

A Reader's Guide

La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl

by [David Huddle](#)

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About the Book

"In [this] masterful new novel, an art history professor retreats from her failing marriage into fantasies of her research subject, Georges de La Tour . . . A truly remarkable piece of fiction." — *Washington Post Book World*

"Huddle skillfully counterpoints his three plots, and the result is a prismatic, gemlike structure . . . Such psychological and emotional depth is particularly striking." — *New York Times Book Review*

David Huddle's acclaimed second novel is a "finely crafted . . . story of relationships, intimacy, sex, storytelling, art, lies, and betrayal within the scope of perfectly ordinary lives" (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*). Hopscotching between present-day Vermont and seventeenth-century France, Huddle presents a fascinating fictional examination of the echoes of Georges de La Tour's work across time. Art history professor Suzanne Nelson escapes her failing marriage by withdrawing into the fertile world of her imagination, inventing La Tour's final painting sessions with a lovely young village girl named Vivienne. In the author's skillful hands, the intertwined tales become "a luminous portrait of two worlds . . . part historical novel and part sharp-sighted study of domestic strife" (*Boston Globe*).

About David Huddle

David Huddle is the author of many works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. His novel *The Story of a Million Years* was named Best Novel of the Year by the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, and distinguished first novel by *Esquire*, and his work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Story*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *The Best American Short*

Stories. The recipient of two NEA fellowships, he teaches writing at the University of Vermont and serves on the faculty of the Bread Loaf School of English.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl* for every reader.

1. How do the alternating chapters at the outset of the novel serve as a means of introducing Suzanne and Jack? What do the stories there reveal about their characters? What do they say about the two characters' ultimately ending up together?
2. Huddle writes of Suzanne and Elijah, "What she had to do was — she knew it as clearly as if it had appeared before her in letters of fire — TOUCH HIM. But what she really wanted more than anything was to move away, put some distance between his flesh and hers . . . She'd betrayed him" (pp. 13–14). When Elijah reaches out to her, why does Suzanne react in this manner? When Elijah responds with a note of his own, why does Suzanne then rip it to shreds?
3. What effect do the short, alternating sections have on the novel and our perception of the characters? What devices does Huddle use to intertwine the tales of seventeenth-century France and present-day Vermont?
4. When La Tour discovers the thatch of hair on Vivienne's shoulder, "he wants to spend as many hours as possible in Vivienne's presence. What most concerns him is that the girl will notice the change in him and come to disrespect him. He can hardly bring himself to give her any orders or directions. When she comes to his studio in the mornings now, he has a desire to kneel before her" (p. 51). Why does La Tour react so strongly to his discovery? What about that physical trait of hers affects him so profoundly?
5. Vivienne tells La Tour, "Until you began to ask me about my life, I never saw it, because to me it was invisible. I could have lived to be an old lady without a glimpse of what my life was like" (p. 61). In what way(s) has La Tour come to play such a vital role in Vivienne's life? How does their relationship parallel Suzanne and Jack's?
6. When Vivienne sees La Tour's painting of her for the first time, "the appalling distortion of her features tells La Tour something he's known but has never voiced to himself — that nothing expresses anguish like the human face. What a face can tell of joy or pleasure is slight compared with how sublimely it articulates pain" (p. 71). Why does Vivienne react with such resentment when she sees La Tour's finished painting?
7. In addition to alternatives between the seventeenth century and the present day, Huddle moves back and forth between Suzanne's and Jack's pasts. What effect do these flashbacks have, and how does Huddle work to incorporate them smoothly into the rest of the narrative? How is knowing their family backgrounds integral to understanding their personalities?
8. How does the story of La Tour and Vivienne help the author examine the relationships between Suzanne and Jack, and Jack and Elly? What does the imagined story reveal about

Suzanne, other than a desire to escape reality?

9. The characters create a variety of stories throughout the novel, from Suzanne's imagined world to Vivienne's fabrications about her family life. In what ways do the characters retreat into the stories they devise? Why are these fictions so essential to their lives and well-being?

10. As La Tour completes his painting of Vivienne, "he knows that when he has set down that extraordinary sunlit glistening of the dark thatch on Vivienne's shoulder, the picture will be finished. He will be finished" (p. 63). Why does this particular painting represent a conclusion for La Tour?

11. Why does Vivienne want La Tour's painting of her so badly? Why does La Tour condone her lying to him about her reasons?

12. Vivienne lies about her mother's telling her, "I could not have loved my life without you in it" (p. 175). How could this also be applied to other sections of the novel? How does this fabrication reflect on Suzanne?

13. Suzanne is finally able to give solace to Jack at the end of the novel. Why was she incapable of providing it at the beginning?

14. Why does Vivienne stay with La Tour in the final moments of his life? What does she now understand about him?

15. What is the significance of ending the book with a scene involving Vivienne and La Tour as opposed to Suzanne and Jack? Would the ending have had the same effect otherwise?

16. Conversation plays a big part in this novel, often becoming the highest form of intimacy between characters. Why is conversation such a crucial element in these characters' lives and their interactions with each other?

A Conversation with David Huddle

Q) How did the idea for *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl* originate?

A) In 1996, at a show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., I saw a number of Georges de La Tour's paintings. Their narrative content appealed to me: peasants cleverly hoodwinking rich dandies, a quarrel breaking out among beggars, a young woman with a lot on her mind, up late at night staring at candlelight. Not long after I attended the show, I came across an article about the painter in *Smithsonian*. I was especially intrigued by the following passage, which I've used as the book's epigraph:

"The dusty old municipal records also reveal a difficult man who, particularly in his later years, was not exactly a model of civic virtue. There were complaints that he refused to contribute his quota to the poor while a famine raged, that he assaulted a sergeant at arms, and that he administered a savage beating to a peasant. One particularly detailed set of charges reported La Tour 'making himself obnoxious to everyone by the great number of dogs . . . he keeps,

acting as though he were the lord of the manor, sending his dogs after hare into the standing crops, which they trample down and ruin.'" "

The contradiction between La Tour's compassion for the poor in his paintings and his brutal treatment of a real peasant piqued my interest. His keeping so many dogs somehow made him seem very real to me. I began by setting forth what I imagined to be the painter's least admirable human qualities, then used my writing to look into his personality for what might account for the nobility of his artistic vision.

Q) Did the book involve any special research in art history?

A) I have to admit that I'm not a serious student of art. I enjoy pictures in an almost primitive way. The ones I like best are those which translate into stories in my mind. Often such stories are speculations about the painter and the making of the picture.

Q) How would you define the relationship between the two parallel stories in the novel?

A) The thread of Vivienne Lavalette's story is spun out of Suzanne Nelson's memory and imagination as well as the circumstances of her life. La Tour stands at the center of the book. One of my discoveries in writing this novel is the practical value of the imagination — it's a survival tool, as essential as opposable thumbs or peripheral vision. In the daily lives of my characters, art is a force.

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl*.

[The Story of a Million Years](#) by [David Huddle](#)

[The Blue Flower](#) by [Penelope Fitzgerald](#)

[Wild Decembers](#) by [Edna O'Brien](#)