



Alone in the Classroom by Elizabeth Hay

About the author:

Elizabeth Hay's latest novel, **Late Nights on Air**, won the Scotiabank Giller Prize and has been an enormous national bestseller. Her other works include **A Student of Weather** (finalist for The Giller Prize and the Ottawa Book Award), **Garbo Laughs** (winner of the Ottawa Book Award and a finalist for the Governor General's Award) and **Small Change** (stories). In 2002, she received the prestigious Marian Engel Award. Elizabeth Hay lives in Ottawa.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

About this book:

In a small prairie school in 1929, Connie Flood helps a backward student, Michael Graves, learn how to read. Observing them and darkening their lives is the principal, Parley Burns, whose strange behaviour culminates in an attack so disturbing its repercussions continue to the present day.

Connie's niece, Anne, tells the story. Impelled by curiosity about her dynamic, adventurous aunt and her more conventional mother, she revisits Connie's past and her mother's broken childhood. In the process she unravels the enigma of Parley Burns and the mysterious, and unrelated, deaths of two young girls. As the novel moves deeper into their lives, the triangle of principal, teacher, student opens out into other emotional triangles – aunt, niece, lover; mother, daughter, granddaughter – until a sudden, capsizing love thrusts Anne herself into a newly independent life.

This spellbinding tale – set in Saskatchewan and the Ottawa Valley – crosses generations and cuts to the bone. It probes the roots of obsessive love and hate, how the hurts and desires of childhood persist and are passed on, as if in the blood. It lays bare the urgency

April 2016



of discovering what we were never told about the past. And it celebrates the process of becoming who we are in a world full of startling connections that lie just out of sight.

Source: Author's website (<http://elizabethhay.com/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. Most of the main characters in *Alone in the Classroom* are teachers, from Connie Flood and Syd Goodwin, who are gifted teachers, to Anne Flood, who doubts her teaching skills, to Parley Burns, a magnetic but troubling presence in the classroom. They frequently ruminate about education, as when the young Connie asks, "What if education is the catastrophe?" or when Syd, thinking about the rise of Hitler, says, "I used to think education helped." Syd also points to the "real difference" between education and schooling. Discuss the ways in which education and the experience of school inform the plot and the ideas in the novel.
2. Fire is an important symbol in the novel. Susan Graves dies in a fire. Parley Burns (whose last name also suggests fire) re-writes that story into a play in which a character who resembles Susan's brother Michael sets fire to the school and a nearby house. Connie wonders whether there was a deeper truth behind that idea, perhaps about Michael's destructive or seductive power. Michael shows Anne's children how to light a fire, so that it never runs away with itself. Sexual attraction, often described in terms of fire, is something else that can run away with itself, and this happens more than once in the novel. Talk about the different kinds of fires – their dangers and attractions – in *Alone in the Classroom*.
3. Michael Graves refers to schoolchildren as "Brave and trusting ... poor little suckers." Connie watches "all the brave children come back to school." Why do schoolchildren require bravery? And why is the novel called *Alone in the Classroom*?
4. Connie believes in reading, as she says, and will not disturb a pupil with a lesson while they are reading. Literature figures prominently in the novel, from Dickens' novel *Nicholas Nickleby* to a poem by Seamus Heaney, but the predominant author is "pessimistic, erotic Thomas Hardy," as Anne describes him, especially his novels *Tess of*

April 2016



the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. How does Elizabeth Hay use Hardy's novels to advance her own themes? Does the connection with Hardy enrich the novel for you even if you are not familiar with Hardy's works?

5. Parley Burns is a fascinating character. Hay doesn't wait for the reader to assess him: early in the novel we are told that he moved through the school "like mustard gas in subtle form. You were aware afterwards that you'd been poisoned." Undeniably, he does some terrible things, but his complexity is also undeniable. Thinking about the lights and shadows in his nature, Anne feels that "his personality widened a little, a door in the house opened." What exactly is Connie drawn to, against her will, in him? What are Parley's strengths and (more obviously) his weaknesses? Do you ever feel warmth or admiration or pity for him?

6. The sexual incompatibility of Syd Goodwin and Connie is described in terms of fruit: "She was an orchard ready to be picked and Syd could not find the fruit." Elizabeth Hay uses fruit, especially berries, at other crucial moments in the novel. What are they, and what do they suggest? Discuss the connection these images and symbols have with the central importance of nature in the novel.

7. There are frequent instances of cruelty and even sadism in the novel, from small examples – like the Italian painting of a man being scourged that Connie finds unforgettable or the mention of the mistreatment of children in Nicholas Nickleby – to much larger ones. Hay's treatment of it can be unexpected. When Connie uses the strap on one of her pupils, she is horrified by the pleasure it gives her, but at the same time, it seemed "that she had gained ground. All day the children worked hard to please her." What are some other examples of cruelty in the novel, and what does Hay seem to be saying about it?

8. The aunt/niece relationship is an unusual one around which to build a novel. Narrated by Anne, the story centres around her aunt Connie for the first half of the book, and Anne only emerges as a leading character in the second half. At one point, Anne thinks that she is "Connie in diluted form." How does Anne's relationship to her aunt affect the way she feels about Michael Graves and even Parley Burns? How does it knit into other major themes in the book?

April 2016



9. *Alone in the Classroom* does not proceed in a straightforward way. It involves four generations, and the story is not told chronologically. Also, the plot often advances in a deliberately unemphatic way, with important information imparted almost casually, in an aside. An example is the trial of Johnny Coyle for the murder of Ethel Weir. After Johnny has been convicted and sentenced to hang, Hay lets us know that Coyle has later been acquitted almost as an afterthought, while dating a long walk Connie makes to Wakefield, Quebec. Similarly, we learn in an understated sentence that Anne "lost a husband and half lost an aunt" during her affair with Michael. Why do you think Hay chooses to tell her story in this circuitous, quiet way? How does this technique heighten the effectiveness of the storytelling?

10. Connie Flood has charisma, in the sense that it's hard to define exactly what makes her appealing. As her niece describes her effect on her brother, "Her methods were invisible. She didn't make overt efforts to question him or include him in conversation, but he said more in an hour with her than in a month with anyone else." Connie is both glamorous and the embodiment of many of the important values in the book. Some of this is suggested by her name, Constance. To what is she constant or faithful (and to what or whom is she not?) What are the ways and moments in which Hay communicates Connie's attractiveness?

11. Parley believes that after his grandmother hanged herself, his sister was born with a strangle mark around her neck. Connie also believes that we carry the past forward into future generations. Anne rejects her aunt's idea that her own birthmarks indicated that Susan Graves, who died in a fire, had come back as Anne. But the novel is shot through with examples of the ways in which past generations influence later ones. Discuss these intersections between past and present.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca>)

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