompanied by a yearning to find independence and a sense of his own masculinity; Molly, two years younger, cannot understand his emotional turmoil despite all her precociousness. Soon, four years have passed, and Ralph and Molly—once inseparable—are barely even speaking.

The final climax of the tension between Ralph and Molly, and of the heartache of growing up, is a shocking testament to Jean Stafford’s talent. Ralph and Molly are not perfect, romanticized icons of childhood—much of the time, they are stubborn and wrongheaded—but they are all the more compelling for their utterly human flaws. *The Mountain Lion* is a haunting and unforgettable novel.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. What makes Ralph and Molly so different from their mother and sisters? We are told the two characters are isolated within their family because they battled scarlet fever—is this the only reason? Do Ralph and Molly really love their mother? Does she love them?
2. The seeds of Ralph’s discontent with Molly are planted at the beginning of the book: we learn that “Ralph had had moments of irritation with her” [p. 6]. By what process does their discord grow as the novel goes on? Are the two equally responsible for it?
3. Reread the description of Ralph and Molly’s appearances [p. 28]. Why is it important that the siblings are ugly? What effect did your knowledge of how they looked have on your reading of the story?
4. Ralph and Molly hotly anticipate Grandpa’s visit [p. 33]. What does the figure of Grandpa represent to the children? Contrast Grandpa with the deceased Grandfather Bonney, whom Ralph and Molly despise and their mother loves. What is the difference, in their eyes, between Grandfather Bonney and Grandpa? Why does Ralph say to Leah that his mother killed Grandfather Bonney [p. 72]?

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

**Eustace and Hilda: A Trilogy**

L. P. Hartley (Introduction by Anita Brookner)

**The True Deceiver**

Tove Jansson (Translated from the Swedish by Thomas Teal, Introduction by Ali Smith)

**School for Love**

Olivia Manning (Introduction by Jane Smiley)

**Skylark**

Dezső Kosztolányi (Translated from the Hungarian by Richard Aczel, Introduction by Péter Esterházy)

**Butcher's Crossing**

John Williams (Introduction by Michelle Latiolais)

**The Slaves of Solitude**

Patrick Hamilton (Introduction by David Lodge)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*

Charles Portis, *True Grit*

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

James Agee, *A Death in the Family*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

5. The passage detailing Ralph and Molly's initial arrival at Uncle Claude's ranch is vividly descriptive [p. 95]. What was your impression of the ranch? Does the landscape seem idyllic or foreboding?
6. As Ralph begins to become occupied with what it means to be a man, how does the model set by Uncle Claude figure into his musings? Why is Ralph conflicted about his opinion of Uncle Claude [pp. 102–104]? Does it seem like Ralph wants to be the kind of man Uncle Claude is? Does the answer to this question change as the novel goes on?
7. Between the fourth and fifth chapters of *The Mountain Lion*, a substantial amount of time passes: we learn that “for four years now Ralph and Molly had divided their year between the men and the merchants” [p. 115]. What effect does this shift in time have on the novel? How have Molly and Ralph changed from the ages of eight and ten to twelve and fourteen, respectively?
8. Why does Molly pour Miguel's acid on her hand [p. 130]? Do you think she understood the consequences of this action before she performed it? Is Molly generally a self-destructive character? Why or why not?
9. Molly and Ralph's relationship suffers irreparable damage on the train to Uncle Claude's, when Ralph asks Molly to “tell me all the dirty words you know” [p. 158]. Why does the narrator tell us “Ralph's childhood and his sister's expired at that moment” [p. 159]? Why are the effects of his request so serious? What role does the tunnel play in the description of this moment?
10. Consider Molly's exchange with Magdalene [p. 176]. What attitude does the novel take towards race? How much of Molly's casual slur towards Magdalene can be attributed to the time period? Is Molly racist, or misguided? Does she care about Magdalene?
11. What does Molly mean when she thinks of Mr. Follansbee's belches and Ralph's question as being “fat” [p. 179]? Can you think of a synonym for Molly's conception of “fat”? Why does she choose this particular word to describe things and people she does not like?
12. The mountain lion is not addressed until nearly halfway through the novel, when it is listed as one of two things Uncle Claude has never seen [p. 113]. However, the animal is the most important symbolic element of the second half of the book. We are told that Uncle Claude “really hated the mountain lion and wanted to kill her for that reason and not for the sport of it” [p. 211]. What is the difference between Uncle Claude's feelings about the mountain lion and Ralph's? Why did Jean Stafford choose *The Mountain Lion* as the title of her book?
13. Why does Molly add her own name to her list of unforgivables [p. 217]?
14. Discuss the book's ending. Were you surprised that Molly and Ralph's story ended up this way? Is anyone to blame for what happens?

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