



## The Beekeeper's Daughter

by Jessica Stilling

ISBN 978-1-949290-19-6

Lorelei Bauer is a modern day woman with a penchant for Sylvia Plath, a woman struggling with the injustices of the fifties with her marriage, her role and status as a poet, her "job" as a mother, and her mental illness.

Lorelei's own mother suffered from mental illness and when Lorelei learns of her mother's breakdown and illegal abortion, she goes on a quest to better understand her as a parent. Lorelei soon discovers her life is paralleling Plath's and she panics about her fate.

During her quest, she meets up with an old friend of her mother's, Joanne, who gives her a secret, unpublished manuscript that her college friend, Sylvia Plath, sent her before her death. It is a continuation of the story of Esther Greenwood, Plath's protagonist from *The Bell Jar*. Lorelei learns many secrets from the Plath manuscript which both hurt her and makes her hopeful for her own future.

### From the author

This book was in me for a while. After I read *The Bell Jar* and learned that Plath had written another novel about Esther that she'd destroyed and that people thought there was at least another novel out there that Ted Hughes never let see the light of day, I started considering the idea of continuing Esther's story on my own. For the longest time that's all I knew, that I wanted to do some kind of continuation of *The Bell Jar* but I wasn't sure how it would work. Ideas come slowly sometimes. They percolate, they simmer, you have to wait for them to truly form. But I continued to think about this idea for years. And I knew someday the story would come to me and I would write it. I just wasn't sure how right away. Would it be an interlocking narrative like Cunningham's *The Hours* or a retelling or continuation like *The Wide Sargasso Sea*?

After a trip to Cape Cod the idea for Lorelei started to take shape. I did more research on Plath and her life there and as I was doing it Lorelei and her story started to come into focus and become a part of the novel. Then I decided that Plath should have a narrative voice in the book and I started to wonder about what time in Plath's life I'd like to write about. At first I thought maybe I'd write about when she was a child growing up near Cape Cod, like Lorelei, then I thought maybe her time in New York, like *The Bell Jar*. I read many different Plath biographies while writing this. When I got to the end of the biography, to the part when she moves into Yeats' house, something clicked. I knew that this was the time in her life I needed to write about—the horrible London winter after her divorce that led to her suicide. It was dark, but that time really spoke to me. The novel emerged from there. I saw it very clearly but at the same time it took about two years of just thinking about it, doing a little research but just thinking about it, before it became something clear I could start working on.

### Discussion Questions

1. How does the theme of the role of mental illness in the life of a woman take shape in the novel? Does it show a change in the way women were treated from Plath's time (the 1950s) to the present when we are introduced to Joanne's character?



2. How does the ocean (or the sea) work as a metaphor throughout the story? How might the image of Stonehenge in Esther Greenwood's story accomplish the same things?
3. How are the various men in this novel portrayed? From Ted Hughes to Esther's Tom, to Lorelei's ex-husband Theo, to her boyfriend Eamon, we meet many different kinds of men who have many kinds of relationships with women. Are there any consistent themes or personality traits portrayed? How might they influence the outcome of the novel?
4. During the final section of Esther Greenwood's story she narrates, "And what was art, any art, but a byproduct of damage, of pain and loss so unimaginable? . . . and what kind of pain had the creator of the ocean felt as He made the waves so violent they trekked across the sea pummeling rocks and sea creatures, entire mountain ranges in their wake? What kind of pain had the makers of Stonehenge felt? What were they looking for, what did they need to know so badly they had to pull stones from the sea and drag them hundreds of miles?" How is the role of art and the creative process shown to affect an artist's life in this novel?
5. How is the marriage of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Path portrayed in this novel?
6. What impact does seeing Stonehenge have upon Esther Greenwood's character? Can you pinpoint the moment when things start to change for her?
7. Can you pinpoint a moment when Lorelei's life goes wrong? What is it for you? Why?
8. Throughout the novel Lorelei has a close group of friends Amelia, Eamon, her aunt Sarah and Joanne, to fall back on. Sylvia Plath seems very much alone (though a few friends look in on her). What role does friendship and familial ties play in the mental health of a woman going through a trying time in this novel?
9. Lorelei learns of a secret, illegal abortion that her mother had before she was born when she reads her mother's journal. How does this impact the story? Why might the author have chosen to portray an abortion in this way?
10. At the end of the novel Lorelei walks into the sea. It is left ambiguous what happens next. Do you think she goes too far? Does she come back? Why do you think this?

### **About the author**

Jessica Stilling is the recipient of the Bronx Council on the Arts Chapter One Award and she is the author of the critically acclaimed novel *Betwixt and Between*. She has studied writing and literature at The New School and holds an MFA from City College. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in over forty literary journals including *Wasifiri*, *The Warwick Review* and *Caustic Frolic*. Her feminist nonfiction has appeared in various media outlets such as Tor.com and the Ms. Magazine Blog. She has taught writing and literature in New York City for many years. She lives in New York with her family.