

About the book...



A captivating novel about the woman who chaperoned an irreverent Louise Brooks to New York City in 1922, and the summer that would change them both.

Only a few years before becoming a famous actress and an icon for her generation, a fifteen-year-old Louise Brooks leaves Wichita to make it big in New York. Much to her annoyance, she is accompanied by a thirty-six-year-old chaperone who is neither mother nor friend. Cora Carlisle is a complicated but traditional woman with her own reasons for making the trip. She has no idea what she's in for: Young Louise, already stunningly beautiful and sporting her famous blunt bangs and black bob, is known for her arrogance and her lack of respect for convention. Ultimately, the five weeks they spend together will change their lives forever.

For Cora, New York holds the promise of discovery that might prove an answer to the question at the center of her being, and even as she does her best to watch over Louise in a strange and bustling city, she embarks on her own mission. And while what she finds isn't what she anticipated, it liberates her in a way she could not have imagined. Over the course of the summer, Cora's eyes are opened to the promise of the twentieth century and a new understanding of the possibilities for being fully alive.

About the author...



Laura Moriarty received her master's degree from the University of Kansas and was awarded the George Bennett Fellowship for Creative Writing at Phillips Exeter Academy. The author of [The Center of Everything](#), [The Rest of Her Life](#), and [While I'm Falling](#), she lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Curtis Sittenfeld interviews Laura Moriarty

Curtis Sittenfeld is the author of the bestselling novels [American Wife](#), [Prep](#), and [The Man of My Dreams](#), which have been translated into twenty-five languages. Here she talks with novelist Laura Moriarty about her experiences writing **The Chaperone**.

Curtis Sittenfeld: You tell the story of two characters whose trajectories overlap --- Louise Brooks before she becomes famous, and quietly complicated housewife Cora Carlisle, who serves as 15-year-old Louise's chaperone in New York in the fateful summer of 1922.

Did you always know they belonged in a book together, or did you decide to write about one of them first?

Laura Moriarty: I always found Louise Brooks interesting. She was an icon of the silent-film era, and I knew she'd grown up in Kansas, and that she was smart and rebellious and sharp-tongued. But it wasn't until I learned that she'd first gone to New York as a teenager with a 36-year-old chaperone that I saw a story I wanted to write. I'm drawn to intergenerational tension, and it must have been strong in the 1920s: I wondered how Louise's generation of flappers appeared to the women who came of age at the beginning of the century --- wearing corsets, long skirts, and high collars. This older generation of women had campaigned for suffrage and prohibition of alcohol; they must have been bewildered by the very different values and sensibilities of their daughters. I liked the idea of a chaperone, someone thrown into this dynamic all at once.

CS: Were you a fan of Louise Brooks specifically, or of movies from the 1920s and 1930s generally, or were you exploring an art form unfamiliar to you when you started writing this novel?

LM: I wasn't that familiar with silent films. I didn't know, for example, how hugely popular silent films were in the 1920s, how people would go to the movies

several times a week. While I was writing the book, I went to see Louise Brooks's most famous film, *Pandora's Box*, at the Tivoli in Kansas City, and it was a lovely experience. You can watch old silent films on DVD or even on YouTube, but it was a different feeling watching her up on the big screen, seeing the film the way people saw it all those years ago.

CS: You've clearly done a lot of research. What form did your research take? Were there discoveries you made --- about Brooks, or the early twentieth century, or Wichita --- that particularly captured your imagination? Was there any incredibly juicy details you came across that just didn't belong in the book?

LM: One of the first things I did, and maybe the most important, was drive down to Wichita and walk around Union Station, where Louise and her chaperone disembarked for New York in 1922. It's boarded up now, but just seeing the physical place helped me see the story and the journey as real. I read Louise's autobiography and Barry Paris's biography of her. I read oral histories of Manhattan in the '20s, and I read travel guides from that era as well. I spent a lot of time learning about 1920s fashion, not just what flappers were wearing, but what most women were wearing, what men were wearing. Overall I learned a lot of details about 1920s clothes, cars, kitchen appliances, and food. I had a character eating peanut butter in one scene until I learned that peanut butter

wasn't commercially packaged and sold until 1924. But the biggest challenge was probably getting into the psychology of someone living in that era --- to know her values, and how she saw the world.

Here's an interesting bit about Louise that didn't get in the book: After she became famous, she and some friends were dining in a restaurant in Europe; she was bored, and she spotted a man she'd been friendly with, and she asked the waiter to summon him. The man didn't come over right away because he was with a woman, and he didn't want to be rude. When he finally did go over to Louise's table, apologizing and explaining his delay, she picked up a bouquet of roses and sliced him across the face with it, the thorns actually cutting his skin so his face was dripping blood. This story, to me, says a lot about the dark side of Louise's personality. Yes, she was beautiful and intelligent, and she could be very funny, but obviously there was a deep insecurity there, a real destructive rage and immaturity. I couldn't work that scene into the book, but I knew what it told me about Louise, and I thought about it when I was writing her scenes with Cora.

CS: One of your characters was part of the Orphan Train, which placed children with midwestern families (who also happened to be strangers!). Is her experience based on that of anyone real, or is it more of an amalgamation?

LM: The thing that got me about the Orphan Trains was that the experiences were so varied. Some of the kids went from neglect and hunger in New York to loving farm families who couldn't wait to fatten them up, who gave them medical care, an education, affection. And some of the kids became the victims of terrible cruelty, and more hunger, and more neglect -- it all depended on who adopted them off of the train. Because the experiences of the children were so varied, I wouldn't say this character's experience is an amalgamation, though she isn't based on any one real person either. Her story is just what could have happened to a child, and what probably did happen to many of them.

CS: Like Cora, you yourself live in Kansas, and you've set earlier fiction there. What do you like about writing and living in a place that's not considered a literary hotbed? (Admittedly, I ask this as someone who lives in nearby Missouri!)

LM: I love my town, Lawrence, Kansas, so I'm glad I get to live here. I've never felt that wanting to write required me to live in New York. There are so many great authors living there, of course, but I can get their books here, or I can read their stories online or in journals. And there's a great community of writers right here in my town. I teach creative writing at the University of Kansas, and I have creative colleagues and thoughtful graduate students, and I have a writing

group I meet with almost every week. I suppose it's a little humbling to write from Kansas. I know I'm not at the literary center of the universe. But that might not be a bad thing.

CS: I want to ask you a variation of a question I've been asked. I wrote a novel, *American Wife*, that borrowed from the life of a real person --- Laura Bush --- but I changed her name. You've written about a real person --- Louise Brooks --- and used her real name, but she's no longer living. Do you feel any moral qualms about portraying a real person saying and doing things that you've made up?

LM: I was so excited about this book when I started it that I didn't have a lot of moral qualms. But the more I read about Louise and the more I wrote about her, the more I started to really care for her, and I did worry about getting her right, portraying her in a way that was accurate. I tried to keep my depiction true to what I learned from her autobiography and biographies about her. It's impossible to know what she'd think of my portrayal, but I hope she would approve. In any case, I don't think Louise Brooks ever lost too much sleep over what other people thought of her.

CS: Your descriptions of Cora wearing a corset are incredibly convincing. Did you --- for the sake of research, of course --- ever try one on yourself?

LM: I don't think I've ever tried on a corset, though a certain bridesmaid's dress did require a torturous bustier that will stay forever burned in my sensory memory.

Reviews

Booklist

Moriarty elegantly dovetails the stories of two vastly different women poised on the brink of self-discovery. When an immensely talented Louise Brooks—destined to become the toast of Hollywood—is accepted into a five-week summer course at the prestigious Dennishawn School of Dance in New York City, all the prematurely worldly 15-year-old needs is a suitable chaperone. After all, in 1922 even girls as advanced as Louise need to present a veneer of propriety. The unlikely candidate turns out to be Cora Carlise, a highly regarded and extremely respectable Wichita matron. Although it initially appears that empty-nester Cora merely longs for an exciting change of scenery from her staid, middle-class life in Kansas, it soon becomes clear that she has a hidden agenda of her own. As Cora clashes with her headstrong charge, the

heartrending truth about both her childhood and her marriage is revealed. Despite her irreverent and deliberately provocative attitude, Louise, too, harbors tragic secrets of her own. A book-club favorite (*The Center of Everything*, 2003, and *The Rest of Her Life*, 2007), the always engrossing Moriarty has combined real-life and fictional characters to great effect as both Cora and Louise end up defying the conventional expectations of the era with mixed results.

Library Journal/**Starred Review**/

With her bobbed black hair and strikingly red lipstick, Louise Brooks was a femme fatale in early Hollywood movies. In this latest novel from Moriarty (*The Center of Everything*), a teenage Louise heads to New York City in 1922 from her home in Wichita, chaperoned by proper Kansas matron Cora Carlisle. Once in New York, Louise is accepted by the renowned Denishawn School of Dancing and is on her way to fame. An innocent young adult she is not □hard as nails, she is both self-promoting and self-destructive. The real story here, however, is about Cora, a kind soul despite the shocks she has endured at several crucial times in her life. Cora's visit to New York gives her a new perspective

and changes her life in unexpected ways. The novel, which spans the next six decades of Cora's life, also reminds us how dramatically American life changed over the 20th century. VERDICT Moriarty is a wonderful storyteller; it's hard to put this engaging novel down. Fans of the Jazz Age and sweeping historical fiction will likely feel the same way.

Kirkus Reviews

In Kansas-native Moriarty's fourth novel (*While I'm Falling*, 2009, etc.), she imagines the life of the actual Wichita matron who accompanied future silent film star Louise Brooks to New York City in 1922 as a favor to Brooks' parents. Although Louise Brooks was a larger-than-life personality whose memoir *LuLu in Hollywood* is held in high critical esteem, she's given short shrift by Moriarty, whose interest lies in Cora Carlisle. In 1922, 36-year-old Cora faces an empty nest as her twin sons prepare for college. Her lawyer husband, Alan, 12 years her senior, is a wonderful father and a good man, but their marriage is a sexless sham. She has grudgingly accepted and kept secret his (lifelong) homosexual love affair. So Alan is in no position to stop her when she announces that she is escorting

Myra Brooks' 15-year-old daughter to New York City, where the girl has enrolled in dance school. He knows Cora's real reason for going east. She lived in a Catholic orphanage in Manhattan until she was 7, then was sent to Kansas, where she was raised by a loving farm couple. Now she yearns to learn about her parentage. Louise, precociously sexual as well as beautiful and brainy (Schopenhauer is her favorite author), is a difficult, unlikable charge, but Cora finds time in New York to seek out information. Joseph, the janitor at the orphanage, helps Cora in her research while introducing her to the passion her marriage never offered. With Louise on the road to stardom, Cora returns to Wichita with Joseph, claiming he is her brother--a charade Alan agrees to maintain. Cora seems to represent the history of women's rights in the 20th century. An early suffragette, she applauds the end of prohibition and champions birth control and racial equality. She also gives Louise good advice during a rocky period in her career. Unlike the too-infrequently-seen Louise, the fictional characters seem less alive or important than the issues they represent.

Publishers Weekly

Moriarty (*While I'm Falling*) skims the surface of 1920s life in Wichita, Kans., where homosexuality, contraception, and being just about anything other than white and Protestant is considered a moral offence. In the summer of 1922, prim, married Cora Carlisle chaperones a young Louise Brooks, the silent film star, to New York. Cora keeps mum about her own childhood journey from the New York Home for Friendless Girls to a new life with an adopted family in Kansas, because she intends to search for her birth mother once she and Louise arrive. What follows the trip for Louise is history: film stardom until the advent of sound. What follows for Cora is at first a letdown for the reader, and then highly dubious, given her naïve and conservative nature. Though what happens in New York gives Cora a new moral order, for the rest of her life she keeps it, too, a secret. The novel, which in its final stretch races to 1982, attempts to portray Cora as a heroine buffeted by the bigotry and priggishness of the Jazz Age, but glosses over events and neglects the inner lives of many of its characters.

Discussion questions

1. *The Chaperone* opens with Cora Carlisle waiting out a rainstorm in a car with a friend when she hears about Louise Brooks for the first time. What do we learn about Cora in this scene? What does it tell us about her and the world she lives in? Why does Laura Moriarty, the author, choose to open the novel this way? Why do you think she waits to introduce us to Brooks?

2. When we first meet Louise Brooks, she seems to be the complete opposite of Cora, but the two women form an unlikely bond anyway. Are they really so dissimilar? What does Cora learn from Louise? Do you think Louise learns anything from Cora?

3. When Cora arrives in New York, the city is worlds away from her life in Wichita. How much do you think Cora actually embraces New York? When she returns to Wichita, what does she bring back with her from New York? What parts of her stayed true to Wichita all along?

4. The limits of acceptable behavior for women were rapidly changing in the 1920s, and both Cora Carlisle and Louise Brooks, in their own ways, push against these boundaries. Discuss the different ways the two women try to change society's expectations for women. Is one more successful than the other? What are the values involved in each woman's approach?

- 5.** Cora becomes frustrated with the hypocrisy of the women in her Wichita circle of friends and yet she herself chooses to keep details about her own life secret. Do you think she should be more open about her life choices? What are the risks for her if she were to be more open?
- 6.** Cora Carlisle hopes to find the secret of her past in New York City but discovers that the truth doesn't align with either her expectations or her memory of the past. Why do you think Laura Moriarty has chosen to leave Cora's history ambiguous? What does this tell you about Cora? How has Cora's attitude toward her past changed by the end of *The Chaperone*?
- 7.** Cora narrates the events of the book from a perspective of many years later. What juxtapositions does this allow her? By placing Cora's narration at a time of radical social change, what parallels is Moriarty making?
- 8.** Think about Louise Brooks's behavior. How much of it would be considered scandalous today? What values has society held on to? In what ways has society changed?

Readalikes

[*Best Kept Secret*](#) by Jeffrey Archer (2013)

The third installment of the Clifton Chronicles series finds author Harry Clifton and his new bride, Elizabeth Barrington, building a new life for themselves and their two children, Sebastian and Jessica. While things certainly seem to be looking up, dark clouds soon appear on the horizon in the form of Elizabeth's brother Giles. He is under the spell of a woman who seems to have designs on the Barrington family fortune. As the plot thickens, Harry comes face-to-face with a new antagonist, Fisher, who bullied Harry during their schoolboy years and is now intent on spoiling Giles' political aspirations. This book brings the Clifton Chronicles from 1945 into the 1960s.

Clara Bow: Runnin' Wild by David Stenn (2000)

David Stenn traces the dramatic arc of silent movie legend Clara Bow's life and her meteoric rise and merciless fall from grace as Hollywood's first silver screen sex goddess. The winner of *Motion Picture* magazine's 1921 "Fame and Fortune" contest, the former Brooklyn tenement slum dweller was transformed into The It Girl, preeminent symbol of the Roaring Twenties woman of style, spirit, and independence. Stenn portrays a complex, troubled,

frightened girl from the lower classes who, despite her professional and personal triumphs, spent her life trying to escape a past that included not only poverty, but also a family history of alcoholism and mental illness. He asserts that Bow's looks, charisma, energy, and smoldering sexuality--all the attributes for success--paradoxically became the cause of her swift, devastating fall in a series of sexual scandals, abetted by studio exploitation and manipulation.

Glimpses of Paradise by James Scott Bell (2005)
Zee Miller, a minister's daughter, dreams of becoming a famous movie star. Her sweetheart, Doyle Lawrence, has had his life mapped out for him by his wealthy attorney father, who wants his son to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer. Then World War I breaks out and changes all of their carefully made plans. Doyle enters the military and is sent to France. Disillusioned by war, he no longer feels compelled to do what his father wishes. Taking to life on the road, Doyle drifts to Los Angeles. Coincidentally, Zee is also in Los Angeles attempting to break into the film industry. When she is arrested for murder, the childhood sweethearts find their lives colliding once again.

The Sandcastle Girls by Chris Bohjalian (2012)

Author Chris Bohjalian draws on his Armenian heritage to create a story about love, family, and secrets. In 1915, Mount Holyoke graduate Elizabeth Endicott travels with her father from Boston to Aleppo, Syria, to aid the victims of the Ottoman government's acts of violence. There the wealthy young American woman meets an Armenian engineer, Armen, whose wife and child have been killed in the massacre. When Elizabeth and Armen part, they continue their friendship through a series of letters. In 21st-century Pelham, New York, novelist Laura Petrosian learns of a photograph that supposedly depicts her grandmother. When she begins to investigate her family's history, Laura discovers Elizabeth's collection of letters from Armen and a shocking revelation from the past.

The Woman in the Picture by James Wilson (2007)

The novel is a fictionalized account of the life of filmmaker Henry Whitaker. Beginning in Germany in 1927, the narrative chronicles Whitaker's life at the beginning of his filmmaking career and his tutelage under the infamous Arthur Maxted. Entwined in the story is Henry's daughter, Miranda, and her search to find out what happened to her mother. She knows the two met in Germany and has always suspected Henry of playing a part in her mother's suicide. As she gets closer to the truth, faint glimpses of repressed

childhood memories lead Miranda to more complicated and surprising answers.



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