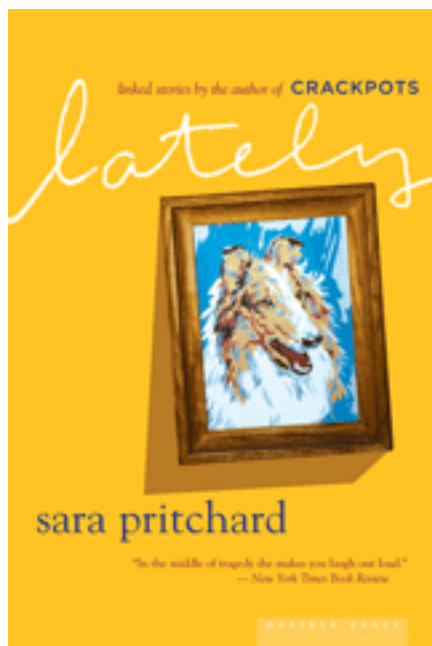


## A Reader's Guide



### Lately

by Sara Pritchard

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"Dense with flavor and beautifully wrought . . . *Lately* demands to be savored." — *Entertainment Weekly*

### About the Book

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In eleven interconnected stories, Sara Pritchard presents women and men whose lives have been influenced by Bob Dylan and Vietnam, childhood accidents and family mysteries. The characters in *Lately* often possess a certain good-can-be-made-from-bad personal calculus, a resilience of character, and a resolve to suck out the marrow of life — or at least to soldier on. Pritchard's stories captivate with radiant prose, offbeat characters, and emotional depth.

"A Winter's Tale" follows a mother who yearns for a meaningful connection with her sullen teenage son. In "The Honor of Your Presence," two sisters throw a divorce party — from cake to costume it's a Martha Stewart vision gone darkly, delightfully awry. "Late October, Early April" finds a coed in the late 1960s debating whether to keep the child she's carrying, while the baby's father is missing in action. Disarming and heartfelt, *Lately* is the work of a writer of great sensitivity and spirit.

"Sara Pritchard is the real deal. With precision and humor, she creates worlds the reader enters with effortless grace . . . More, Sara, more!" — Adriana Trigiani, author of *Big Stone Gap*

"*Lately* reads like a love letter to the hysterical juxtapositions, absurd misses, and lost opportunities of the world. The book is funny, sad, irreverent, and dead-on; one that shouldn't be missed." — Kate Walbert, author of *Our Kind*

"*Lately* is such a moving and funny collection that reading it makes my heart ache. I would follow Pritchard and her characters anywhere just to hear what they had to say." — Vendela Vida, author of *Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name*

"A page-turner, a collaged valentine of a book . . . This is a book to fall in love with, and to read over and over." — Sarah Stone, author of *The True Sources of the Nile*

## About the Author

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**Sara Pritchard** is the author of the short story collection *Lately* and the novel *Crackpots*, which was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book. She has been the recipient of the Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize for fiction and a West Virginia Literary Arts Fellowship. Pritchard lives in Morgantown, West Virginia, with her Australian Labradoodles, Fay (a.k.a. "Officer Guggenheim") and Figgy (a.k.a. "Brownie"), and her husband, author Kevin Oderman. She is a graduate of the MFA in Creative Writing Program at West Virginia University, and she works for the West Virginia University Press.

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups as well as provide a deeper understanding of *Lately* for every reader.

1. In her author interview, Sara Pritchard discusses some of the differences between short story collections and novels, particularly regarding the unique reading experiences offered by the two forms. She delights in the "freedom and willynillness of short story collections." Did you read the stories in *Lately* in order, from beginning to end, or did you skip around? Do you think the order in which the stories are read changes a reader's perception of the collection? How would certain resonances and connections be strengthened or weakened if particular stories are read closer together or further apart? How would you ideally arrange this collection?
2. How does your encounter with Celeste in "The Winter's Tale" affect your reading of "The Christening"? Chronologically speaking, which story would you suppose happened first? What clues does Pritchard offer about Celeste's situation? What are some other examples in the collection where details from one story influence your reading of another?
3. Several stories address fraught relationships between mothers and daughters: Sissy and Fanny in "The Pink Motel," Gloria and Frieda in "Lately," Miriam and Celeste in "The Christening." How do these characters shape one another? Are the mothers and daughters more alike or different? In each case, did your allegiance lie with the older or the younger character — and why? How are other familial relationships — father/daughter, mother/son, siblings — presented in the collection?
4. The soldier Vincent Devron, who is missing in action in Vietnam, is mentioned several times in the collection, but he never materializes as an active character. How does Vincent nevertheless influence the characters in *Lately*? In the context of the stories "Late October, Early April" and "The Pink Motel," is it possible that his absence is more significant than his presence?

5. Many of the stories in *Lately* feature ghosts, from the apparitions in "The Lost Pilot" and "La Vecchietta in Siena," to the vision in "Reading Raymond Carver, Waiting for Bob Dylan," to the less supernatural ghosts of memory in "The Wonders of the World." What do these ghosts represent to the characters who encounter them? What do the appearances of ghosts suggest about the play of the past in present lives?
6. The story "Lately" begins with a reflection on the concept of "spiritual landscape" — the type of topography or physical surroundings in which an individual is most at peace. The stories in *Lately* are set primarily in the fictional Cook County, an imaginary amalgam of Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, and West Virginia. What are the specific characteristics of this place? Which, if any, of the characters have found their spiritual landscape here? What do you think your own spiritual landscape would be like?
7. As she discusses in her interview, Pritchard often includes references to songs in her stories. What effect did these mentions have on you as you read? How does the inclusion of songs enhance the stories, and what functions do the songs serve? What other cultural allusions helped anchor the stories in their particular time and place?
8. The title of the collection, *Lately*, suggests impermanence, fleeting time, and also a certain amount of reflection. How does each of these interpretations play out in the stories?
9. One of the epigraphs to the collection is from the poem "Wine Over Cabbage" by Lorine Niedecker. The poem is in some sense about small acts of personal bravery and a certain type of resilience. How do the poem's themes surface in Pritchard's stories? Is there hope for her characters to overcome their circumstances, or have they already done so? Who best demonstrates resilience?
10. The *New York Times* has written of Sara Pritchard: "In the middle of tragedy, she makes you laugh out loud." In *Lately*, Pritchard examines serious themes and writes about difficult situations, but her writing is shot through with humor. How would you describe the overall tone of the collection? Which elements did you like best?

## **A Good Name for a Dog: A Conversation with Sara Pritchard**

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**Your story collection is called *Lately*. An adverb for a title? And what's with the paint-by-number of Lassie on the cover?**

Ahhhhhh, Lassie. I'll start with the picture. There's a character, Bobbie, in one of the stories — the story called "The Honor of Your Presence" — who has paint-by-numbers of Lassie hanging in her office. She did them when she was a kid.

## And what about the title?

There's a story in the collection called "Lately." The title of that story comes from a song called "Lately," by Greg Brown. Lucinda Williams did a great cover of "Lately" on the Red House Records album *Going Driftless: A Tribute to Greg Brown*. I used a fragment of the lyrics as an epigraph:

That was long ago—  
Do you still love me,  
Or do you hate me?  
I wouldn't know,  
I haven't see you lately.

I love those lines and the whole range of emotions and possibilities they embrace. I love the fact that in everything you do, you can be so right or so wrong and not even know which until someone else tells you. There's a lot of sadness in that fact, in the fact of such profound uncertainty. Those lines are about writing, too, and about all art, about the need for validation. You write a story and you think, "OK, maybe I like this. Hey, I think I like this. I really like this. I think it's pretty good." But until someone confirms your suspicions, you really don't know if it's gold or just pyrite. So, I guess I'm saying to the reader, "Here I am again. Do you like this, this book of mine? Look at this book I made and that I'm giving to you; do you like it? Do you love it? Do you love me?"

By the way, *Lately* was originally called *Wine Over Cabbage*, from the lines of a poem by Lorine Neudecker, which ends with the advice, "And don't be afraid to pour wine over cabbage." I love that line, too, and it remains as an epigraph in *Lately*. To me, "wine over cabbage" says something also about possibilities, about turning something common into something special, about deliberation, and about art, too. That title was very much about process. The stories in the book are also about ordinary people pouring wine over their lives, so to speak, literally and metaphorically. (There are always characters with alcoholism or other addictions in all my stories. Everybody — I mean in real life — everybody is addicted to something, even if it's moderation. But some addictions are more socially acceptable than others, and some aren't so apparently consuming.) It's like that Bob Dylan song "Gotta Serve Somebody." Or something. There's always something that's got the best of us, so to speak.

I don't remember, really, why and when my editor and I changed the title of the whole book to *Lately*. At some point, we just started referring to the collection as *Lately*. Also, I think that at some point I searched the word "lately" in the manuscript, and it came up a lot. So there's some kind of link there going on between stories, something about immediacy, I think, about time: the past creeping into the present. What tense of a verb is that? Past perfect? Pluperfect? Past imperfect plu?

**Speaking of music, you once said that buried in each of your stories is a song. What do you mean by that?**

I think most of my stories could be distilled into a song lyric like "Lately." The song lyric at the heart of the story "The Honor of Your Presence" is from Bob Dylan's "Song to Woody": "They come with the dust, and they're gone with the wind," and really the whole song "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" is the essence of that story. The song buried in "A Winter's Tale" is "Piece of My Heart," which was the story's original title.

**The collection is identified on the cover as "linked stories." Can you talk a little bit about that?**

I'm obsessed with linked stories and the connectivity of everything. The whole web of any writer's — really any artist's — work, anybody's life. It's wonderful to read an entire body of work by an author or to see a retrospective of a painter's work. It's like looking at family photos. You see what the early things, the sketches, matured into.

I didn't realize this book was a linked story collection until I'd assembled it into a manuscript. It was maybe eight stories then, which I'd written over that many years. And then I wrote the story "Lately," and the main character/narrator at that time was named Bobbie, and I gave this story to my friend Beth to read. Beth reads all my stories, and she called me up after reading "Lately" and said something like, "Hey, is this the same Bobbie with the Labrador retriever, the one who had the New Year's Eve party in *Crackpots*, or is this the Bobbie with the German short-haired pointer, the Bobbie who threw the divorce party for her sister?"

Well, you know, I was dumbfounded. I didn't realize that this character Bobbie was in all these stories, and that not only did she have the same name, she really was, basically, the same character.

And then when I started to really think about this, I realized that this character was in just about everything I wrote. Sometimes she was named Bobbie and sometimes Ruby and sometimes Pauline and sometimes Pearl or Harper and sometimes something else, but she was always there. It was like this one character Bobbie was meandering through everything I'd ever written, dragging one big narrative along like something stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

I guess a more accurate description of Bobbie is that she was more like that ant with the string tied around it. You know that Greek myth where a guy's in prison and the king tells him that if he can thread a piece of string through a chambered nautilus he can go free, so he ties the string around an ant and puts the ant through one end of the shell, a little pinprick of a hole — the entrance — and then he puts a crumb at the exit and goes to sleep, and next morning: voila!

**That was Daedalus, wasn't it?**

Yes! I think it was Daedalus. Was it Daedalus? Daedalus is a very good name for a dog.

**Yes, absolutely! But please tell us more about linked stories.**

Well, yes. Linked stories. I started to think about this day and night, and I began to see everything as linked. It was some great awakening.

And then I realized that really the strongest link in the collection was place, rather than character. And I think that that's true for most writers. Every writer has a world that's part imagination/part reality. That mythical county of Faulkner's that starts with the letter "Y" and nobody can pronounce. It's Alice Munro's Jubilee, Ontario, and John Updike's Olinger, Pennsylvania. I made up this place called Cook County that's somewhere intersecting Pennsylvania and New Jersey and West Virginia, and all the places I know best. That place became the ground I worked in, and then the characters did not have to know each other or be related; they just had to trod the same ground.

I think of linked story collections as having a kind of invisible superstructure like an umbrella or parachute above them. The difference between calling something linked stories and calling it a novel, I think, has to do with the fact that readers approach a novel strictly from front to back (unless you're one of those people like me who read the end way before they should), but they often will read a story collection randomly, ignoring its syntax. I know I do it all the time. I skip around. I pick out the shortest story or the longest one, depending on how much time I have to read, or I pick out the story by its title or its first line. I love this freedom and willy-nillyness of short story collections. So in linked story collections, you're working with puzzle pieces, and readers might put the puzzle together differently, not starting with the corners, but they should end up with the same picture as the one on the box.

I like linked stories for another reason, too — every story is discrete and can stand alone, yet every story is intricately bound up in and enhances the whole. There's something else going on. The reader can make the connections. The reader can roam around in the white spaces between stories and imagine all kinds of things. The reader can connect the dots. The space between stories becomes so open and participatory.

And I love when I'm reading a linked story collection or related novels and I recognize a character who was in something I read before. I remember the joy I felt when I read Andrea Barrett's *Voyage of the Narwhal*, and somewhere way, way into the novel, there's mention of one of the main character's sister, Nora. And suddenly I knew that this was the Nora from *Ship Fever*, the Nora who thought her brother was dead, and so just that mention of Nora cracked open the narrative of *Voyage* to reveal *Ship Fever* nestled inside it. It was brilliant. I love linked story collections where a cameo character in one story steps up to center stage in a much later story. Joan Silber does this brilliantly in *Ideas of Heaven*. Subtitle: *A Ring of Stories*. It is just that. So perfect a ring.

Time is an issue, too. Time is slippery. Joan Silber covers centuries in *Ideas of Heaven*. You have to let time just do what it wants, but you can't have conflicts in time. One conflict is maybe interesting. It can tickle a reader's brain. More than that is annoying.

Once you let yourself start playing with conflicts in time and with contradictions, then you start to enter that dangerous realm of experimentation, which can be consuming. The danger for the writer is that you can just get seduced by your own amazing creativity, your own amazing intellect, your own amazing cleverness, your own amazing metaphors, your own amazing sprachgefühl. But it's all seduction, and if you follow it, you risk ending up slumped in a blind alley, smiling at yourself in a tarnished compact mirror, holding a completed crossword puzzle in your lap. The reader gets up and leaves and never comes back. The best stories, I think, don't fool around. They don't have gimmicks. They're straight stories. They stay close to the heart. You know that Edie Brickell song that goes,

"Throw me into shallow water before I get too deep"? I think about that a lot.

**It's the first song on her first album, isn't it? Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians. "What I am."**

I think that's it. It has that line, too, "Religion is a smile on a dog."

**A great line. And you — are you writing anything else?**

Well, I have a couple of things in mind. I let things work themselves out in my head, and then when I write a story, it just comes out. Like a baby.

The last story I wrote for *Lately* was like that. It's my favorite story. It's all these scraps of things I knew I wanted in a story, but I didn't know how they fit together. But I just trusted that they would. And then one day, I had lunch with my friend Harriet, and she told me about how this rat had been living in her basement and how an exterminator came and trapped him in one of those humane, have-a-heart, catch-and-release cages, and as the exterminator was leaving the house with the rat in the cage, the rat looked at her — actually made eye contact with her — and screamed bloody murder. What I needed was that rat. I had to have that rat. I caught that rat Harriet put on the table, and I ran home and set him loose, and that's the story "Here on Earth" that snuck into *Lately* just under the deadline wire.

## For Further Reading

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The following books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed Sara Pritchard's *Lately*:

[\*Crackpots\*](#) by [Sara Pritchard](#)

[\*People I Wanted to Be\*](#) by [Gina Ochsner](#)

[\*Torch\*](#) by [Cheryl Strayed](#)

[\*Good Women\*](#) by [Jane Stevenson](#)