

The Rest of Her Life

by Laura Moriarty

About the Book

In *The Rest of Her Life*, Laura Moriarty delivers a luminous, compassionate, and provocative look at how mothers and daughters with the best intentions can be blind to the harm they do to one another.

Leigh is the mother of high-achieving, popular high school senior Kara. Their relationship is already strained for reasons Leigh does not fully understand when, in a moment of carelessness, Kara makes a mistake that ends in tragedy -- the effects of which not only divide Leigh's family, but polarize the entire community. We see the story from Leigh's perspective, as she grapples with the hard reality of what her daughter has done and the devastating consequences her actions have on the family of another teenage girl in town, all while struggling to protect Kara in the face of rising public outcry.

Like the best works of Jane Hamilton, Jodi Picoult, and Alice Sebold, Laura Moriarty's *The Rest of Her Life* is a novel of complex moral dilemma, filled with nuanced characters and a page-turning plot that makes readers ask themselves, "What would I do?"

Praise for the Book

"Are the sins of the parents visited upon the children, or vice versa? Laura Moriarty's raw, honest novel about an ordinary family whose life changes in one extraordinary moment resonates like an emotional tuning fork. You'll be asking yourself what you would do in this situation, long after you've finished reading."

— *Jodi Picoult, New York Times bestselling author of My Sister's Keeper and Nineteen Minutes*

"Laura Moriarty writes with unflinching honesty and clear-eyed compassion ... Her characters are as real as mirrors, and sentiment never crosses the lines to sentimentality. Laura Moriarty can do this surpassingly well. I carried this book everywhere I went."

— *Jacquelyn Mitchard, New York Times bestselling author of The Deep End of the Ocean and Cage of Stars*

Courtesy HarperCollins

About the Author

Title: Laura Moriarty

Source: Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2008. From Literature Resource Center.

Document Type: Biography

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2009 Gale, Cengage Learning

Updated:09/05/2008

Personal Information

Born 1970; children: one daughter. Education: University of Kansas, B.S.W., M.A. Addresses: Home: Lawrence, KS. E-mail: laura_moriarty@yahoo.com.

Career

- Writer.

Awards

- George Bennett fellowship, Phillips Exeter Academy, 2000-01.

Works

Writings

- The Center of Everything (novel), Hyperion (New York, NY), 2003.
- The Rest of Her Life (novel), Hyperion (New York, NY), 2007.

Sidelights

Laura Moriarty attended the University of Kansas, first earning a degree in social work, then another in writing. In an interview posted on the University of Kansas Web site, she related: "I started writing after I got my degree in social work, when I was a fifth year exchange student at the University of Malta. It's a long story. Maybe it'll be Novel #3. But basically, I tried to push myself to be other things for a long time. I tried to be a doctor, and then a social worker. I wanted to do something that could help people, and writing seemed self indulgent. It probably is, but it's what I love to do and what I'm good at, and after a while, I got tired of suppressing the desire to write." Moriarty also told the interviewer about her love of Kansas, and particularly Lawrence, where she lives and where she attended university. She also conveyed how she values that city over the other places she has lived, including eight states and two other countries.

Moriarty's debut novel, *The Center of Everything*, is narrated by Evelyn Bucknow, beginning from the time she is ten years old. Evelyn is a bright, down-to-earth child who is more grounded than her mother, Tina, who is separated from her Evelyn's father. Tina gives birth to a severely

retarded baby boy as a consequence of her affair with her married boss. Evelyn faces her own problems alone, wearing clothes that do not fit and that definitely do not match the designer clothes of the other girls. She has a secret crush on Travis, a bad boy who lives in their apartment complex but who is attracted to Evelyn's beautiful best friend, Deena. The one person who is always there for her is her devoted and religious grandmother Eileen. As Evelyn grows older, she faces hard choices, particularly when her membership in an evangelical church clashes with her love of science. The novel is set in the fictitious small town of Kerrville, Kansas, during the years of the administration of President Ronald Reagan. Moriarty uses pop culture references that give the story an accurate feel for the time. Norah Piehl reviewed the book for Bookreporter.com, describing it as "a coming-of-age novel, family drama, and political commentary rolled into one."

Alexandra Tursi interviewed Moriarty for *Identity Theory*, following the publication of Moriarty's *The Rest of Her Life*. Tursi wrote: "Laura Moriarty's writing has been said to 'resonate like an emotional tuning fork.' A novelist intrigued by the varied and complex relationships between mothers and daughters, she crafts characters that are both authentic and accessible, caught in difficult situations that force them to come to terms with themselves."

This novel is narrated by Leigh Churchill, a middle-school teacher married to a college professor; she is the mother of Justin and Kara. Leigh and her sister, Pam, daughters of a divorced and unstable mother, had a hard childhood. Leigh's children, in contrast, enjoy parental love and stability. Kara has blossomed in this environment, while Justin fits in less well. Because of their upbringing, Kara and Leigh are not always able to relate to each other. As the story begins, eighteen-year-old Kara runs down and kills another teen, a former student of Leigh's. Moriarty, through Leigh, then reveals how this tragedy impacts every aspect of the characters' lives. *Library Journal* reviewer Beth E. Andersen commented that Moriarty is "a blunt, honest scout." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor concluded that the characters in this novel "grab readers the minute they enter the story, and recollections of their vivid personalities will linger long after the last page." Lourdes Orive, a review for *Teen Reads*, described *The Rest of Her Life* as "a compelling novel that takes a steady, unforgettable look at how an instant can change a family's life irrevocably. Readers looking for a well-crafted family drama with a page-turning plot will not be disappointed with Moriarty's latest work."

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- Book, July 1, 2003, Beth Kephart, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 77.
- Booklist, July 1, 2003, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 1866; July 1, 2007, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Rest of Her Life*, p. 30.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, July 17, 2003, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 15; November 25, 2003, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 3.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, June 20, 2003, Allyssa Lee, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 79; August 10, 2007, Tina Jordan, review of *The Rest of Her Life*, p. 73.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, June 15, 2007, review of *The Rest of Her Life*.

- Library Journal, July 1, 2007, Beth E. Andersen, review of *The Rest of Her Life*, p. 83.
- Los Angeles Times, July 27, 2003, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 14.
- Publishers Weekly, June 11, 2007, review of *The Rest of Her Life*, p. 37; June 18, 2007, "PW Talks with Laura Moriarty; Writing in the Blind Spot: *The Rest of Her Life* Explores What Happens When a Mother's Childhood Intrudes on Her Daughter's," p. 34.
- Tribune Books (Chicago, IL), July 13, 2003, review of *The Center of Everything*, p. 2.
- Women's Review of Books, September 1, 2007, "Read Like a Girl," interview with Laura Moriarty, p. 2.

Online

- Bookreporter.com, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (February 11, 2008), Norah Piehl, review of *The Center of Everything*.
- Identity Theory, <http://www.identitytheory.com/> (February 4, 2008), Alexandra Tursi, "Staring Down the Blind Spots: An Interview with Laura Moriarty."
- Laura Moriarty Home Page, <http://www.lauramoriarty.net> (February 11, 2008).
- Teen Reads, <http://teenreads.com/> (February 11, 2008), Lourdes Orive, review of *The Rest of Her Life*.
- University of Kansas Web site, <http://www.ku.edu/> (February 11, 2008), interview with Laura Moriarty.

Source Citation: "Laura Moriarty." Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2008. Literature Resource Center. Gale. KENT DISTRICT LIBRARY. 13 May 2009 <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom_kentdl>.

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000180798

Author Interview

Writing in the Blind Spot by Norah Piehl -- Publishers Weekly, 6/18/2007

The Rest of Her Life explores what happens when a mother's childhood intrudes on her daughter's.

PW: The new novel's protagonist, Leigh, is an adult and a mother, but she continually returns to her identity as a daughter—can there be the one without the other?

Laura Moriarty: I think it's really hard to write about being a mother without writing about being a daughter. I've read *Mothering Without a Map* [by Kathryn Black] and *Motherless Daughters* [by Hope Edelman], both of which are about how not having a mother, for whatever reason, is going to affect your mothering. That's kind of what I was exploring with Leigh in this novel, about the blind spot she has with regard to her own mothering.

PW: In the novel, there's a literal blind spot—

LM: —when Leigh's daughter, Kara, strikes and kills a pedestrian with the family car, yes. Whenever you read newspaper accounts of car accidents where someone's hit a pedestrian, they always say, "I never even saw it." So there's this idea that you can do all this harm without even seeing it—what a good metaphor for bad parenting.

PW: You returned to Kansas to live and set both your novels there.

LM: I moved around a lot as a kid. As a writer, I always felt like an imposter, an outsider when I tried to write about setting. Sometimes that can be a good vantage point, but on the other hand, it can be a disadvantage to not really know a place. Kansas is the first place that I really have lived in long enough to understand. I almost feel like I own it in a way.

PW: It's also been a focal point for contentious battles about issues like intelligent design—was that a factor?

LM: This novel was born out of me reading the local section of the paper every day. You can't read those sections without reading about those battles, and they do have ramifications for the entire nation. All I try to do is write it fairly. The two misconceptions about Kansas is that it's ugly, which it's not—it's breathtaking. And the second is that there are all these "crazy" people here, and I wanted to show a more balanced, nuanced view of fundamentalism and of the different kinds of people who live here.

PW: Your first novel, *The Center of Everything*, is a very popular choice for book groups.

LM: Often what happens is that when I visit a book group to talk about the book, I end up wanting to join the group—and in one case, I did end up coming back, as a regular member. I was surprised to be invited into some Kansas City schools as well. There were two major groups that the book appealed to—mothers of grown children and also teenagers.

Courtesy publishersweekly.com, retrieved 2009

Discussion Questions

1. Leigh is certainly a flawed human being. But what are her strengths -- as a mother and as a human being? What are her weaknesses? If her weaknesses are a product of her difficult childhood, why is her sister so different?
2. In the course of the novel, the relationship between Leigh and Kara changes. What do you think of as the major turning point in their relationship? What do you think was at the heart of the conflict?
3. How important is the setting to this story? Would the same situation have played out differently in a larger town, a suburb, or a city? What do you think would have been the same?
4. At the beginning of the novel, Leigh believes she likes living in a small town like Danby because she likes the sense of community it offers. Is she really a part of this community? How does Leigh's relationship to the town change over the summer?
5. When Leigh accuses Eva of being a gossip, Eva defends herself by saying she just cares about what's happening in the lives of people in her community. Do you buy this? Leigh spends a lot of time worrying about what people are saying about her family, but is gossip ever a positive force in the story? Do you like Eva? Why or why not?
6. After hearing Eva deny being a gossip, Leigh is stunned: *"People didn't see themselves, she considered. It was almost eerie when you saw it face to face."* Who else in the novel might not see herself or himself clearly? Does anyone? Do you think of this selective "vision" as a conscious choice or a true inability?
7. Is Gary a better parent than Leigh? In what ways does his relationship with Justin mirror Leigh's relationship with Kara? What is it about each child that brings out such different responses from both Gary and Leigh?
8. The first time the bereaved mother confronts Kara, it is Leigh -- not Gary -- who steps in to protect her. Leigh believes she recognizes something in Diane Kletchka, something we can assume Gary does not. What do you think it is about Diane that feels familiar to Leigh?
9. In this novel, we see Leigh in several different kinds of relationships: she's a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a friend. How do all these different roles compete with each other for Leigh's attention/ loyalty? Does she give too much attention to any one role? Not enough to another? In what ways do these different kinds of relationships influence one another?

Courtesy of Hyperion