



## ***Late Nights on Air by Elizabeth Hay***

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### **About the author:**

Elizabeth Hay's fiction includes *A Student of Weather*, a 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 Marian Engel Award. Hay worked for CBC Radio in Yellowknife, Winnipeg, and Toronto. She lives in Ottawa.

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

### **About this book:**

The eagerly anticipated novel from the bestselling author of *A Student of Weather* and *Garbo Laughs*.

Harry Boyd, a hard-bitten refugee from failure in Toronto television, has returned to a small radio station in the Canadian North. There, in Yellowknife, in the summer of 1975, he falls in love with a voice on air, though the real woman, Dido Paris, is both a surprise and even more than he imagined.

Dido and Harry are part of the cast of eccentric, utterly loveable characters, all transplants from elsewhere, who form an unlikely group at the station. Their loves and longings, their rivalries and entanglements, the stories of their pasts and what brought each of them to the North, form the centre. One summer, on a canoe trip four of them make into the Arctic wilderness (following in the steps of the legendary Englishman John Hornby, who, along with his small party, starved

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to death in the barrens in 1927), they find the balance of love shifting, much as the balance of power in the North is being changed by the proposed Mackenzie Valley gas pipeline, which threatens to displace Native people from their land.

Elizabeth Hay has been compared to Annie Proulx, Alice Hoffman, and Isabel Allende, yet she is uniquely herself. With unforgettable characters, vividly evoked settings, in this new novel, Hay brings to bear her skewering intelligence into the frailties of the human heart and her ability to tell a spellbinding story. Written in gorgeous prose, laced with dark humour, *Late Nights on Air* is Hay's most seductive and accomplished novel yet.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Harry Boyd, an admitted romantic, tries to make an impression on Dido Paris by setting her news script on fire while she is on the air. Fire is an ancient metaphor for passion, and *Late Nights on Air* could be described as an anthology of romantic love. Mrs. Dargabble's first husband had urged her to "jump," and many of the characters do, with differing results — from the sexually charged union of Eddy and Dido to more gradual entanglements. Discuss the varieties of love present in this small, isolated community. Which ones strike you as the most successful?
2. One of Elizabeth Hay's great novelistic strengths is her sense of place and the ways she knits her characters into their settings. In her first novel, *A Student of Weather*, the places included Saskatchewan, New York City, and Ottawa; her second novel, *Garbo Laughs*, is set in Ottawa, most memorably during the ice storm of 1998. In *Late Nights on Air*, set in Yellowknife and the North, the sense of place and her characters' relationship to it is particularly intense. Sometimes readers talk about a novel's setting as if it were a character in itself. Do you think



that is the case in *Late Nights on Air*? What descriptions of place, in Yellowknife or on the canoe trip into the Arctic wilderness, have stayed with you most? How does the sense of place work to underscore and echo the characters and their situations or to contrast with them?

3. In *Late Nights on Air*, fictional characters interact with a real, contemporary person, Judge Thomas Berger. Although they only interact with him minimally and formally, Berger and his commission are important components in the novel. Discuss Berger's approach and personality, the ways in which it informs the Inquiry, and the place of the man and the Inquiry in *Late Nights on Air*.

4. *Late Nights on Air* begins with Harry falling in love with the sound of Dido's voice. In the novel, Gwen finds her radio voice — both in the sense of finding an attractive physical voice and in the sense of expressing her own personality. Voice and sound in general are natural preoccupations for people who work in radio, and the novel pays consistent attention to them, from Gwen's fascination with sound effects to the voices of the announcers (in English and Dogrib), and the many descriptions of natural sounds and music. Discuss some of the ways Elizabeth Hay uses voice to characterize her men and women, and to highlight her larger themes.

5. Elizabeth Hay says in her acknowledgements that the story of the adventurer John Hornby was always at the back of this book. A fascination with Hornby and Edgar Christian is one of the things Gwen and Harry have in common, and the explorers' cabin is the destination of the canoe trip that takes Harry and Gwen, Eleanor and Ralph into the wilderness, where their lives will change forever. Does Hornby's story of a quixotic and doomed exploration connect with, and perhaps comment on, the story of the modern characters — and if so, in what ways?

6. One of the most sophisticated elements in an Elizabeth Hay novel is the fact that her flawed characters don't find any conversion or easy resolution: Dido, for example, cannot bear criticism, and Harry, a veteran radio man, can't separate his



personal failure in television from the medium in general. Problems don't get neatly wrapped up in *Late Nights on Air*, and the characters, though changed, in many ways end as imperfect as they began. Discuss some of the things that the characters have learned in the end — about each other and about themselves. Discuss some of the situations or personalities that never get “fixed,” and the particular flavour this gives the book.

7. Harry's relationship with Dido is never really fulfilled, but Harry's yearning remains largely undiminished. What do you think the author is saying about human beings in general?

8. Just before he died, Eleanor's father was reading her the French story of “*la fille qui était laide*” — a girl so ugly that she hid herself in the forest where the fresh air, sun, and wind made her beautiful. The narrator tells us that, in the summer of 1975, a version of that story would unfold. The theme of this kind of transformation has been seen before in an Elizabeth Hay novel (*A Student of Weather*). Who is the transformed woman in *Late Nights on Air* — or should it be “women”? How does it happen?

9. Discuss Dido and her personality, and how she powerfully affects each of the characters — Harry, Gwen, Eleanor, Eddy. To what extent is she affected by her past? Where does her power really lie? Is she, in fact, as confident and strong as she seems?

10. There are frequent instances of foreshadowing in *Late Nights on Air*. The narrator writes, for example, about three unfortunate things that would happen to Harry in the coming winter, and in another place that “the events of the following summer would make these pictures of Ralph's almost unbearably moving.” The reader is regularly pulled into the characters' futures, but without knowing the details. In what way does foreshadowing function in the novel? How does it affect your reading experience?



11. Eleanor, who is reading William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, has a religious awakening in the course of the book. Most of the other characters don't share her connection with institutionalized religion, but there is a strong undercurrent of spirituality in the book, felt differently by different characters. Discuss the varieties of religious or spiritual experience you find in the book.

12. There is an elegiac tone in *Late Nights on Air*, and a sense that an older, more human way of life is disappearing, as radio gives way to television and as the traditional ways of the North are threatened by the pipeline and, more generally, by the South. Where are the shades of grey in the conflict between old ways and "progress"? Does the novel give you a sense of where the novelist stands on this?

13. John Hornby's biographer, George Whalley, tells Gwen that both he and his subject approach life "'crabwise,' meaning sideways and backwards rather than head-on." Harry likes this idea of "a wandering route notable for its 'digressions and divagations'.... A route of the soul, perhaps." Does "crabwise," in the sense Hay is using the term, suggest something of the structure chosen for *Late Nights on Air*? In what way does this approach reflect the characters' yearnings and the way they are able to express themselves? Is this true of human beings in general?

14. "Gwen found herself thinking about the vulnerable rivers and birds and plants and animals and old ways of life." She learns, for example, that an oil spill, in turning the ice black, ruins its reflective power so that it absorbs light and melts, thus changing the environment. At one of its deepest levels, this is a book about ecology, about the fragile interdependence of people, animals and their environment. Discuss the ways this plays out in *Late Nights on Air*.

15. In addition to its rewards, the canoe trip taken by Harry, Eleanor, Gwen, and Ralph has its share of ordeals, including Harry and Eleanor getting lost, Gwen's encounter with a bear, and Ralph's fate. Discuss the various ways in which the characters are de-stabilized and reoriented in the course of the trip, and how the trip impacts upon their lives later.



16. Dido is so different in her relationship with Harry than she is with Eddy. What is it about the two men — and what is it about Dido — that cause such different responses?

17. This is a book where couples are often frustrated and love is not reciprocated or is cut off too soon — Harry and Dido, Dido and Eddy (a relationship that endures but on unknown terms), Eleanor and Ralph. Perhaps unexpectedly, an unconventional couple comes together at the end of the book. Were you surprised? Are there hints throughout the book? Does it work for you?

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

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