

The first time I saw Lauren's name I was in an airport bookstore in New York. I was quite terrified of flying back then and what helped me through a flight was reading short stories. Novels were too difficult to concentrate on at 10,000 feet, I needed something short and short and sweet, better yet bittersweet or hair raising scary or very funny. I picked up *Florida* (Lauren's 2018 short story collection, as most of you will know), intriguing title. Leopard with half his face shown on the cover (liked that). Read the title of the first story: *Ghosts and empties* (right up my alley emotion wise stuck in that airport terminal) and then read the first lines, which are these: 'I have somehow become a woman who yells, and because I do not want to be a woman who yells, whose little children walk around with frozen watchful faces, I have taken to lacing on my running shoes after dinner and going out into the twilight streets for a walk, leaving the undressing and sluicing and reading and singing and tucking in of the boys to my husband, a man who does not yell'.

Okay, I thought, I am totally getting this book.

I got on the plane, downed a mini bottle of wine (also helps a little) started reading *Florida* and finished it when we touched down in Amsterdam. Just like what happened to me with Stephen King when I got my hands on a copy of *Misery* when I was fourteen, I was dead set on reading everything Lauren had written.

First, I Googled her of course, as one does, and found out – not so hard, it's on top of every Google search - that Barack Obama named her novel *Fates & Furies* as the best book he had read in 2015. That's basically the coolest thing that can happen to you as a writer of literature, besides maybe, just maybe, winning the Nobel Prize. And, as far as I am concerned, getting a compliment from Stephen King – which Lauren also got, and this for her debut novel *The Monsters of Templeton*, a story about a young woman who in the wake of a disastrous affair with her archeology professor returns pregnant and miserable to her ancestral home in Templeton, where at the same day the 50 foot corpse of

a monster surfaced in the local lake. King wrote: “I was sorry to see this rich and wonderful novel come to an end, and there is no higher success than that.” I couldn’t agree with him more, except that by ending it, I could move on to her next book *Arcadia* and another short story collection: *Delicate Edible Birds*. And then came *Fates & Furies*, in my opinion the most thoughts and feelings provoking novel about a marriage since *Revolutionary Road*.

‘A really powerful novel’, President Obama jubilated from the Oval Office. Very true. But I would like to add powerful, but not in the punch-that-big-red-bag-in-the-gym-with-sweaty-boxing-gloves kind of way. I think it is powerful in the sense that it makes you glad that you are alive and able to read this wonderful, beautiful work of art, which gives meaning, joy and a getaway from whatever you don’t feel like doing, and it gives you angles to look at things – whether it is the swamps of Florida or a hippie community in the sixties – from unexpected perspectives.

And then I waited, until *The Matrix* came out, a fictional biography of poet and mystic Marie de France – the last child in a long line of female warriors in a noble French family. Set in the early Middle Ages, Mary is cast out of the English court by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and is ordered by the queen to take charge of an impoverished community of nuns on the brink of starvation.

I read the in a hammock in France during the days of an overwhelming heat wave. It gave me a deep sense of emotional involvement with women – nuns in particular – and it gave me chills in the best possible way – and not just by reading the parts that describe how terribly cold and clammy it was in the abbey which Mary, who in the beginning very reluctantly takes on the task that has been pushed on her, turns into a fortress of female power.

As in all her books the use of language as well as the story lines are astonishing while they make complete sense all the time. As Mr. King would say: there is no higher success than that.

So. Let's now listen to Lauren's words in her own voice as she reads a few pages from *The Matrix*.