

Discussion Questions: *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl*

Discuss all the questions in your reading group and write your answers into your book-project folder. Number your answers clearly so you can quickly find them or cut up this sheet and glue the questions into your reading diary. Your project folder will be assessed for completeness, clarity of organization and content.

Before Reading the Novel:



Georges de la Tour, The Fortune Teller

1. Look at the painting for several minutes. What is your impression of the girl? Who is she? What is she thinking right now? Write an inner monologue following the girls' thoughts. Write at least one A4 page. If you want to see a better copy of the painting, go to www.abcgallery.com and look for La Tour, "The Fortune Teller".

While Reading the Novel: Collect ideas as you go along.

2. Read slowly and carefully and try to visualize the scenes clearly. As you go along add notes to the character profiles of Suzanne, Jack, Vivienne and La Tour. What do we learn about their backgrounds, their daily lives and problems, their values and beliefs? Use the Character Profiles sheet for further instructions.

3. How do the alternating chapters at the outset of the novel serve as a means of introducing Suzanne and Jack? What do the stories reveal about their characters and their backgrounds? Start filling in the character profiles.

4. Huddle writes of Suzanne and Elijah, "What she had to do was – she knew it as clearly as if it had appeared before her in letters of fire – TOUCH HIM. But what she really wanted more than anything was to move away, put some distance between his flesh and hers ... She'd betrayed him" (pp. 13-14) When Elijah reaches out to her, why does Suzanne react in this manner? When Elijah responds with a note of his own, why does Suzanne then rip it to shreds?

5. What effect do the short, alternating sections have on the novel and on our perception of the characters? How does the story of La Tour and Vivienne help the author examine the relationships between Suzanne and Jack, and Jack and Elly? Check if you find any common traits among the events within one chapter.

6. When La Tour discovers the thatch of hair on Vivienne's shoulder, "he wants to spend as many hours as possible in Vivienne's presence. What most concerns him is that the girl will notice the change in him and come to disrespect him. He can hardly bring himself to give her any orders or directions. When she comes to his studio in the mornings now, he has a desire to kneel before her" (p. 51). Why does La Tour react so strongly to his discovery? What about that physical trait of hers affects him so profoundly?

7. Vivienne tells La Tour, "Until you began to ask me about my life, I never saw it, because to me it was invisible. I could have lived to be an old lady without a glimpse of what my life was like" (p. 61). In what way(s) has La Tour come to play such a vital role in Vivienne's life?

8. When Vivienne sees La Tour's painting of her for the first time, "the appalling distortion of her features tells La Tour something he's known but has never voiced to himself — that nothing expresses anguish like the human face. What a face can tell of joy or pleasure is slight compared with how sublimely it articulates pain" (p. 71). Why does Vivienne react with such resentment when she sees La Tour's finished painting?

9. In addition to alternating between the seventeenth century and the present day, Huddle moves back and forth between Suzanne's and Jack's pasts. What effect do these flashbacks have? How is knowing their family backgrounds integral to understanding their personalities? Keep working on their character profiles.

10. The characters create a variety of stories throughout the novel, from Suzanne's imagined world to Vivienne's fabrications about her family life. In what ways do the characters retreat into the stories/daydreams they devise? Why are these fictions so essential to their lives and well-being?

11. As La Tour completes his painting of Vivienne, "he knows that when he has set down that extraordinary sunlit glistening of the dark thatch on Vivienne's shoulder, the picture will be finished. He will be finished" (p. 63). Why does this particular painting represent a conclusion for La Tour?

12. Discuss the symbolism of posing nude. Vivienne does it for La Tour, Suzanne is modeling for an arts class. Compare the two women's experiences. What do they learn about themselves? What makes them do it?

13. Why does Vivienne want La Tour's painting of her so badly? Why does La Tour condone her lying to him about her reasons?

14. In the course of the novel all the main characters develop and learn something about themselves. What has each of them learned? Describe their characters at the beginning of the novel and at the end (note form)

Suzanne		
Jack		
Vivienne		
La Tour		

15. Why does Vivienne stay with La Tour in the final moments of his life? What does she now understand about him? Reread the last page of the novel. What does he not want her to see?

16. Conversation plays a big part in this novel, often becoming the highest form of intimacy between characters. Why is conversation such a crucial element in these characters' lives and their interactions with each other? Compare Jack's relationship with Suzanne and his relationship with Elly? What kind of intimacy has developed between La Tour and Vivienne?

17. Huddle examines art as a tool we use to form our identities. Where in the novel does art help the characters to learn about themselves?

18. What is the significance of ending the book with a scene involving Vivienne and La Tour as opposed to Suzanne and Jack? Would the ending have had the same effect otherwise?

19. Read the following interview with the author. Then write a short story, poem or inner monologue where you speculate about the painter and the making of the picture as Huddle describes it in his answer to question 2. Choose one of the following paintings (Look them up in the internet to see more detail. You'll find the paintings in Olga's Gallery, Georges de la Tour.)



A Conversation with David Huddle

Q1) How did the idea for *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl* originate?

A) In 1996, at a show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., I saw a number of Georges de La Tour's paintings. Their narrative content appealed to me: peasants cleverly hoodwinking rich dandies, a quarrel breaking out among beggars, a young woman with a lot on her mind, up late at night staring at candlelight. Not long after I attended the show, I came across an article about the painter in *Smithsonian*. I was especially intrigued by the following passage, which I've used as the book's epigraph:

"The dusty old municipal records also reveal a difficult man who, particularly in his later years, was not exactly a model of civic virtue. There were complaints that he refused to contribute his quota to the poor while a famine raged, that he assaulted a sergeant at arms, and that he administered a savage beating to a peasant. One particularly detailed set of charges reported La Tour 'making himself obnoxious to everyone by the great number of dogs . . . he keeps, acting as though he were the lord of the manor, sending his dogs after hare into the standing crops, which they trample down and ruin.'"

The contradiction between La Tour's compassion for the poor in his paintings and his brutal treatment of a real peasant piqued my interest. His keeping so many dogs somehow made him seem very real to me. I began by setting forth what I imagined to be the painter's least admirable human qualities, then used my writing to look into his personality for what might account for the nobility of his artistic vision.

Q2) Did the book involve any special research in art history?

A) I have to admit that I'm not a serious student of art. I enjoy pictures in an almost primitive way. The ones I like best are those which translate into stories in my mind. Often such stories are speculations about the painter and the making of the picture.

Q3) How would you define the relationship between the two parallel stories in the novel?

A) The thread of Vivienne Lavalette's story is spun out of Suzanne Nelson's memory and imagination as well as the circumstances of her life. La Tour stands at the center of the book. One of my discoveries in writing this novel is the practical value of the imagination — it's a survival tool, as essential as opposable thumbs or peripheral vision. In the daily lives of my characters, art is a force.