

BACK to the GARDEN

LAURIE R. KING

BOOK CLUB KIT



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

Thirty times now, I've sat down to start a novel, and thirty times, it's been different. Sometimes the main character simply marches in and takes over. Other times, they play coy, demanding that I really think about who they are, what they want, why they're acting the way they insist on doing.

Raquel Laing, the protagonist in *Back to the Garden*, is one of the latter. I knew she was strong—I could feel her absolute confidence and toughness, even as I wrestled with understanding her. I also knew that concealment was central to her nature. This is a woman with secrets too deep to give out easily, even to her author.

But because I'm an “organic” writer—no outlines for me—I'm well used to finishing my first draft and only then figuring out what the story is really about. With *Back to the Garden*, Raquel's enigma became central to a book whose threads twist around each other: a peace-and-love 70s community where someone died; a modern cop whose gifts come with problems, set to investigate a serial killer; old bones that might be identified too late to solve the case; with personal lives and loyalties that may cause it all to fray apart—or to come together in a taut and powerful strand.

I hope you and your book club enjoy meeting Inspector Laing and her colleagues, as they spin their way through the historical threads of the story. And I love writing this while thinking about you digging out your hippie garb (your mother's, maybe?) and grooving on Joni Mitchell and Joe Cocker while the fondue heats up.

**YOURS,
LAURIE R. KING**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A story like *Back to the Garden* contains many themes, from “justice” to “family,” from “good against evil” to “loyalty” and “love.” What deeper ideas resonated with you as you read it? What do you think the book is mostly about?
2. The author alternates between two timelines in the narrative: Then and Now. What did you think of this structural choice? How did moving between these timelines affect your reading experience?
3. What was your first impression of Inspector Raquel Laing? Did your perspective of her shift over the course of the novel? What about Jen Bacchus and the other characters?
4. Discuss how the author painted the picture of the urban legend/lore of The Highwayman. Why do you think people (especially readers) are so fascinated with serial killers?
5. Cold cases, particularly those related to serial killers, are a very popular interest both in real life and in fiction. In real life, do you think cash-strapped police forces ought to dedicate significant time and resources towards investigating old cases? Why or why not?
6. A significant part of the Gardener Estate’s lore and history is its commune, The Commons. In discussing the commune, a character says, “We’d all wanted to think that surrounding ourselves with good thoughts and a clean life would change the world, but in the end, the cops had to come and save us. It felt like the universe was saying, Enough playing around, kids. Time to grow up.” Discuss how the novel depicts the commune, from its beginning and evolution into a working community through to its eventual downfall. What mistakes did they make?
7. What role does the setting of the Gardener Estate play in the book? What about the highly discussed statue? Is it being a three-faced Eve significant? What do you think it represents?
8. While Raquel is deep in researching the commune, the author writes: “In Raquel’s experience, every Eden had a serpent. And love did not inoculate against its venom.” Do you agree with this reflection? What does it tell you about Raquel herself? What point do you think the author was trying to make?
9. Discuss the relationship between Raquel and Jen over the course of the novel. Were you surprised by how it unfolded? Given Jen’s longstanding relationship with the Gardener family, were you suspicious of her at any point in the story? Why or why not?
10. In the novel, Raquel is referred to as “The Sherlock of San Francisco.” Their times and circumstance are vastly different, but do you see ways in which her personality and investigative techniques are similar to those of Sherlock Holmes?
11. Which scene in the book stuck with you the most? Why?
12. Discuss the ending of the novel. Were you surprised by the killer and the identity of the victim? Were you satisfied? What do you see happening next for each of the characters?

WHO'S WHO? ACCORDING TO THE BOOK

INSPECTOR

RAQUEL LAING:

the Sherlock of San Francisco

JERRY RATHFORD:

Junior partner, early thirties, who hadn't really thought out the whole hippie-commune-in-Oregon thing.

DEE LAING:

Much of what Raquel's sister did online was, as she had obliquely told Jen, against the law.

MICHAEL JOHNSTON, THE HIGHWAYMAN:

In a hospital bed some twenty miles south of the Gardener Estate, an old man made of bones and skin and angry eyes drifted slowly toward his death.

MEADOW:

a hippie Earth-mother with the political skills of a Chicago mayor

JEN BACHUS:

Jen Bachus had been the Estate's manager since the Trust took over and, before that, a neighbor and regular trespasser.

AL HAWKIN:

A legend in the Homicide Detail, and on his way to becoming equally legendary in his "retirement" to Cold Case

RAIN:

Mephistophelian rock star

DAVID KIRKUP:

Though David loves the place, he isn't, strictly speaking, a Gardener. Without David's single-minded devotion, the Estate would have been sold off years ago.

MRS. DALHOUSIE:

Mrs. Dalhousie had instantly volunteered—rather, she walked in and took over.

THE GARDENER FAMILY TREE



RECIPES TO SET THE SCENE

Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* opened middle-class cookery to the exotic but attainable triumphs of Quiche Lorraine and boeuf bourguignon, while Irma Rombauer's *Joy of Cooking* explained the how-to for more familiar dishes. Of course, in hippie kitchens, you were more likely to find *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), *The Moosewood Cookbook* (1977), and *The Vegetarian Epicure* (1972).

DRINKS:

The wine revolution was only getting started and the younger (student) generation tended to buy cheap, sweet wines like Blue Nun or Mateus Rosé. Still, a good California wine would have been thought sophisticated, while lunches (with pink lemonade frozen into ice cubes!) or fruity drinks such as Piña Colada and Strawberry Daiquiri would make for a festive meetup. (And of course, they're all easy to make non-alcoholic.)

NIBBLES:

Fondue was The Thing in the 70s—giant pots of melted cheese scooped up with bits of French bread on a long fork. It still tastes great, but for a lighter meal, try it with bits of vegetable, steamed (tiny red potatoes are great) or raw (red pepper or cherry tomatoes.) And tart apples go great with fondue's cheeses.

Small Meatballs were big, whether fruity with pineapple, spicy with barbecue sauce, or milky as Swedish Meatballs. Keep warm and stab them up with toothpicks.

Quiche was another discovery of the 70s, thanks to Julia Child. Use petite muffin tins to make individual quiches, with cream-cheese dough pressed in or store-bought crust rolled extra thin. Just cut any meats or veggies used into smaller pieces than you would for a full-sized quiche, and up the flavorings a little.

Cocktail sticks are fun threaded with bits of cheese, tiny sausages, pineapple, gherkins, olives, tomatoes.

JELL-O molds. And of course, America was still in the thrall of gelatin-based “salads” or desserts: Add a can of crushed pineapple or peaches, miniature marshmallows, grated carrots, or (for lime gelatin) lime sherbet and some artificial whipped topping, then pour your creation into a decorative ring mold to set.

Put on your maxi skirt or flared jeans, find your Indian necklace, let your hair fall free and your facial hair grow, turn on the stereo—and enjoy your visit to the era of Nixon, Ford, and Carter!

PLAYLIST

LISTEN ON SPOTIFY AT “[BACK TO THE GARDEN BY LAURIE R. KING](#)”

1972:

MORNING HAS BROKEN

Cat Stevens

ANTICIPATION

Carly Simon

FAMILY AFFAIR

Sly & the Family Stone

I'D LIKE TO TEACH THE WORLD TO SING (IN PERFECT HARMONY)

The New Seekers

HEART OF GOLD

Neil Young

THE LION SLEEPS TONIGHT

Robert John

CITY OF NEW ORLEANS

Arlo Guthrie

DAY BY DAY

cast of Godspell

AMERICAN PIE OR VINCENT

Don McLean

1975:

ONE OF THESE NIGHTS

The Eagles

JIVE TALKING

The Bee Gees

LUCY IN THE SKY WITH DIAMONDS

Elton John

SISTER GOLDEN HAIR

America

CAT'S IN THE CRADLE

Harry Chapin

WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS?

War

YOU'RE NO GOOD

Linda Ronstadt

YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL

Joe Cocker

HOW SWEET IT IS (TO BE LOVED BY YOU)

James Taylor

TANGLED UP IN BLUE

Bob Dylan

1979:

I WILL SURVIVE

Gloria Gaynor

HOT STUFF

Donna Summer

YMCA

Village People

WE ARE FAMILY

Sister Sledge

DESPERADO

Judy Collins

HISTORY BEHIND THE STORY

BY LAURIE R. KING

It's hard to think of something you actually remember as "history," but *Back to the Garden* sent me back to those dim days to revisit my own past.

The Seventies were that time when tie-dyed t-shirts gave way to business women's shoulder pads, folk rock turned to disco, when politics moved from Bobbie Kennedy to Ronald Reagan. The freedom of the Sixties began to feel quaint and naïve, with homegrown weed giving way to crack cocaine, the flower children raising kids of their own.

Sure, research for this book was in part a rummage through my own memories and photo albums, but what came to light could surprise me. I'd forgotten that we all sewed our own clothes. That "health food" could inflict high cholesterol on a twenty-year old.

And I remember hitching rides—by myself—during precisely those years when my home town had two serial killers, becoming known as "the murder capital of the world."

I do live in a part of the world that has clung to the Sixties more than most. I know people like Rob and Wes and the ladies of Arachne Weavers.

Come to think of it, I am people like them.

I hope you enjoy reading, and talking about, *Back to the Garden*.
Let me know what you think!

Laurie R. King



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