

CORMORANT/DCB TEACHERS' GUIDE

About *A Secret Music*

Set in 1936 Montreal, *A Secret Music* is the story of Lawrence Nolan, a sensitive fifteen-year-old piano prodigy who grows up in the shadow of his mother's mental illness. Forced to keep this shameful secret, he attempts to raise himself and his ten year old brother. He counteracts the deep ache and creeping mistrust caused by his mother's emotional absence by escaping into the intense realm of Chopin and Schubert, the only language he understands. When his brother becomes ill, he is left with enormous responsibilities. At a piano competition in Montreal, Lawrence makes a climactic decision that puts his future on hold in order to salvage his family life.

In *A Secret Music*, Susan Doherty Hannaford re-creates the Depression-Era world of Montreal and demonstrates how music can redeem a life.

Praise for *A Secret Music*

"Brought to life by a sharp eye for physical and sensory detail and meticulous historical accuracy."
– *Montreal Gazette*

"A powerful debut."
– *Toronto Star*

"A pleasure of *A Secret Music* is how fond we grow of nearly all of the characters. Full disclosure: I cried at least once while reading this book and did not want to part with the Nolan family when I turned the last page. *A Secret Music* sings."
– *Montreal Review of Books*

Awards

Grace Irwin Award
The Word Guild Award

About Susan Doherty Hannaford

A Secret Music is author Susan Doherty Hannaford's first novel. She is a long-serving board member at the Royal Conservatory of Music and a board member of the Quebec Writers' Federation. She also volunteers at the Douglas Hospital in the area of schizophrenia. She lives in Westmount.

Curriculum

Grades 11, 12 English (Reading and Literature Studies)

Grade 11, 12 The Arts (Music)

Student Objectives

After reading *A Secret Music* students will be able to:

- Demonstrate a knowledge of classical music and musicians.
- Analyze and discuss the relationship between a piece of music and the cultural context in which it was created.
- Examine the impact that music has both on the individual and the larger community.
- Identify the inspiration for a piece of music and how it informs the tone and mood of the piece.
- Discuss their emotional response to a piece and understand the role of art as a therapeutic tool in mental health.
- Identify ways of expressing emotion and relating to others through music.

Getting Started

Play an excerpt of Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 for the students and provide information about Rachmaninoff's life and the cultural context in which he created music. Have students identify the tone or mood of the piece and describe their own emotional response to the music.

Lawrence's mother compares him to Rachmaninoff in the first chapter of the novel. Suggest ways in which the characters in the novel might identify with him or his music.

Classroom Activities / Discussion Questions

- 1) Miss Tarasova tells Lawrence "If you have meaning in your life, you become impervious to suffering." What gives meaning to Lawrence's life? (Chapter 3, pg. 31)
- 2) How has the Great Depression affected Lawrence's father? Why is he particularly upset by Chester Mahoney's layoff? (Chapter 3, pg. 41-42)
- 3) Wilfred Pelletier wants to make a place for Quebec's music "on the world stage" by establishing the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Why might that be particularly important for Quebec, a French-speaking province in a largely English-speaking country? (Chapter 5, pg. 74)
- 4) Why does Lawrence hide his brother's symptoms from his mother? Is it the right choice? (Chapter 7, pg. 90)
- 5) Miss Tarasova compares understanding John's family to understanding music : "I must feel your motives with my instincts. My intuition. Is very much like music" (Chapter 14, pg. 165). In what ways is it similar?
- 6) Why is the piano Lawrence's "perfect place"? Compare this to Dwayne's perfect place at the camp. (Chapter 18, pg. 195)
- 7) What did Lawrence learn about his father at the camp? What did he learn about himself? (Chapter 19, pg. 205)

- 8) Why might Lawrence's mother have given away the piano? Why does Lawrence think she has done this? What does Father McMahon mean that she gave away "her piano," not Lawrence's? (Chapter 22, pg. 244)
- 9) Why does Lawrence wear a sling when he goes to visit his family on Christmas? What effect might this have on his relationship with his mother? (Chapter 23, pg. 263)
- 10) Lawrence states that he is inspired by the suffering of other classical musicians to "turn his own torment into rapture," allowing him to overcome difficulties in his life. How is this different than his mother's experience? (Chapter 24, pg. 274)
- 11) What "terrible sacrifice" has Lawrence made to get this far in his musical career? What has he gained? (Chapter 25, pg. 295)
- 12) What is the significance of Lawrence dedicating his composition to his mother? Is he forgiving her or himself? (Chapter 25, pg. 296)