

Readers Group Guide

The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë

Laura Joh Rowland

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A note from Laura Joh Rowland about the writing of *The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë*:

She was a Victorian parson's daughter, from a remote English village, who wrote a best selling, notorious, and beloved novel. That's what many people know about Charlotte Brontë, author of *Jane Eyre*. Not as many are aware that she lived a life as rich in adventure, romance, and tragedy as her famous novel.

I happened upon her story years ago, by sheer accident. I was a premed student at the University of Michigan, struggling to keep my head above water in my chemistry, biology, and physics courses. My favorite study break was browsing the shelves in the library and reading books about subjects far removed from science. One day I picked up a biography of Charlotte Brontë. I was enthralled by her experience at a grim Victorian boarding school, her extraordinary siblings, her dramatic rise to literary fame, her late in life marriage, and her early, tragic death.

Life intervened. I never went to med school. (The fact that I preferred reading for pleasure to studying science probably had something to do with it.) Inspired at least in part by Charlotte, I eventually became a writer, although of books as unrelated to her as one could imagine. But I never forgot her. What particularly stuck in my mind was the thought that no matter how much adventure she'd experienced, she always craved more. She was the ultimate yearning, romantic, creative spirit. Many years into my career as an author, I decided that Charlotte would make the perfect heroine for a historical suspense novel. Thus was born *The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë*.

There are definite parallels between Charlotte and Jane. Both had a lot of passion. They were ambitious -- they had the fire to be something more than they were. Like the classic heroine, they wanted to go places. Charlotte cared what people thought of her, but she did what she wanted to do and took the hits. She triumphed over the everyday things that circumscribed her life.

As I wrote the book, I combined the rich material of her life with the political and sexual intrigue beneath the prim morality of Victorian England. I tried to give Charlotte the adventure she craved. In the Victorian era, things were changing fast. The world was opening up through technology. It was a time of high propriety and moralism with a dirty underbelly -- a sex trade that flourished amid great poverty, for example. It was hard to come up with a plot that took advantage of that fascinating time. I didn't want to write a

small and limited village mystery. I had to learn all of European history of the period to send Charlotte on her adventures. England in the Victorian era had a finger in every pie in the world Charlotte was passionately interested in politics and the world around her. I couldn't have her limited to her own life in Haworth -- she wanted to do more.

The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë is my heartfelt tribute to one of the greatest authors of all time.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the narrative style reflects a nineteenth century woman writer? What aspects of the prose contribute to the notion that Charlotte Bronte actually wrote the story?
2. Victorian England is known for its strict sense of propriety and tradition. How did the characters in the story either abide by or diverge from these customs? Discuss the relationships between these characters: George White and Charlotte; John Slade and Charlotte; Monsieur Heger and Charlotte; Isabel White and Kuan Tzu-chan; Kuan Tzu-chan and Charlotte; Queen Victoria and Prince Consort; Branwell and his sisters.
3. The novel also addresses the clearly defined social hierarchy in Victorian England. What different social classes are represented in the novel? Which characters fall into those categories? How do the characters' social positions affect their role in the action of the novel? Consider the Bronte family, the relationship between John Slade and Lord Unwin, the Royal family, Isabel White, and the girls at the Charity School.
4. Women in Victorian England had very few opportunities for employment. Their need to work in Victorian society depended on their social status. What does the Bronte sisters' employment as governesses say about their social status?
5. Charlotte, Anne, and especially Emily have many arguments about revealing their true identities to the public. Many women authors used male pen names so that readers would take their books more seriously. What are some other reasons the sisters may have had for not wanting to reveal themselves as authors?
6. Since the novel is written from Charlotte's point of view in first person, in order to describe scenes in which Charlotte was not present, she rewrites entries from other people's journals or letters that people wrote. Because of this, we are aware of occurrences in the plot that Charlotte herself does not know until after her story ends. For example, we know Emily's experiences at the Charity School as it fits into the story, but Charlotte only learns of them after Emily's death. How do these

points of view shift and change the narrative? How do they affect your reading experience, and the way you identify with Charlotte?

7. We do not learn the significance of the dramatic scene in the prologue describing Beautiful Jade's murder until almost the end of the novel. How did this opening affect your expectations for the rest of the novel? If this scene had appeared later, when Kuan describes his life to Charlotte, how would it have changed your reading experience?
8. When Kuan first begins telling Charlotte about his life, Charlotte marvels at how foreign his life in China is from England society. During the nineteenth century, many Western countries separated themselves from Eastern cultures, categorizing them as exotic and foreign. In many novels written during the Victorian era, authors describe the Far East less as civilized than England. Charlotte admits that she had always "preferred to believe that people in the Far East were savage, ignorant heathens, and if they only knew better, they would understand that we wanted what was best for everyone. We, after all, were more advanced in science and philosophy; we were Christians, with God to justify our actions" (p. 261). Is Charlotte's realization that these assumptions may not be justified something that an average Victorian reader would think? Why or why not? How do you approach these kinds of beliefs from a contemporary standpoint?
9. Many issues, such as sexuality, gender, class, and political corruption that plagued Victorian England persist in society today. Discuss any characters that relate to current events or issues in our time. Consider Lord John Russell's corruption, Isabel White's prostitution, Charlotte's suppressed sexuality, and any others you can think of.
10. During the nineteenth century, England was a formidable power that ruled colonies all over the world. Kuan almost convinces Charlotte of his reasoning for his crimes by describing the terrible situation opium created in China. Do you think Charlotte was convinced only because of Kuan's alluring nature, or did Kuan have legitimate reasons for his actions? Later, Queen Victoria argues the other side of the issue – in favor of England. Charlotte realizes that the Queen of England will understandably argue for whatever helps England, but the Queen also makes some legitimate points. Does Charlotte ultimately believe in John Slade and their mission, or does she see Kuan's point of view to the end? How does Branwell's addiction to opium affect her views?
11. The novel centers itself in a widely studied time and place in history – the Victorian era. How well does the novel describe the society of that time to a reader who has never studied or read Victorian literature? Does biographical information about Charlotte Bronte and her family come through clearly in the midst of the fictional plot?

12. Throughout the story, Charlotte references her popular novel, *Jane Eyre*, as a loose parallel to her life – a life of adventure and love that she had always yearned to experience. How does the ending of this novel compare to the ending of *Jane Eyre*? Even though Charlotte has adventures that exceed her heroine's, she does not share the same fate in love as Jane Eyre. Why doesn't Charlotte marry John Slade? Discuss her reasoning for refusing along with what would have happened if the novel did end with their marriage.