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The Life Before Her Eyes by Laura Kasischke

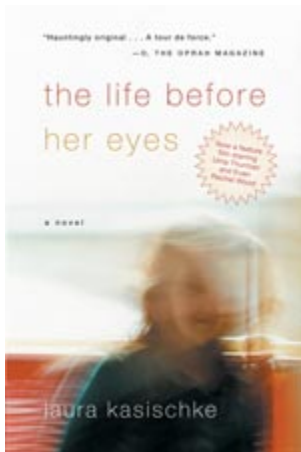
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The Life Before Her Eyes

Laura Kasischke

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About the book:



Diana stands before the mirror preening with her best friend, Maureen. Suddenly, a classmate enters holding a gun, and Diana sees her life dance before her eyes. In a moment the future she was just imagining—a doting wife and mother at the age of forty—is sealed by a horrific decision she is forced to make. In prose infused with the dramatically feminine sensuality of spring, we experience seventeen-year-old Diana's uncertain steps into womanhood—her awkward, heated forays into sex; her fresh, fragile construction of an identity. Together with the sights and sounds of renewal, we experience the tasks of Diana's adulthood: protecting her beloved daughter and holding onto her successful husband.

An acclaimed writer and poet, Laura Kasischke has crafted a consciousness that encompasses the truth of a teenager's world and the profound transformation of that world at midlife. Resonant and deeply stirring, *The Life Before Her Eyes* finds piercing beauty in the midst of a nightmare from long ago that echoes like a dirge beneath each new spring.

About the author:

Laura Kasischke is the author of two previous novels and three collections of poetry. Her numerous awards include the Alice Fay DiCastagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America and the Bobst Award for Emerging Writers. She lives in Chelsea, Michigan.

Discussion Questions:

Q. How did you react to Kasischke's alternating scenes from Diana McFee's fortieth summer with scenes from her high-school years? How does this technique contribute to our understanding of Diana's life, personality, and behavior? Why are apparent past events recounted in the present tense, and apparent present events in the past tense? What effect might this discrepancy of tenses have on our appreciation of Diana's stories?

Q. Why does the narrative turn so frequently to Mr. McCleod, Diana's high-school biology teacher? What is the significance of his appearance at the zoo on the day of Emma's school outing? What is the importance to each of us of what Mr. McCleod tries to impress on all his students—"the enormity, the complexity, of themselves"?

Q. "It is a moment in which a small good could triumph over a small evil," Kasischke writes of Mr. McCleod's not yet noticing the word SLUT written on his blackboard. "The world is always poised, waiting before such moments." Why do you agree or disagree with the possibility of small goods triumphing over small evils? How might we know that the world waits before such moments? What kind of small good might have prevented Michael Patrick's attack on his fellow students? What evils, small or large, occur in the novel for which there is neither explanation or identifiable source?

Q. What parts "of the dream of the life she'd someday have" contribute to the quality of the adult Diana's life, and what parts contribute a distinctly dreamlike quality to that life? Which elements and events seem part of a credible actual life, and which suggest that Diana's life is not what it appears to be? At what point in the story did you suspect that the adult Diana's life is a "dream" projected instantaneously into the future from a fear-filled Briar Hill High girl's room?

Q. Forty-year-old Diana's rush of feeling for her daughter, Emma, "had to do with the great, unexpected mercy of love." What do you think Kasischke means by the "mercy of love"? What other instances of the mercy of love occur in the novel, and how do they contribute to our understanding of the role of love in all our lives? What failures of love's mercy occur, and what is their significance?

Q. What does the novel indicate about the fragility and the tenuousness of life, even young life? In what ways might we understand the sentence, "Her daughter...would only be a child for a short time..."? What images of and references to insubstantiality, transitoriness, and the ephemeral occur—for example, Diana's feeling that "her hand could pass right through the furniture and walls" of her dream home? How do these images and references affect our understanding of Diana's life and our own lives?

Q. What is the importance of intentional evil and of intentional good, as Professor McFee presents the concepts? What instances of intentional evil and intentional good do you find in the novel, and how would you explain the circumstances of

their occurrence? Do we always have a choice between the intentional and the unintentional in relation to evil and good? Why might “all the goodness all our lives” be “the miracle...the real miracle”? In what ways does *The Life before Her Eyes* celebrate the exuberance of life in the face of death and the glory of good in the face of evil?

Q. Why should Diana McFee feel “as if she’d been punched” or feel “a bright flash at the side of her face” when she hears the “unnaturally bright” voice on the radio say, “I am in hell”? What does Diana, as high-school student or as forty-year-old mother, know of hell? What other instances are there of the adult Diana feeling blows to the side of her face, feeling out of breath, or developing sudden and intense headaches, and what might be the significance of those instances?

Q. What significance do physical beauty, sensuality, and “the blatant sexuality” of life have for the teenaged Diana and for the adult Diana? What roles do beauty and sexuality play in the lives of the novel’s characters and in all our lives? How successful is Kasischke in conveying the young woman’s and older woman’s sexual awareness and experience?

Q. How might we explain the sequence of increasingly mysterious and scary events that transform the adult Diana’s dream-perfect life—for example, the howl and laughter she hears on the radio after her meeting with Sister Beatrice, and Timmy’s reappearance? What might be the sources and significance of these and similar experiences? To what extent did each event prompt you to modify your view of Diana?

Q. What instances are there of the adult Diana’s noticing the absence of something from her world and at that precise moment observing her world fill up again with that something? To what extent might these instances affirm the power of thought and imagination to shape the world in which we live? To what extent might their significance relate to some other power?

Q. What is the significance, near the novel’s end, of the wolf that the adult Diana, we are told, had seen before—“the blue eyes, the howling in the next room”? How might we interpret the clause that follows Diana’s recognition of the wolf—“but that was something else, that was before he became this, before he began this life”? Why might the moment outside the wolf cage, as Diana faces the wolf, be “the moment she’d been born for,” “the moment in which she gave up herself...”?

Q. One reviewer has written of “the central questions of the novel: What is the difference, if any, between perception and reality? Is an imagined future as real as an actual one”? How does Kasischke explore these questions, and what conclusions does she arrive at? After completing *The Life before Her Eyes*, how would you answer these two questions?

Q. How credible is it that the story of Diana’s adult life occurs instantaneously, as Michael Patrick shoots her in the left temporal lobe of her brain, “the place where the future is imagined, the place where what would have been is”? What details in the preceding narrative link the “what would have been” with what has been and what is? What situations might give rise to an instantaneous view of the possible versions of one’s life? What alternative versions of Diana’s future life might we—and she—envision?

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