



## The Stolen Heart

By Lauren Kelly  
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### Introduction

Merilee Graff is an ordinary-seeming but secretive young woman. Caring, sensitive, and intelligent, she observes the world around her and seeks to build a coherent meaning from the details of life. Merilee's world, though, is anything but ordinary. Her childhood, while outwardly appearing to be one of privilege and wealth, is closer to a Grimm's fairy tale, with secrets, an atmosphere of dread, and the suggestion of dire consequences to any deep probing. The abduction of a classmate who is never found becomes the compelling thread in a mystery that Merilee is driven to solve, though the solution is something that she would go to almost any lengths to avoid knowing.

A master of the subtle interrelation of style and substance, Lauren Kelly seduces the reader into the darkness and terror of this world in exactly the way that Merilee herself is seduced. There are many stolen hearts in this story, and Kelly places them like markers on a map, pointing out how easy it is to slip from the safe, daylight world of ordinary life into another place where there are no boundaries, no rules, and no compassion. Kelly knows that what we call love, in its darker forms, is often the means by which this slip happens.

What Merilee finally discovers will return her to herself and to safety, but is it a happy ending? Lauren Kelly has given us a story that is perfectly constructed, like a Chinese box with secret compartments, and at its center lies that very question.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The glass heart, Merilee's gift to her father, is the central image of the novel. It is beautiful, and is also a magnifying glass. Why is it so important to Merilee? In what ways is it effective as a symbol?
2. Merilee wants very badly to see her father as a good man. She works very hard to create him as a living presence in her life, and to imagine his feelings. Does Kelly give us any clues as to how Dennis Graf actually feels about his daughter?
3. We first see Edith Graf through the eyes of a child, her daughter. As Merilee's experience changes, so does her view of her mother. How did your view of this character change over the course of the novel, and at what points did it change?
4. Both Edith and Merilee are afraid of Dennis's disapproval and criticism. How does this fear factor into their love for him?
5. Merilee seems to envy Lilac Jimson, and wishes she could be her friend. Lilac is exotic and likable, outgoing and friendly, but ignores Merilee. How does this make her disappearance both more frightening and fascinating for Merilee?
6. Discuss the meaning(s) of Merilee's gift giving, from the gifts of her possessions to her classmates, to her gift of the glass heart to her father. Merilee says, "I'm a gift-giver who gives the gift of myself knowing that I can take it back at any time" (Page 25). What does she mean? How do gifts work in this story?
7. What is it that Merilee wants from Roosevelt Jimson? Why is she attracted to him?
8. The glass heart reminds Merilee of something her father had said. "If you look too closely at people, we are all alike -- material. And if you look yet more closely, we are all atoms in the void -- energy" (Page 53). What might this statement reveal about Dennis Graf's character, and about the nature of this story?
9. Were you disturbed by the seeming ease with which Merilee is seduced by Jedah Graf? What might contribute to her passivity?
10. Discuss the ending of this novel. Is it a satisfying ending? How did you feel about Jedah's punishment?

### About the Author

Lauren Kelly is one pseudonym of Joyce Carol Oates, a recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. Oates's most recent novel, *The Falls*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book, a *Washington Post* Best Book of 2004, and a *Chicago Tribune* Top Ten Book of 2004. *The Falls* also won France's 2005 *Prix Femina*. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978. In 2003 she was a recipient of the Commonwealth Award for Distinguished Service in Literature.