



READERS' GUIDE FOR  
LAURA STANFILL'S  
*SINGING LESSONS FOR THE STYLISH CANARY*,  
Published by Lanternfish Press

## BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. Gender roles are a key theme in *Singing Lessons for the Stylish Canary*. While men make serinettes, women hold the fiscal power to purchase them—and to hire male servants to do the repetitious cranking to train their precious birds. Can you name other scenes or family relationships within the novel that challenge the gendered status quo of the nineteenth century?
2. Céline’s husband never gets a first name. He’s always referred to as *Monsieur*. Why do you think the author made that choice?
3. Do you believe Henri has the power to raise the dead? Why or why not?
4. While the novel is historical fiction, a modern awareness is woven throughout—especially when it comes to societal power structures, the patriarchy, and breaking away from inherited family roles. Elizabeth Gilbert’s *The Signature of All Things* is one example of a book set in the past that evokes current thinking—earning its place as a historical novel that has personal resonance for modern-day readers. Can you list any other books that play with this construct—a setting in the past, but with hat-tips to the current zeitgeist, showing an intended awareness of the modern reader?
5. *Publishers Weekly* calls *Singing Lessons* a “charming, lite-fantasy debut, set in the mid-1800s.” *Shelf Awareness* says it offers “a folktale style.” How would you describe this book and its genre blending?
6. While the book is ostensibly about two half-brothers and the father they have in common, it’s the women around these men who relentlessly pull and tug on the plot and change the course of events. Give a few examples.
7. How does the author use canary training as a metaphor? Are there characters who are being trained—by their peers or their family—to perform in specific ways?
8. How is music used in the novel? Is it kind of a character of its own?
9. What music did you grow up with in your house? Did you feel like your music taste blended in with your peers or was completely different or somewhere in between?
10. Pleasure and hope are woven throughout the novel. Sometimes they occur outside the frame of the story, like the Blanchards sending their serinettes to entertain rich families in the United States. How does the writing style mirror this kind of optimism or joy? What are some other books you’ve read that leave you feeling hopeful? Has the pandemic changed your reading preferences toward more upbeat books?



# THE SERINETTE



This is Laura's serinette, sitting on the workbench of restorer Joel McCluskey. You can see the barrel, the pins, and the top of the bellows.

It's a small instrument with a simple wood exterior. The cases were usually walnut.

At the time this photo was taken, the pipes had been incorrectly reversed during a previous restoration attempt. The music didn't yet sound like recognizable songs. To solve the mystery, Joel consulted with a European restorer, who noted the pipes seemed to be backwards.

Here's a look at the old bellows—white leather that needed replacing. The bellows is what makes this a barrel organ; music boxes don't have bellows and pipes.



## THE SOUNDS OF THE NOVEL

Laura's fascination with mechanical music related to birds started because her parents displayed Reuge bird cage automatons in the dining room of her childhood house in New Jersey. Here's a video about [the restoration of a similar instrument](#).

Laura wrote the novel using videos and research materials to learn about serinettes—long before she acquired one of her own. [Here's one video of a serinette](#).

While other kids rebelled by listening to punk or death metal, Laura rebelled by choosing Mahler over her father's beloved Chopin *études*. Mahler's Fourth made an indelible impression on her in high school when her band conductor invited students to a live performance, which led her to explore the rest of the composer's oeuvre. [Mahler's Fourth](#) remained her favorite.

When she was sixteen, Laura and her family moved to suburban Washington, DC, where her father began a decade-long restoration of a Wurlitzer Theatre Organ. The pizzazz of the instrument—its actual bells and whistles—impacted her life and perhaps even the construction of the sentences in *Singing Lessons for the Stylish Canary*. Theater organs are multi-voiced. They can sound like many different instruments, even at the same time. Here's a video of [organist Cameron Carpenter](#) recording at Laura's parents' house. You can see her dad on the ladder!

For more information on the Wurlitzer and its extensive restoration, [check out her dad's website](#). The instrument is now in boxes, in process of being moved to its next home.

## ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

Laura wrote about inspiration and the historical research behind the novel in [this article published by \*Necessary Fiction\*](#).

[“Birdsong in the Key of Brain Injury,”](#) an essay published by *Longridge Review*, explores Laura's neurodivergence and her experience growing up with mechanical music.





# A SHORT STORY

Laura spent 15 years working on *Singing Lessons for the Stylish Canary*, adding and cutting hundreds of pages over the years as she developed the sound of the voice and tinkered with the plot. On the next pages, you'll encounter an early short story about a serinette and a canary named Buster, originally intended to be part of the novel.

Book clubs that focus on the craft of writing may want to compare and contrast the styles, characters, and themes of the story with the finished novel.

## “FOR HE’S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW”

Laura Stanfill

First published in 2013 in *Voicetratcher Magazine*

In late September 1853, in the town of Fishkill Landing, New York, Jean-Jacques agreed to instruct an unremarkable brownish finch. Buster was the sole companion of Mrs. Percy Mallaby, a widow shrouded in what her neighbors considered a suspiciously quiet mourning period. Nothing ever seemed to be happening behind the sober crepe draped on all five of her ground-level windows. She never received deliveries or sent her sewing out any more. Certain officious nose-pickers, who spied her tending healthy vegetables in the back garden in the thick of a poor growing season, swore they only saw her black garments swaying. Never a face beneath the mourning bonnet. Nor a wrist.

Mrs. Percy Mallaby wouldn't have been surprised if one of her neighbors knocked on the door to accuse her of being a ghost. She rather felt that way herself. When she woke each morning, the rustling covers brought no complaints. Her feet in her slippers made no objectionable sounds. And nobody cared when her bread baked flat or burned. Certain parts of herself, she suspected, had attended her husband of 20 years halfway into the hereafter, opening the channel for continuing slippages. As proof, she noted the withering muscle in her left



shoulder, the shrinking cartilage in both ears, and the flattening of her formerly buxom buttocks. Her heavy mourning outfits had to be tucked with thread at least once a week, and this she learned to do herself, for it would have been quite expensive otherwise.

Jean-Jacques' hiring was born of the hope that Buster might prove a more communicative companion during the four months remaining in the full mourning period. Mrs. Percy Mallaby happened to appreciate men with pale skin, and perhaps that's why, two sentences into the Frenchman's spiel, she ushered him inside. Her husband was unusually pale, it's true, even before his demise. He had a great deal more skin than Jean-Jacques, though, and plenty more fat, so as when they were lying together, she imagined herself a fish pinned down by a whale who barely sensed her presence down there. During the three-day laying out period, despite the festoons and bouquets in the parlor, Mrs. Percy Mallaby swore her whole house smelled like the ocean.

"Teach Buster whatever you wish," she instructed the itinerant songmaster the day he happened to scrape his mudded shoes upon her threshold. "In fact, anything cheery will do. It's deadly quiet in here most days."

The two strangers listened, for a moment, to nothing.

"Le noir ne vous convient pas," Jean-Jacques said. It was a lovely phrase intended to appear to console, especially the verb *convier*, a mix of the Latin *invitare* and *convivium*. However, it translated as "Black doesn't suit you."

Mrs. Percy Mallaby assumed she had been given a compliment. "Thank you very much," she said. "Will the kitchen be acceptable for your lessons?"

The widow was sentenced to the garden so she wouldn't guess at Jean-Jacques' plain methods. She had a flat nose and a lack of padding in all crucial areas, as if her body, even in its



fullest bloom, had always leaned on the fence between today and nothing. She often imagined her best qualities as compost, curled like a carrot peel and tossed on the wrong side of that fence.

Jean-Jacques understood loneliness no better than music. He settled on teaching Buster the 1709 smash hit, “Marlbrough s’en va-t-en guerre,” a catchy piece about a wife being told her husband has died in battle. In English-speaking parts of the world, the tune goes by the name “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.” Its hearty backslappery most often filled Jean-Jacques’ pockets.

As he cranked the serinette in Mrs. Percy Mallaby’s kitchen, reciting in his head the many French verses, Buster fell silent and cocked his little head behind the dull brass cage. The selection was quite appropriate, Jean-Jacques decided, especially how the page tells Marlborough’s wife to take her pink dress off and make the switch to black. When Jean-Jacques’ fingers cramped, he quit mid-measure to stretch.

That’s when the finch tapped his right wing on the bars, the way a conductor drums his baton on a music stand. Buster filled the silence with one lovely verse of “Marlbrough s’en va-t-en guerre,” the perfect pupil a plain bird from noplacé.

Jean-Jacques clapped and then undid the latch of the cage so Buster could peck a thankful kiss on his cheek like other birds had wont to do. The feathered gentleman hopped onto the table and stretched both wings to their full nine-inch span, showing off matching golden spots underneath. Then, blinking at his audience, Buster began a much-improved version of “Marlbrough s’en va-t-en guerre,” keeping the melody intact beneath an obscene number of flourishes, not to mention the near-brilliant two-minute cadenza between the thirteenth and fourteenth verses.

Jean-Jacques leaned against the kitchen counter, sticking his elbow in a spot of butter. The stain on his one suit coat didn’t matter. He had discovered a genius.



The pseudo-musician approached Mrs. Percy Mallaby in her garden, while she implored her winter squashes to take heart and root. Buster was a slow pupil and would need more tutelage, Jean-Jacques explained. The widow didn't care how much it cost. Every day Jean-Jacques showed up meant proof that she still existed, and might exist again tomorrow. She sent him away with enough coins for better lodgings and a hearty supper.

The following week was the best of Buster's foreshortened life. At the start of each lesson, he repeated the serinette's fluted phrases exactly, caging his own raging song to match the machine's interpretation. Once released, though, Buster would perch on the sideboard, the counter, or a cluttered shelf in the pantry, sitting wherever he pleased. He did his best work in the kitchen sink. There, his own notes came pounding back to him from several directions, as if a family of like-minded accompanists had sprung from dust.

Jean-Jacques repeated songs on the serinette until the finch knew them well enough to integrate his artistic yearnings with all eight western melodies and his surprisingly innate grasp of diatonic scales.

His lot depleted, Jean-Jacques tried singing to grow Buster's repertoire. Each of his attempts was interrupted by garbled warbles, as if the bird feared exposure to the man's lack of pitch. They could have toured the best parlors of the New England colonials, those two, or masterminded a traveling peep show. After that featherbrain's puff of harumph, though, Jean-Jacques left the Mallaby home and, four houses over, found an employer with a dull-witted canary and a guest room. This saved on lodging.

Trying to force his freedom, Buster sat silently in his cage for three days, oddly corresponding to the formal quiet of Mr. Percy Mallaby's laying in. The widow assumed the training was a failure. Alas. Her bird didn't even wheet or chi-chuwee or seet-seet-seet any more, let alone sing. Or perhaps what once existed beneath her skin, which she imagined pale and cold,





firm with only a hint of give, like a potato or a rutabega, the solid deep-down part of her that appreciated sound, had slipped out of the house and therefore it only seemed like Buster wasn't wheeting any more.

After the third day, though, at 2 o'clock in the morning, the mini-maestro changed strategies. He launched into his entire repertoire from the cage in the parlor, adding trills and improvisations whenever he could squeeze the extra air out. Mrs. Percy Mallaby awoke sucking on black air, the back of her throat clogged with a brine-soaked tongue, and it took three measures to realize her house was flooded not with seawater, but with fresh birdsong. She felt her way along the corridor, touching her way down the banister, not bothering to light a candle, for she was sure she was dreaming until she parted the curtains and let the moon in. At this exact moment, Buster, thus spotlighted in silver, hit the high notes in "La Petite Chasse" and frolicked back down the other side. The notes sounded like her own fingers testing for ripeness. The small branch of grief she had been unable to swallow dissolved like minerals being washed out of rocks to enrich the soil.

The widow threw open the brass cage latch. Buster made his mark on all four burgundy velvet chairs before perching on the fireplace mantle. Thus positioned, he twittered "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," which the widow mistook as praise for her own kindheartedness. She wept and collapsed into one of the chairs, earning a white shit smudge on the back of her black dressing gown. After the fourteenth verse, Buster's internal organs wheezing, Mrs. Percy Mallaby's appetite returned. She leapt from her seat, lit a candle and returned a few minutes later with a feast of applesauce, stale breadcrumbs, and a second helping of dinner for herself.

The next morning, Mrs. Percy Mallaby tore the black crepe from her windows. She stuffed her mourning clothes under the bed. For the occasion, she donned her favorite mint gown with four cakelike tiers of flounces and eighteen hand-stitched satin bows. Thinking better of the



obviously gaping bodice and the loose waist, she tossed a fur-trimmed cape overtop before hand-carrying formal invitations, written in her best brown ink, to her neighbors. She promised a concert followed by dinner.

Jean-Jacques would have continued offering services for another month or two in Fishkill Landing except for the unsuccessful nature of this particular party. Mrs. Percy Mallaby spent a week in preparation, stuffing herself with cold sausages and raw eggs, so her best dress would fit better, as well as airing out the parlor and plucking birdshit off the burgundy chairs, now that Buster was allowed out of his cage with such frequency. She added to the guest list a Mr. Abraham Overton, a renowned singer himself, widowed two years ago in April, poor man, and his nephew Alexander, who was staying in town at least until spring.

Those most convinced of their neighbor being a ghost sent regrets by servant. The final tally was eight guests, plus the widow, plus Buster, plus a double portion of dinner for her recently reinstated cook, who was miffed by the daily birdshit accumulation in the sink.

On 4 October 1853, the guests assembled in the parlor, then waited patiently for Mr. Overton and his nephew, who, finding standing-room only, leaned against the windowsill on the side of the house. Mrs. Percy Mallaby, her body almost present in that mint gown, made sure to wave her arms about to stave off any lingering rumors. When she announced the performer's identity, everyone laughed, except for Mrs. Harding Walker, who was currently paying for the same talent to be drummed into her good-for-little canary.

The show almost went as could be expected.

To prove himself, the tiny-beaked triller, despite being caged on the mantle to protect the attendees' clothes, wound through his repertoire to great applause and two standing ovations. As the concert grew longer, and as the dinner hour passed, those assembled shifted in their seats and yawned. Mr. Overton and his nephew began leaning against one another to keep upright. Buster,



adept at reading his audience, sped his tempo all the way up to vivacissimo, very lively, and sang “Marlbrough s’en va-t-en guerre” with such gusto he forgot to quit at the end of the fourteenth repeat and thus went round again and again. This was not expected.

With her bird thus stuck, Mrs. Percy Mallaby encouraged her guests to sup, for the cook had twice warned her that the soup was in danger of separating. Buster remained caged in the parlor, singing the same notes raggedly, occasionally pausing in the hopes that someone would remember he needed breadcrumbs and water. The whole party was trying to ignore him. In fact, as Fishkill Landing was as yet untouched by the increasingly dour temperance movement, at Mrs. Percy Mallaby’s house that evening, many toasts were raised in the spirit of getting drunk enough to ignore the wretched repetitions of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.” They also drank to keep warm, for the cook, whose cousin had trained in Paris, insisted on keeping a dining room window open to keep the delicious aromas circulating.

After the soup course, Mr. Abraham Overton’s nephew excused himself to deal with the matter of atmosphere. He retrieved the cage, with Buster still singing inside, and set it on the dining room table as a centerpiece. He fiddled with the catch until the little brass door opened, and Buster wobbled out, fluttering his throat to let some heat escape. Standing next to the steaming platter of beheaded turkey. Buster quit singing. And breathed. And breathed. A night that was foggy dark and frog-full, with barely a moon. He thought about the maestro, who taught him about grandness. He thought about Mr. Mallaby, and this feathered cousin on a platter. Then he thought about how nice it was to finally get cooled down.

This moment of silence was broken by Mrs. Percy Mallaby’s guests hollering, clapping and whistling their approval of the long-overdue conclusion of the evening’s performance. More unfortunately, Buster assumed this was a request for an encore. He rearranged his feathers, pecked a few more breaths out of the chill air. Despite being pickled with exhaustion, he flew to



the windowsill and bowed. Then he delivered a final full-blown canzone of his own composing, evoking the spirit of the 1851 premiere of *Rigoletto* in Venice, specifically, noted tenor Raffaele Mirate's rendering of *La Donna e Mobile* in Act 3. The bird's song was set in the celebratory key of D. But instead of building toward a thundering resolution, like Verdi's version, an ill-timed shake of a handkerchief caused the bird to bleed one G into an F-sharp. The startle of white, and the subsequent musical miscalculation, made Buster take a few thin-legged steps backwards, right off the windowsill. As he fell, the note continued dropping in pitch until landing in the bushes of an unceremonious B-flat. There followed a quasihemidemisemiquaver rest, during which Mrs. Percy Mallaby's guests were treated to flapping sounds, rustling sounds and raccoon sounds. Buster chirruped a final misplaced F-sharp and this time, fell silent.

Thus Jean-Jacques' reputation in Fiskill Landing plummeted. That night he was evicted from Mrs. Harding Walker's guest room without explanation. After sleeping on the bench in Mrs. Percy Mallaby's garden, which he mistakenly assumed to be safe territory, he took his serinette and his uninspired white canary back to the frayed edge of New York City where he lived in fine style until his money ran out again.

"For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," sung in a *lento* tempo and the haunting key of F-sharp minor, was a staple of Fishkill Landing funeral processions for the next few generations, beginning with the last rites of Mrs. Percy Mallaby.

After two months of once again losing her waist and tiptoeing through a quiet, uncomplaining home, she tripped over an enormous root in the back garden, only to discover it was in fact a leg attached to the torso of her former cook, who was there to steal winter vegetables, harvesting them from her old employer, who didn't have much of an appetite anyway, to please her new one. Mrs. Percy Mallaby was simply glad to bump into someone she knew. In fact, she thought it would be rather nice to invite the cook inside for tea, but the shock



of a human face among her beloved greens triggered an attack of the heart that wouldn't permit her tongue to loosen the necessary syllables. It seemed that in letting her husband go to ground she had, indeed, been vested with his weak heart. Moreover, the cook's terror, how white she turned, and how her mouth worked and spat without pronouncing anything intelligible, convinced Mrs. Percy Mallaby that she was a ghost. Or, rather, she was only pretending at life. The widow fell to her knees, settled her head between two thriving cauliflowers and never rose out of her own finely tended rows.

