



Blood Mask

By Lauren Kelly
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Introduction

Everything about Lauren Kelly's newest mystery novel engages the reader on the most intimate and visceral level. Annemarie Straube, aka Marta, lives through an adolescence that is about as far from "normal" as it is possible to be. Escaping from a dysfunctional home into the intense, countercultural reality of her eccentric aunt, Drew Hildebrande, Annemarie inhabits the boundaries of culture clashes between class, gender, and ultimately, conflicting perceptions of reality itself. "Who did it?" is a question that Kelly (one of the pseudonyms of Joyce Carol Oates) is not about to answer in any quick or simplistic way.

The vicious politics of the New York art world, the dangers inherent in an art colony run by a passionate and controlling personality, and the ever-compelling and shifting terrain of gender relations and sexual politics are all woven together here with great subtlety, immediacy, and emotional force.

Kelly wields language, and the intricacies of narrative, as a painter uses a brush. She takes risks in the way she presents her story, and they all work; they all bring the reader closer in, so close to the characters that it becomes difficult to make moral judgments about their behavior. In effect Kelly puts the reader through the same process of mind tampering that Annemarie/Marta undergoes. The fact that Kelly is able to do this with such ease and confidence shows that she understands all the levels involved in story telling.

There aren't many mystery novels today that are a complete pleasure to read, that draw the reader along with fascination and dread, while also inviting the most profound questions about art, politics, identity, and life. This book is one of that rare breed.

Questions for Discussion

1. Annemarie's inner reality is represented at the opening of the novel in a fragmentary, "stream of consciousness" style, with almost no punctuation. Did you find this method effective? Did it help you to identify with her confusion and fear?
2. In what ways does Annemarie's relationship with her mother affect her later relationship with her Aunt Drew?
3. What psychological role might Tania Leenaum, the "girl who died" at Chateauguay Springs, play in Annemarie's mind?
4. Bio-art is real, and is very controversial. What kinds of questions does this novel raise about such a radical art form? Is it immoral, unethical, or just a new form of art that is disturbing, as new art often is?
5. Drew Hildebrande is no longer a practicing artist herself, although in a way, she has recreated herself as a work of art. Why do you think it was important for her to have Annemarie, recreated as Marta, come and live with her?
6. On page 49 Kelly writes, "Drew didn't believe in the old, tired tyranny of family life. At Chateauguay Springs there was newer kind of 'family' to which you didn't belong by blind biological chance." In what ways does this novel complicate traditional ideas about family?
7. The Warhol portrait of Drew seems to hold a lot of meaning for Annemarie. Drew describes Warhol as "an utterly empty man" (Page 75), and then goes on to say, "There can be greatness in such emptiness, I think." What does she mean by emptiness? In what way would it be "great?"
8. The reader gets a very different view of Drew through her behavior toward Virgil. What does this reveal about Drew's character, and what does Kelly's portrayal of their relationship have to say about gender relations?
9. Annemarie is unable to articulate her responses to the art that Drew shows her, but in her mind she asks the questions, "Isn't art meant to be beautiful? If art is uglier than life, why would anyone want to look at it? Why would anyone want to create it?" (Page 76) How would you respond to these questions?
10. Did you find the ending of this novel at all hopeful?

About the Author

Lauren Kelly is one of the pseudonyms of Joyce Carol Oates. Oates is Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University, and lives in Princeton with her husband of over 35 years. She is the recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN/Malamud Award.