

Crow Lake

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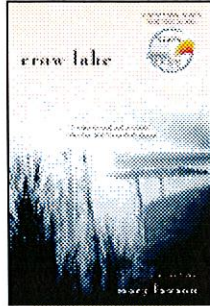
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ENLARGE VIEW

Written by **Mary Lawson**

Category: Fiction - Literary

Imprint: **Delta**

Format: Trade Paperback, 304 pages

Pub Date: January 2003

Price: **\$14.00**

ISBN: 0-385-33763-9



ABOUT THE READER'S GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your reading of Mary Lawson's **Crow Lake**. We hope they will enrich your experience of this brilliant novel.

READER'S GUIDE

1. Kate says that "understatement was the rule in our house. Emotions, even positive ones, were kept firmly under control." How would you say that this "rule" affected each member of the Morrison family? How did it influence their relationships with each other and with people outside their family? What are some examples?
2. For the first few weeks following the death of her parents, Kate believes that she was "protected from the reality by disbelief." How did she carry this defense mechanism with her throughout her childhood and into adulthood? What are some examples?
3. How do you imagine things would have turned out if the children had been separated, as Aunt Annie had arranged? How do you think it would have benefited and/or impeded their growth as individuals and as a family?
4. Guilt is an ongoing theme throughout the book. How did this feeling affect the children's relationships and the choices they made immediately following the death of their parents? How did it affect their adult lives? Who would you say was most stricken with this feeling?
5. Why do you suppose Kate and Matt were bonded together so strongly? What about Bo and Luke?
6. When you think of a conventional family, stereotypical images come to mind. How does each of the four Morrison children fit in that image? Which child took on which traditional family role? What are some examples?
7. Given the chance to attend university, what choices do you think Matt would have made? Do you think he would have returned to Crow Lake? Why or why not?
8. Matt sees problems clearly and is realistic about solving them, whereas Luke is content to wait for things to work themselves out. Given the situation they were

in, what were the advantages and disadvantages of each frame of thinking?

9. Great-grandmother Morrison's love of learning set the standard against which Kate judged everyone around her. Do you think Great-grandmother Morrison would have approved of Kate's disappointment in Matt? Why?

10. The Crow Lake community opened its arms wide to the Morrison children after their parents were killed. How does this generosity conflict with the community's collective reaction to Laurie Pye's disappearance? Why is this?

11. Miss Vernon's stories about the history of Crow Lake suggest that some patterns can never be broken. How is this true and/or false for the Pyes and Morrisons?

12. What do the ponds symbolize in this book? What do they represent to Kate and Matt especially?

13. Was Matt doomed to let Kate down in some way? Do you think it's possible for any young man to live up to such heroic expectations? Why?

14. What do you imagine happens between Kate and Daniel after the book ends?

15. Do you think Kate's resentment and distaste toward Marie will lessen as she rebuilds her relationship with Matt?

16. What could Kate learn from Matt to make herself a better teacher? Do you think she will enjoy teaching more when she returns from Simon's birthday party?

17. We are meant to assume that Luke and Miss Carrington develop a romantic relationship at the end of the book. Do you think they are compatible? Why or why not? What are some examples?

18. Kate and Mrs. Stanovich are complete opposites when it comes to dealing with tragedy and hardship. What do you think each woman could learn from the other?

19. Daniel believes that Kate is incapable of empathy. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

20. What do you think would have become of Luke had his parents not been killed?

21. As a consequence of the events of her childhood, Kate is a rather judgmental, withdrawn young woman. Nevertheless, Daniel falls in love with her. What do you think he sees in her, under her protective shell?

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Set against the wild terrain of northern Ontario, where heartbreak and hardship are mirrored in the landscape, this universal drama of love and misunderstanding recounts a family's tragic and moving past. Poignant, funny, and utterly unforgettable, **Crow Lake** is a deceptively simple masterpiece of literary fiction.

Orphaned young, Kate Morrison and her siblings were bound together by loss. None of them could have expected the tumultuous times ahead—least of all Kate's older brothers, Matt and Luke. Twenty years later, the sacrifices they made and the promises they broke would continue to reverberate through their lives and the quiet rural community of Crow Lake.

In a gorgeous, slow-burning story, Mary Lawson combines well-drawn characters, beautiful writing, and a powerful description of the land to tell the emotionally pitch-perfect story of personal struggles, familial bonds, and the power of forgiveness.



ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Mary Lawson was born and brought up in a farming community in Ontario. She now lives in England with her husband and sons, though she returns to Canada every year.

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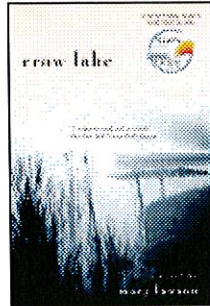
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AUTHOR Q&A

CROW LAKE

By [Mary Lawson](#)

Q. What inspired you to write this novel?

A. The honest answer is, I don't know. The novel came from a short story, and the short story came from a single sentence, which came into my mind one morning without explanation and out of nowhere. It was, 'My great grandmother fixed a book-rest to her spinning wheel so that she could read while she was spinning.'

This was true – fact not fiction – though I still have no idea why I suddenly thought of it. My mother had mentioned our great grandmother often when we were children, but that was a long time ago and I hadn't given her a thought for years.

There was quite a gap between the short story and the novel, and during that time both of my parents died and my children flew the nest. I spent even more time than usual, then, thinking about issues of family, home and childhood, and I have no doubt that that had an influence on the novel.

Q. Do you see Kate's character as being autobiographical to a certain extent and if so, in what ways?

A. If you'd asked if the story was autobiographical – no. Virtually nothing that takes place in the novel happened in my life. But you asked about Kate's character, which is harder to answer.

She is much more serious than I, but circumstances have made her so. She has been damaged by loss, and the damage has made her rather self-righteous and judgmental – I hope I am not quite as hard on other people as she is. Having said that, I do share some of her prejudices; the work ethic is strong in both of us; I expect a lot of myself and of those around me; I am not by nature tolerant, easygoing or laissez-faire. But fear of further loss has caused Kate to limit her world. Academic study is safe, it cannot betray her; love, on the other hand, would make her vulnerable again. So she keeps the barriers up, to protect herself. Life has been much kinder to me than it was to her.

As for other similarities; I have two older brothers, whom I adored as a child (still do), so I have shared with Kate the experience of hero worship. I also have a

younger sister, whose infant self was the model for Bo. (She is the only character based on a 'real' person, apart from Great Grandmother.) Family is tremendously important to Kate, and it is to me.

Q. 'Setting too much store by education can be a subtly dangerous thing'. Do you agree and if so, why?

A. I think setting too much store by any ideal, however admirable, can be dangerous. It can take over; it can damage your sense of proportion and blind you to other things.

Q. Why did you choose Northern Ontario as the background for this novel? How much did you draw on your own childhood experiences?

A. I grew up in Southern Ontario, but my family spent a lot of time in the North, and it is the North I think of when I think of home.

The community I grew up in was larger than Crow Lake, less isolated, much less homogeneous, and less remote, but it was isolated enough that people depended on each other, and took care of each other. There is a downside to small communities of course – they are hell on earth for those who don't fit in – but I remember it with affection, and *Crow Lake* is in some respects a tribute to it.

Small incidents in the book did take place in reality – people regularly go through the ice out on the lake, for instance, and the winter storms I've described are drawn from life. The ponds are drawn from life too – as in the novel, they were back beyond the railroad tracks, and were full of all manner of marvelous wriggling creatures.

Q. The novel moves in its very early stages into tragedy. Do you think it would be fair to say that the rest of the novel deals with overcoming that?

A. A number of people who have read *Crow Lake* feel that its main theme is bereavement and coming to terms with loss, but in fact, that was not uppermost in my mind when I wrote it. For me, the heart of the novel is the relationship between Matt and Kate, and the greatest and most tragic loss in the story is the loss of that relationship. The tragedy which occurs at the beginning of the book would have had an enormous effect on all the Morrison children, and the story of their attempt to remain together as a family is the backbone of the novel, but for me, the central struggle is Kate's attempt to understand what went wrong between her and Matt – a struggle which requires her to re-evaluate the goals and principles by which she has lived her life.

Q. For you, what was the importance of the Ponds? Clearly the symbol of a bond of closeness between Matt and Kate but the strong emphasis placed on biological study is evident. Is this an area you yourself have studied in the past?

A. Initially, I based the novel around the ponds purely out of nostalgia. I remember the ponds where I grew up as a source of great delight. They are small worlds, after all, and if there are shelves or shallow places within them you feel as

if you are seeing the whole of that world. It changes constantly, and yet it is always the same.

As the novel progressed, though, the ponds took on a wider significance. They were, as you say, as symbol of the closeness between Matt and Kate, but to me they also came to represent Kate's childhood – the period of 'innocence' before she was, as she saw it, betrayed by Matt. The trips with Matt to the ponds survived the tragedy which overtook the family at the beginning of the book, and partly through them, Kate managed to survive it too. But they did not survive Matt's 'betrayal', and in an emotional sense, neither did she. In fact, the ponds were the scene of the crime. Kate says in the book, 'By the following September the ponds themselves would have been desecrated twice over, as far as I was concerned, and for some years after that I did not visit them at all.'

Years later, when Kate decides on her choice of career, it is partly because of a fear – almost a terror – that the ponds themselves, the symbol of the golden period of her childhood, may not survive. 'I imagined myself,' she says, 'going back to them one day in the future, looking into their depths and seeing . . . nothing.'

Having set the novel around the ponds, the choice of biology as Matt's passion and Kate's later field of study was almost inevitable, but I was more than happy with that. I do not have a background in biology, but of all the sciences it is the most easily accessible to the layman, and as a subject it is so beautiful, and so fascinating, that I had no fear that readers would be put off by small passages of description.

Q. In her adult life, the breakdown of her relationship with her brother affects her relationships with other men, i.e. Daniel. What do you think is the significance of Daniel's character and why did you choose him for Kate?

A. In spite of Kate's denial, I think Daniel is quite a lot like Matt. He would have to be pretty special for Kate to be interested in him, and he would have to be quite unusual to be interested in Kate, disillusioned and bitter as she is! She says at one point that she had never expected to admire anyone again; if Matt could turn out to have feet of clay, what hope was there for anyone else? And yet she admires Daniel. She sees in him the qualities that she knows she is lacking in herself – tolerance, open-mindedness, and generosity of spirit. Daniel can see the whole view, whereas Kate is blinkered by the past. He represents what she would like to have been, and just possibly might still be.

On another level though, Daniel represents what Matt should have been, and this is a problem for Kate. When she looks at Daniel, she sees all that Matt has lost.

On his side, I believe Daniel is attracted to Kate partly because of her honesty. She does not pretend, to others or to herself. It is this which is her salvation, in the end – she is able to look at her 'picture of how things are', and see that it is wrong.

Q. What do you think lies behind the anger and resentment between the two brothers, Matt and Luke, which results in violence?

A. I think a lot of the tension between Luke and Matt stems from the fact that their balance of power has shifted. Until 'the accident', Luke was very much the lesser brother. He was a standard bored, sullen, resentful teenager, his deficiencies highlighted by comparison with his brilliant younger brother.

And then comes the accident. Traumatic though it is, I think the accident is the making of Luke. From being the family problem, he becomes the family solution. He sees that it is in his power to save the rest of the family, and he does that, at great personal cost. Perhaps he would have 'found himself' anyway, but it would have taken a long time. In particular, it is Bo's overwhelming need of him that transforms Luke. No one ever needed him before, and no one adored him as she does. 'Yeah, but she likes me,' he says to Aunt Annie. You could say that he needed Bo every bit as much as the other way round.

So Luke is now the head of the family. He is mother and father rolled into one, and this is a problem for Matt. I don't see Matt as being jealous or resentful by nature, but still, things have changed, and the change is hard for him to accept. He is hugely indebted to Luke, and that debt would be a heavy burden. You expect your parents to make sacrifices for you – that is what parents do – but you don't expect it of your siblings.

To complicate matters, Matt genuinely doubts Luke's ability to carry off his plan. His lack of faith would have been galling to Luke.

What it boils down to, I guess, is sibling rivalry, that plus the anxiety, uncertainty and grief which both boys had to deal with at the time.

Q. Did you enjoy writing this novel? And did the final ending mirror that which you had in mind when you started to write?

A. I loved it. Initially when I answered this question, I wrote 'I loved every minute of it.' My husband, reading it through, scribbled, 'That's a load of bull. You did not. I was there.' So for the sake of absolute accuracy, I've deleted 'every minute of'.

I knew how it was going to end, though for a long time I couldn't work out how to get there. How to get Kate to see that she had got it wrong – that was the problem. Daniel and Marie helped me out in the end.



Crow Lake

by Mary Lawson

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333 pages, 2002

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In Praise of Late Bloomers

Reviewed by Margaret Gunning

The success of Mary Lawson's tender, vibrant first novel *Crow Lake* has been the sort of Cinderella story that gives middle-aged women writers (this one included) a lot of hope. It's one of those "overnight sensation after 20 years of effort" scenarios that implies a great deal of moral fiber and perseverance in the author. This trait of steadfastness (dare I say faith?) sounds loud and clear in the novel itself, which is so deep and dimensional, so polished and true, that it makes you wonder why agents weren't pounding down her door long before this.

But such are the vagaries of the publishing biz. The important thing is that someone finally gave the 55-year-old Lawson a break, so that we now get to enjoy a heart-tuggingly beautiful piece of work by an author who clearly knows what she is doing.

The opening paragraph is a stunner:

My great-grandmother Morrison fixed a book rest to her spinning wheel so that she could read while she was spinning, or so the story goes. And one Saturday evening she became so absorbed in her book that when she looked up, she found that it was half past midnight and she had spun for half an hour on the Sabbath day. Back then, that counted as a major sin.

This passage tells us volumes about the Morrison clan -- their unquenchable passion for learning squashed down hard by an iron sense of duty. But it reveals even more about our narrator Kate, a 26-year-old woman reflecting

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back on her anguished childhood from the seemingly safe vantage point of worldly success as a professor of invertebrate biology.

Four hundred miles away from the tiny northern community she grew up in, the adult Kate has supposedly won the ultimate Morrison prize: she is educated, she has escaped rural impoverishment and isolation, and she is making her way by her wits. But with all her apparent advantages, Kate is anything but free. In fact the past has a stranglehold on her so life-choking that it has left her almost unable to feel. Her backward reflections are an attempt to probe the course of her life to determine just exactly where she lost herself.

"Memories. I'm not in favor of them, by and large. Not that there aren't some good ones, but on the whole I'd like to put them in an airtight cupboard and close the door." Well might Kate fear memories, for at the tender age of seven her small world shattered in an instant when both her parents were killed in a catastrophic car accident.

They had gone into town to buy a suitcase. The fact that the Morrison family didn't even own one reveals worlds about their isolation in Crow Lake, but the suitcase is a powerful symbol of the fact that one of them was about to get out. Kate's older brother Luke, 19 years old and a diligent student, has just won a scholarship for teacher's college -- a sort of miracle for a family in which finishing high school was a luxury only earned after generations of sacrifice and toil.

The best of times, elation over Luke's breakthrough, turns into the very worst with a sickening crash. In a blinding instant four children are orphaned: Luke, 17-year-old Matt, Kate, and baby Bo who is only 18 months old.

Many reviewers have interpreted *Crow Lake* as the story of how a family copes with sudden and massive bereavement, and it is that. But Lawson imbues her writing with such liquid depths that it becomes a delicate prose-poem on the theme of relationship. At the heart of the novel is Kate's intense and nearly worshipful connection to her gifted brother, Matt, who ignites her lifelong love of science by taking her down to the ponds to observe the wonder of wild things:

*Sticklebacks were drifting aimlessly about.
 The breeding season was over so it was hard
 to tell the males and the females apart. When*

they were breeding the males were very beautiful, with red underparts and silvery scales on their backs and brilliant blue eyes...

"What do the females do?" I'd asked him.

"Oh, laze around. Go to tea parties. Gossip with their friends. You know what females are like."

"No, but really Matt. What do they do?"

"I don't know. Eat a lot, probably. Probably they need to recover their strength after producing all those eggs."

The idyllic atmosphere Lawson creates in these trips to the ponds tugs at all of us who can remember gleaming jewels of magic even in the midst of the most turbulent childhood. But this poem to relationship extends far beyond Kate's adulation of her brother.

The fiercely loving yet heated rivalry between Matt and Luke (the "responsible" one) is one of the most realistic portrayals of brotherly war in recent literature. It's a tender battle, but the two can be wild as snorting stallions with each other, and sometimes even come to blows. Luke is determined to make the supreme sacrifice of his education and future in order to hold the traumatized family together, but Matt hates the gut-twisting guilt this near-martyrdom stirs up in him.

And then there are the Pyes. Just off-camera, this neighboring farming family endures another sort of trauma, the chronic, escalating generational cycle of violence begetting violence. The Morrisons and the Pyes are entwined by more than the fact that the boys make a little extra money helping out on the farm. They are caught in a sort of deadlock that becomes much more than psychological by the novel's end.

Kate's life as an esteemed professor should be rich, but in fact is peculiarly barren and bloodless. For the first time in her life she is becoming seriously interested in a man, a fellow professor named Daniel, and it is almost more than she can endure: "You must understand: I had never thought that I would really love anyone. It hadn't been on the cards, as far as I was concerned. To be honest, I had thought that such intensity of feeling was beyond me."

Intensity of feeling is not beyond her at all, but merely deeply repressed, a survival mechanism for coping with massive grief (but also a living out of the Morrison family edict: "Thou Shalt Not Emote"). This repression and its steep, life-sapping cost is familiar to so many of us who grew up with families where tightlipped reserve was the norm.

There is a sense in *Crow Lake* of pent-up energy, of something about to burst open or explode, but it never quite happens. Lawson is so masterful at describing the trauma of small children that it sometimes shocked me into tears, as in this hair-raising passage where Matt and Luke physically fight:

I thought the walls of the house would shatter and fall down around us. I thought the end of the world had come. And then I knew it had, because in the middle of all the uproar a movement beside me caught my eye and I looked down and saw Bo shaking so that even her hair seemed to vibrate. She'd gone rigid, her arms sticking down stiffly at her sides, fingers spread, and her mouth was open wide and tears were pouring down her face but she wasn't making a sound.

Betrayal is another major theme. Given the dizzying pedestal Matt had to stand on all through Kate's childhood, how could he fail to fall? Yet a chance for a kind of reconciliation comes up when Kate receives an invitation to the 18th birthday party of Matt's son Simon. At first she won't even consider inviting Daniel, so deep is her reserve and mistrust (not to mention a certain embarrassment about taking him to Crow Lake). But in his own gentle way Daniel has the means to unlock the airless vault of Kate's heart. This leads her to the kind of painful, hard-won insight that is literally life-changing.

Lawson gets everything right here, especially the minor characters -- the good folks of Crow Lake who demonstrate a bustling kindness to the bereaved family, and in particular the toddler Bo, a howling, drippy-nosed little terror who somehow comes across as endearing. And the writing is sometimes groaningly beautiful:

Some days thousands of milkweed pods would burst open together, triggered by the heat of the sun; thousands and thousands of small silent explosions repeating themselves in

*salvos down the miles of tracks. On those
days I walked through clouds of silken down
drifting about like smoke in the morning
breeze.*

Poetry, indeed. Mary Lawson is a treasure, a new voice maturing into her gift in mid-life. A younger writer never would have caught all these nuances. Let us rejoice in the discovery of this subtle, graceful, late-blooming talent. |
June 2002

Margaret Gunning has been reviewing books for many years but never gets tired of the grand adventure of reading. Her poetry has appeared in *Prism International*, *Capilano Review* and *Room of One's Own*. She has written two novels, *A Singing Tree* and *Better Than Life*, and is at work on a third, *Nola Mardling*. She lives in Vancouver with one fat cat named Murphy and one nice husband named Bill.



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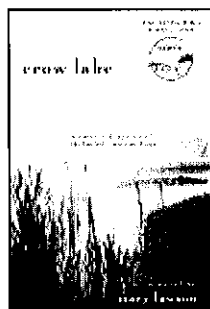
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Crow Lake is that rare find, a first novel so quietly assured, so emotio perfect, you know from the opening page that this is the real thing—a li experience in which to lose yourself, by an author of immense talent.

Here is a gorgeous, slow-burning story set in the rural “badlands” of no Ontario, where heartbreak and hardship are mirrored in the landscape. farming Pye family, life is a Greek tragedy where the sins of the father: visited on the sons, and terrible events occur—offstage.

Centerstage are the Morrisons, whose tragedy looks more immediate if brutal, but is, in reality, insidious and divisive. Orphaned young, Kate M was her older brother Matt’s protegee, her fascination for pond life fed passionate interest in the natural world. Now a zoologist, she can ident organisms under a microscope but seems blind to the state of her own life. And she thinks she’s outgrown her siblings—Luke, Matt, and Bo—w once her entire world.

In this universal drama of family love and misunderstandings, of resen harbored and driven underground, Lawson ratchets up the tension with heartbreaking humor and consummate control, continually overturning expectations right to the very end. Tragic, funny, unforgettable, **Crow** quiet tour de force that will catapult Mary Lawson to the forefront of fic today.

From the Hardcover edition.

PRAISE

"A finely crafted debut ... conveys an astonishing intensity of emotion, Proustian in its sense of loss and regret."

--Kirkus Reviews (Starred review)

"The assurance with which Mary Lawson handles both reflection and vivacity makes her a writer to read and watch ... has a resonance at once witty and poignant."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"**Crow Lake** is the kind of book that keeps you reading well past midnight and grieves when it's over. Then you start pressing it on friends."

—*The Washington Post Book World*

"A touching meditation on the power of loyalty and loss, on the ways in which we pay our debts and settle old scores, and on what it means to love, to fail, to succeed—and to negotiate fate's obstacle courses."

—*People*

"Lawson's tight focus on the emotional and moral effects of a drastic turn of events on a small human group has its closest contemporary analogue in the novels of Ian McEwan."

—*The Toronto Star*

From the Hardcover edition.

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ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Mary Lawson was born and brought up in a farming community in Ontario. After graduating from McGill University she went to England for a holiday and stayed on; she lives there still, with her husband and sons, though she returns to Canada every year.

From the Hardcover edition.

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**Mary
Lawson**



Mary Lawson was born and brought up in a farming community in Ontario. A distant relative of L.M.Montgomery, author of *Anne of Green Gables*, she came to England in 1968, is married with two grown-up sons and lives in Surrey