

Breathing into Marble

Laura Sintija Cerniauskaite

Reading Group Guide

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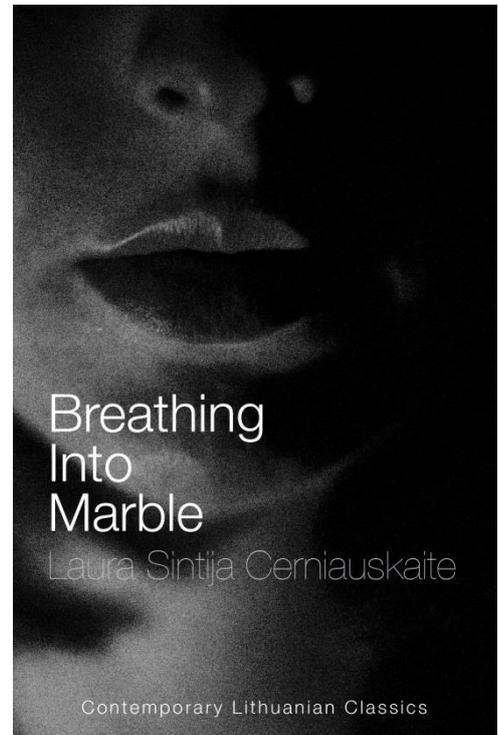
Introduction

The book that you are reading is somewhat unique. It is the only novel by a living Lithuanian writer currently in translation in English. That in itself makes it interesting enough, however the story and the poetic style in which it is told are of greater value.

When Isabel decides to adopt the troubled young orphan, Ilya, she has no idea of the trauma that is about to be unleashed upon her family. Taking him back home to their cottage in the country, his dark presence unsettles the family and resurrects the ghosts of Isabel's past.

Breathing into Marble is a dark and poetic story of love, family, deception and death.

It won the 2009 EU Prize for Literature.



Key questions

Where is Lithuania?

What is the Lithuanian language like? Is it similar to Russian?

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About the Author

Laura Sintija Cerniauskaite is a leading figure in contemporary Lithuanian writing. Born in Vilnius in 1973 she was 15 when Lithuania gained independence. She was almost immediately successful, when, at the age of 17, she won the First Book Award. Since then she has gone on to win many awards in Lithuania. Her books have been translated into a number of other languages. 'Breathing into Marble' won the EU Prize for Literature in 2009. It is now being turned into a film in her native Lithuania.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with an act of sexual aggression between a child and an adult. This is a theme that runs throughout the novel, being reflected in Isabel's back story and, it seems to be intimated, in the relationship between Ilya and Isabel. What do you think the novel is saying about sexual abuse?
2. What role has art to play in the novel?
3. The death of her son leads Isabel to have a breakdown. Do you think the depiction of the deterioration of Isabel's mental health is realistic and sympathetically done?
4. Discuss the exploration of a woman's response to her husband's unfaithfulness. Do you think it is written believably? Do you think there is a cultural difference in these matters between Lithuanian and English society?
5. How do you feel the character of Ilya is represented? Is he more abused than abuser?
6. At one point the former head teacher of the Children's Home criticises her successor for sticking to the rules. What do you think this says about Lithuanian society?
7. In the novel Cerniauskaite depicts an adoption system that fails both parents and children. Do you think the novel accurately portrays the difficulties and joys of adoption?
8. Art seems to play a key role in redeeming Isabel towards the end of the novel. What do you think of the way the writer uses art to bring healing?
9. Isabel has a close relationship with the natural world, and often seeks solace in it. Discuss the role of nature in the novel.
10. At the heart of the novel is the mother's reaction to the death of her son. How did you feel the novel dealt with the processes of grieving?
11. The non-ethnic Lithuanians in the novel, Ilya, who has a Russian name, and the gypsy prostitute both depict the darker side of Lithuanian society. Do you think that this depiction has hints of racism, or alludes to a society that marginalises 'the other'?
12. Do you feel the ending is satisfying?
13. Does the novel read like a translation? Should a translator be worried more about accuracy of translation or making sure that it reads well in English?
14. Is the world depicted in *Breathing into Marble* a familiar one or exotically Eastern European?

An interview with the author

When did you first decide that you wanted to be a writer?

I think I have always been a writer. I don't remember deciding to become a writer at any particular moment; I simply discovered I had the potential to be one. I started writing when I was young because I enjoyed it. I was 17 when I first stepped into the Writer's Union, in the wonderful palace of Duke Oginskis, carrying the first copy of my book to the publishers. Those four short stories were written in school during math and science lessons; I wasn't a particularly zealous student. I remember that as I put my hand on the banister rail of the stairs, such a strong feeling washed over me that I would be a part of that building for rest of my life. That moment, I felt, was a defining moment in my life. And so it turned out; the book won the First Book Award organised by the Writers' Union and was published. That was how I became a writer.

How would you summarise the novel *Breathing into Marble*?

It is the tragic, poetic story of a family. There is everything in the novel: love, betrayal, childhood illness, unsuccessful attempts at adoption, alcoholism, abuse, murder, the inner conflict of a female artist. While writing it I was driven by the desire to raise these terrible problems to the level of poetry, to look at them with a purity of vision, as if through clean glass. I think that's why they call me an optimistic writer.

The relationship between Isabel and Ilya is a complicated one, and quite twisted.

I wouldn't agree that the relationship between Isabel and Ilya is twisted. It's certainly complicated. Isabel is not ready to break through the obstacles to love; her lack of success with Ilya only emphasises her own problems, the most important of which is that she has been crippled by her parents and doesn't know how to love. She needs to be loved. After the murder, she lets Ilya go and covers for him because she feels she is responsible for what he has done. She feels that she provoked him because she abandoned him. I tried to write a story of a woman growing into maturity when one tragic loss after another devastate her and break her down. From the ruins of her soul emerges a new, more mature person.

You deal with some very dark issues in the novel – are these issues that contemporary Lithuanians are struggling with?

In recent years a lot of attention has been given to the issue of adoption in Lithuania; people have been encouraged to adopt or foster the children left in orphanages. The media only cover the positive experiences, but I know that there are sad experiences too, when parents change their minds and return the children. When I was writing an article about this topic, I happened to talk to a social worker who dealt with preparing parents for adoption. I was shocked by her stories of some people's irresponsibility. Specialists prepare parents for the 'shock' of adoption now in order to reduce the number of cases of children being returned to orphanages.

The issue that is most acute in contemporary Lithuania is the problem of suicide; here, as a country, we have, unfortunately, the highest rates of suicide in Europe. Also, statistically, it's clear that half of marriages end in divorce here.

So, where is Lithuania?

Lithuania is the lowest of the three Baltic States. It has a beautiful coast line along the Baltic Sea in the West, while in the East it borders Belarus. Its Southern neighbour, Poland has shared a common history with Lithuania; for around two hundred years the two nations formed a powerful commonwealth that dominated central and Eastern Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries.



In the 18th century the commonwealth collapsed and Lithuania fell under the control of Tsarist Russia and did not regain its independence until 1918.

Interesting fact:

You can tell a Lithuanian's gender and marital status from their name. Whilst most male surnames end in 'as' or 'us', female surnames differ depending on whether you are single or married. The woman takes the husband's name but changes the ending to 'iene', whilst a single woman takes her father's name but changes the ending to aitė, ytė or utė. Both the writer, Černiauskaitė and the translator Marcinkutė have retained their unmarried maiden names.

From 1918 until the Second World War, Lithuania flourished once more as an independent nation. However, in 1939, Russia manipulated its membership into the Soviet Union. The Second World War saw Lithuania occupied first by the Soviet army, then the Germans, and then once more by the Soviet Union. During the war Lithuania's large Jewish population was annihilated, often with the enthusiastic collaboration of local Lithuanians. After the war many Lithuanians were deported to camps in Siberia. Lithuania suffered 45 years of brutal oppression before once more gaining independence in 1991.

The Lithuanian Language

Lithuanian is the native language of the Lithuanian people. Today it is spoken by roughly 3 million people. It is a remarkably conservative language retaining many archaic features found only in ancient languages like Sanskrit and ancient Greek. For this reason it is studied by linguists attempting to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European. It was once said that a Sanskrit scholar could talk to a Lithuanian peasant and understand each other. Though this is an exaggeration, Lithuanian has retained Sanskrit vocabulary. Its only neighbour, language-wise, is Latvian; the two are similar in the manner Spanish and Portuguese are.

Some key Lithuanian

*Labas - Hello
Ačiū - Thank you
Kaip sekasi? - How are you?
Mano vardas - my name is*

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