

THE
D O G S
of
B A B E L
A novel by
CAROLYN PARKHURST

A Reading Group Guide

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR OF

THE DOGS *of* BABEL

Carolyn Parkhurst talks with Jay MacDonald, writer for BookPage.

Linguistics professor Paul Iverson's life is turned upside down when the body of his young wife, Lexy, is found beneath their backyard apple tree. Did she fall or did she jump? Only Lorelei, family dog and sole witness to the tragedy, knows for sure. And she's not talking. Yet.

Carolyn Parkhurst's inventive debut novel, *The Dogs of Babel*, traces the bereaved widower's sometimes bizarre, sometimes touching efforts to teach the King's English to his baffled canine in a desperate attempt to solve the mystery of his wife's death.

In its theme, plot, and occasional uncomfortably gruesome detail, *The Dogs of Babel* bears some similarity to last year's most audacious exploration of grief, *The Lovely Bones*. One might even call this *The Lovely Dog Bones*.

"There's a real issue of getting readers to suspend their belief when your premise is a man who is trying to teach his dog to talk. That might be a hard thing for readers to buy," Parkhurst admits by phone from her home in Washington, D.C. "My hope is that, as you learn more about Paul and what he's like, it's believable that he might follow this unlikely course."

Paul has reason to suspect suicide: Lexy apparently cooked a steak for the dog not long before inexplicably climbing the tree. Later, Paul's bookshelf is rearranged in an apparent rebus from beyond the pale, and Lexy's voice turns up on a television ad for a psychic hotline, desperately seeking succor.

"The book is narrated by Paul, so everything we learn about Lexy is filtered through his perception of her," Parkhurst explains.

Reading Group Guide

“In the beginning, he’s in this state of fresh grief and he so idealizes her that we don’t really get an accurate picture until a little later in the book, when we start to see some of the more troubling aspects of her personality and both the good and bad parts of their relationship. It begs the question: How well do we ever know another person, and when that person is gone, how do we piece together what they were really like?”

Paul’s journey is a perilous one. As an academic, he seeks scientific answers, even as his research with Lorelei makes him the biggest joke on campus. More troubling, his quest leads him to a group of nutcases called the Cerberus Society who attempt to make dogs talk by altering their anatomy through grisly amateur surgery.

That grim detour was particularly difficult for Parkhurst, who lost her own dog Chelsea midway through the two-year process of writing the book.

“The only reason I put it in there is it’s almost the logical extreme of what might happen if you took Paul’s ideas all the way, if you put them in the hands of someone who was truly crazy instead of just off balance with grief. I hope people don’t get too upset by that,” she says.

Lexy’s avocation as a mask maker serves as a leitmotif throughout the tale. On their first date, Lexy drags Paul to a masquerade wedding; later, she develops a morbid fascination with death when she is hired to make masks of the recently deceased.

“I collect masks and find them very interesting,” Parkhurst admits. “It works well with Paul thinking about Lexy after she’s gone and wondering how much of the time she was wearing a mask and how much of the time she was revealing her true self.”

Parkhurst, who holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction from American University, had written only short stories before

Reading Group Guide

jumping into the novel. Her own fear of losing loved ones, which sparked the central story, was heightened when she became pregnant with her first child midway into the manuscript.

“I had a lot of fears about becoming a parent, which I think is normal,” she recalls. “You start to say, am I really allowed to do this? Am I going to screw up this kid in some way I can’t even imagine yet? I took those feelings and amplified them in Lexy.”

Some of the book’s more fruitful ideas came to the author while she was goofing off.

“I actually find procrastination to be a fairly useful tool for me,” she chuckles. “For instance, the phone psychic. I was supposed to be writing one day and I wasn’t, I was watching the Game Show Network or something, and there was this ad for a telephone psychic with all these voices on the commercial telling the psychic their problems. And I thought, what if Paul was watching this and out came Lexy’s voice?”

The idea of teaching dogs to talk came from a tongue-in-cheek fictional account of such “pioneering research” that Parkhurst had written years earlier.

“I think every dog owner has wondered, what is my dog thinking? What do they make of what they observe about my life? I wish it were true that we could talk and find out what they’re thinking, but I don’t think it’s ever going to happen,” Parkhurst says.

By book’s end, Paul does establish a communication of sorts with Lorelei that allows him to get on with his life. It’s an uplifting ending that draws unmistakable parallels between his feelings for Lexy and the unconditional love of man’s best friend.

“I think Paul’s love for Lexy is a little bit less complicated than Lexy’s love for Paul, in the same way that you feel like a dog’s love for you is uncomplicated; they will love you no

Reading Group Guide

matter what. There certainly is an element of that in Paul's feelings for Lexy, but part of his struggle is coming to terms with all of the parts of her personality. There is great richness that she brought to his life, but there were also some very difficult times that he had with her. He's trying to figure out how to put it all together."

The complete text of Jay MacDonald's article on Carolyn Parkhurst and The Dogs of Babel originally appeared in the June 2003 issue of BookPage. Reprinted with permission.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Paul is a college professor and, by all accounts, a rational man, but he truly seems to believe he can teach his dog, Lorelei, to talk. What has led him to this turnaround in his life? Is he simply crazy with grief, or is there a way in which his off-balance actions make sense?
2. Paul and Lexy seem to be a perfect illustration of the phrase “opposites attract.” What has drawn them to each other? What is it about Paul that Lexy finds endearing? And why is Paul so intrigued by Lexy, even after signs of her darker side have started to emerge?
3. What kind of clues does Paul find to suggest that there’s more to Lexy’s death than first appears? Do you think Lexy deliberately left him a puzzle to put together? Or is he so desperate for answers that he’s finding meaning where there isn’t any?
4. Why do you think Lexy becomes fascinated with death masks? What effect does it have on her to work on such a somber project? Do you think it’s a morbid pursuit, as Paul believes, or is it a positive way of memorializing the dead and comforting the living, as Lexy argues?
5. Lexy creates a death mask for a young girl named Jennifer, who committed suicide. Why do Jennifer’s parents reject the first mask Lexy makes? What kind of significance does the mask take on for Lexy? What do you think might have been in Jennifer’s diary?
6. Paul’s obsession with the Cerberus Society leads him and Lorelei into a dangerous situation. Why is he so fascinated with this strange group? Is he responsible for Lorelei’s abduction?

Reading Group Guide

7. What do you make of the incident with Blue Mary in New Orleans? Why does Lexy want so much to believe that she's seen a ghost? Why do you think her disappointment at discovering she didn't see Blue Mary takes the form it does?
8. Lexy faithfully records her dreams in a dream journal. After her death, Paul hunts through this book, searching desperately for answers. What role do dreams play in the novel? Do you think they offer a window into a person's psyche? How do Paul's dreams about Lexy reflect how his own grieving process progresses?
9. In what ways does the Tam Lin poem mirror Paul and Lexy's relationship? Which character do you think is most like Tam Lin? Who is most like Janet? Why does Lexy call Paul her "finest knight"? Do you think he could have saved her?
10. Do you believe Lexy when she says that "suicide is just a moment"? Do you think she would have killed herself if she hadn't become pregnant?
11. What role does the phone psychic, Lady Arabelle, play in Paul's quest for answers? Does she shed any light on the events that led to Lexy's death?
12. Do you like Lexy? Do you have compassion for the pain she feels, or are you annoyed by the ways she lashes out? What about Paul – is he a good husband or an oblivious one? Is there any point at which this troubled marriage could have taken a different direction?

CAROLYN PARKHURST'S SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood: This astute and beautifully written novel looks at the forgotten treacheries and betrayals of childhood, as well as their long-reaching consequences.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler by Italo Calvino: This is a book, above all, about the pleasures of reading. Calvino leads the reader through a whirlwind tour of all the different novels he hasn't quite written, and it's a mind-boggling but thoroughly enjoyable journey.

The Palace Thief by Ethan Canin: Each of the four novellas in this collection is the perfect length to read in a single sitting, and each one will transport you to a place you didn't even know you wanted to go.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay by Michael Chabon: The sheer breadth of this book is stunning – how does Michael Chabon fit so much into a single novel and weave it together so seamlessly? The characters are so utterly human, and their problems so real and heartbreaking, that I loved every page.

The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides: The voice Eugenides uses to tell this hypnotic and heartbreaking story is so compelling that I was hooked from the very first sentence. The story is narrated in the first-person plural by the group of teenage boys who lived alongside the five mysterious Lisbon sisters and watched as, one by one, they killed themselves. But the incredible thing is that the story is never morbid; it's an amazingly evocative look at youth, with all its yearning and despair. I love this book more than I can say.

Reading Group Guide

The Autumn of the Patriarch by Gabriel García Márquez: Written in an intricately swirling style – be prepared for sentences that last for pages – this story of a tyrannical dictator in decline is a wonder.

The Unconsoled by Kazuo Ishiguro: This book captures, better than anything I've ever read, what it feels like to be in the middle of a dream. Things don't always make sense, but they have their own internal logic. Ishiguro also wrote *The Remains of the Day*, which I loved as well, but it's hard to imagine two more different books being written by the same author.

Shopgirl by Steve Martin: This slim, sweet novel is so unexpected. It's funny in parts, as you'd expect from Steve Martin, but it's pervaded by a bittersweet poignancy that took me completely by surprise.

Martha Peake by Patrick McGrath: Patrick McGrath is a master of contemporary Gothic fiction, but in this novel he broadens his lens to include the seedy side of eighteenth-century London and the American Revolution.

Jazz by Toni Morrison: Morrison's prose is as fluid and dazzling as ever, and her characters are as fully formed as any real people I've ever met, but the thing I love about this book is the story she tells: a Jazz Age love triangle that leads to murder.

Mama Day by Gloria Naylor: This wonderful book about the often mysterious inhabitants of a fictitious island off the coast of Georgia is infused with a dark sense of magic. I reread this book every few years, and I love it every time.

Reading Group Guide

Slaughterhouse Five by Kurt Vonnegut: This was my favorite book in high school, and I'm still blown away by it. Funny and haunting, it's undoubtedly a masterpiece, but it's one of the weirdest masterpieces I've ever read.

The Passion by Jeanette Winterson: I love the touches of the fantastic that Winterson uses in her books. This one involves the web-footed daughter of a Venetian gondolier and Napoleon Bonaparte's chef.

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf: I first read this book in college, and it was a revelation to see the way the internal lives of ordinary people could make such a compelling story. It taught me, as a writer, that interior action can be just as intriguing as external action.

NOW IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

Hunger

A novel by Elise Blackwell

“An exquisite little book. . . . A compact embarrassment of riches. . . . Blackwell craftily weaves history and botany through this utterly devourable narrative.”

– Mark Rozzo, *Los Angeles Times*

When the Messenger Is Hot

Stories by Elizabeth Crane

“Crane has a distinctive and eccentric voice that is consistent and riveting from the first story to the last, and *When the Messenger Is Hot* expresses a remarkably strong and coherent artistic vision.”

– Jennifer Reese, *New York Times Book Review*

A Winter Marriage

A novel by Kerry Hardie

“A fine accomplishment – timeless in character, un beholden to any fashion. . . . Thanks to Hardie’s psychological acuity, fresh phrasing, and acerbic sense of both gloom and comedy, *A Winter Marriage* is a spellbinder.”

– Michael Upchurch, *Seattle Times*



BACK BAY BOOKS

Available wherever books are sold

NOW IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

The Lovely Bones

A novel by Alice Sebold

“Mesmerizing. . . *The Lovely Bones* takes the stuff of neighborhood tragedy – the unexplained disappearance of a child, the shattered family alone with its grief – and turns it into literature.”
– Katherine Bouton, *New York Times Book Review*

The Fig Eater

A novel by Jody Shields

“Suspenseful. . . In turning Dora’s story into a murder mystery, Ms. Shields has managed to write a gripping psychological thriller while capturing the nervous mood of fin-de-siècle Vienna, a city preoccupied, like one of its most famous residents, with sex and death.”
– Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

All He Ever Wanted

A novel by Anita Shreve

“There’s something addictive about Shreve’s literary tales of love and lust. . . She is a master at depicting passion’s ferocious grip.”
– Jocelyn McClurg, *USA Today*



BACK BAY BOOKS

Available wherever books are sold