

THE PARTY WALL

BY *Catherine Leroux*

TRANSLATED BY *Lazer Lederhendler*

READING GUIDE

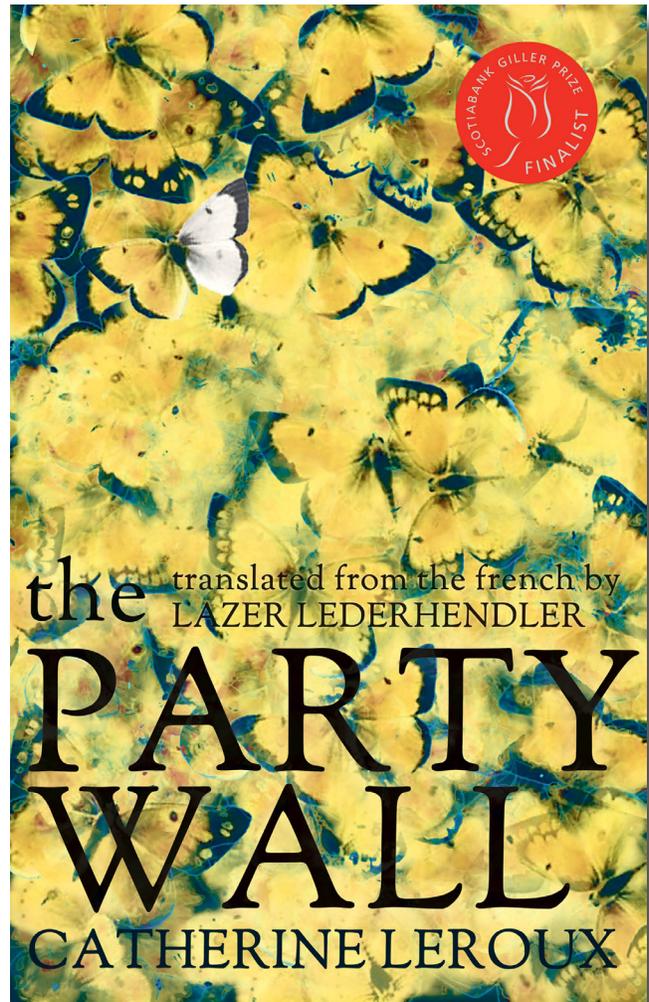
WINNER OF GOVERNOR
GENERAL'S AWARD FOR
LITERATURE—TRANSLATION
(FRENCH TO ENGLISH)

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2016
GILLER PRIZE

SELECTED FOR INDIES
INTRODUCE (SUMMER/FALL 2016)

CATHERINE LEROUX'S *The Party Wall* shifts between and ties together stories about pairs joined in surprising ways. A woman learns that she may not be the biological mother of her own son despite having given birth to him; a brother and sister unite, a their mother dies, to search for their long-lost father; two young sisters take a detour home, unaware of the tragedy that awaits; and a political couple—when the husband accedes to power in a post-apocalyptic sturue state—is shaken by the revelation of their own shared, if equally unknown, history.

Lyrical, intelligent and profound, *The Party Wall* is luminously human, a surreally unforgettable journey through the barriers that can both separate us and bring us together.



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ABOUT CATHERINE LEROUX

CATHERINE LEROUX was born in suburban Montreal in 1979. She studied philosophy at Université de Montreal, and worked at a wide variety of jobs in Quebec, Ontario, the United States, and Europe. She later became a journalist and was the Toronto correspondent for Radio-Canada. Her first novel, *La marche en forêt*, was nominated for the 2012 Quebec Booksellers' Prize. *The Party Wall*, her second novel, was a finalist for the 2013 Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal and won the prestigious Prix France-Québec in 2014. Both novels were published in France. Her most recent book, the story sequence *Madame Victoria*, appeared in 2015. Catherine Leroux lives in Montreal, where she is a full-time writer and translator.

ABOUT LAZER LEDERHENDLER

LAZER LEDERHENDLER is a full-time translator specializing in contemporary Québécois fiction and nonfiction. His translations have earned him many distinctions, including the Governor General's Literary Award and the Cole Prize for Translation from the Quebec Writers' Federation. His work has helped acquaint English-language readers with a new cohort of talented, innovative writers, such as Nicolas Dickner, Alain Farah, Perrine Leblanc, and Catherine Leroux.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the title of the book, *The Party Wall*. A party wall is the dividing partition that is common to two adjoining buildings or units within a structure. Can you identify moments when some of the characters felt their experiences/emotions walled them off from other people? What experiences/emotions (perhaps surprisingly) became, not partitions, but rather part of the architecture of a shared humanity between characters?
2. *The Party Wall* is a novel of pairs. Where can you see duality in this book?
3. Although Madeleine's situation is unique, many of her struggles could be considered universal. Do you identify in any way with Madeleine? Why or why not?
4. While Madeleine's fears were ultimately put to rest regarding her familial relation to her son, Leroux challenges the restrictive view of family as only blood relations in other storylines, and she explores many ways in which families can be cobbled together or destroyed—including violence, love, cultural taboos, and serendipity. What do you think makes a family: DNA, love, a shared history (good or bad), or something else?



5. How do you think the narrative would be different if Ariel and Marie's story ended after the big revelation? What do you think is the effect of showing the consequences of that pivotal moment?
 6. Simon and Carmen may experience an earthquake in a way that none of the others do, but in what sense do all the characters have to deal with their own personal earthquake?
 7. What do you think is the effect of using "The Sisters in the Walls" as a way to close the novel? What does it mean for Monette and Angie? Do you think the sisters in the walls represent any of the other sets of characters in the novel?
 8. Is the ending satisfying to you? If so, why? If not, how would you change it? Do you feel differently about the individual endings to each narrative thread?
 9. This novel was written by Catherine Leroux and translated from the original French by Lazer Lederhendler. Do you think a party wall could also be a metaphor for the act of translation? Each language a separate unit, but the act of translation the attempt at conveying shared experiences, a common structure to our humanity? Does this book make you interested in seeking out other books in translation?
 10. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?
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AN INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE LEROUX

The Party Wall is your first English publication, though you have published three novels already in French. As an introduction to English-language editors and reviewers who may not know your work, could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your writing?

The main thing my three books have in common is their abundance of characters and intertwined storylines. I don't know why they always turn out this way. I've tried to write linear, two-character stories but I get bored. My approach to writing about any subject is to multiply angles, voices and points of view. I like to look at a theme, an event or a character through a fractured lens, or a broken mirror, so to speak.

In my first two novels, of which *The Party Wall* is the second, I wrote about family and genealogy; I wanted to reflect on what is inherited from one generation to the next, what resurfaces after it's been buried or forgotten. I'm also interested in questions of identity, and I like to observe my characters in the most pivotal moments of their lives. My third



book stemmed from a news story about an unidentified body found near the Royal-Victoria Hospital, which allowed me to write about death, women and anonymity while trying on various literary genres.

All my books contain some element of fantasy, or magical realism – I’ve never been quite sure what to name it. I believe (I hope) this allows my stories to be fuller, thicker, more poetic, to somehow contain more.

We can see from the notes at the end that you took some inspiration from real-life stories. What was it about these stories that inspired you? Was there any other spark that led you to write this novel?

I first began “collecting” these stories in 2005 – several years before I started writing the book. At first, I didn’t know they would come together. I just found them fascinating. They were so unbelievable, I kept thinking no writer would ever dare to invent something like that. The first two (Madeleine and Ariel & Marie) struck me because of the revelation element: these people had always carried this big secret, the truth was inside them all along and then suddenly it came out and their whole life was shaken.

With time, I started to think of the stories as somehow linked, but I wasn’t sure how. Then one day, I was having a very mundane conversation about some renovations I needed to do on my house and somebody uttered the words “mur mitoyen” (“party wall,” the shared wall between two houses). That was the spark. These stories were all about people from the same family who were dealing with a wall like that, one that is both shared and dividing. That became the title, and it drove the writing from beginning to end.

One of the things that fascinates me the most about this book is the way you approach duality. Could you talk a little bit about this?

I think one of the most important parts of leaving childhood behind is understanding that the world doesn’t function in oppositions: nothing is black or white, nothing is purely binary. People are not good or bad, and limits are not absolute. This is a notion that I still struggle with as an adult. That is probably why it was so interesting for me to explore it. All four storylines contain a dyad of characters who are questioning dualism; they are repositioning in relation to the boundaries between each other, learning that their “party wall” is thicker or more permeable than they thought.

As I was writing, the notion of duality began to present itself in other aspects of the book. It almost became a compulsion: I was seeing it everywhere, from the wall between Mexico and the US to the divide between Francophones and Anglophones in Canada; my mind collected all these real or symbolic splits and walls.



In a sense, the second half of Marie and Ariel's story takes responsibility for the first. What made you want to explore the broader scope of their lives, rather than focusing on that one pivotal moment?

I felt like their big revelation needed context, follow-up, otherwise it would have been nothing more than a big sensationalistic “aha!” What was interesting to me was to see what they would do with this devastating information, how they would survive. What this would say about the way bonds are formed between people. We can say Ariel and Marie met as man and woman, as lovers, and it is very difficult for them to undo this. We can also say something deep and ineffable united them, and that is why they always end up together.

As the stories unravel, the directions they go in seem to make interesting assertions about twins and kinship. What would you say fuelled your decisions about these characters' lives? And what fascinates you the most about kinships like these?

There's always been something mysterious about twins – we've all heard incredible stories about twins separated at birth who ended up having the same professions, lifestyle, named their children the same ... I read a lot about these connections and that was a big part of the initial inspiration for the novel. But what I aimed for mostly was to write about kinship in general. I find that the fraternal bond is a kind of love that is often overlooked in art, outshadowed by romantic or parent-child relationships. Yet it is so unique and crucial – nobody in the world can know the exact circumstances and conditions under which we grew up except a brother or a sister.

What were your intentions in using “The Sisters in the Walls” as a way to close the novel? Could you talk a little bit about its implications for Monette and Angie? And, for that matter, the other three pairs in the novel?

The book ends with a tale as a way to open it up and to cast a sidelong look at the rest of the novel. It is also a nod to the way fiction can carry us, sometimes at the most challenging times and how, without trying to, it explains things for us. In this case, the character who is thinking of the sisters in the wall story has just made a huge sacrifice for a sibling, and this might be a way for her mind to start grasping what happened, to live in a narrative where sisterly love trumps everything.

In the broader context of the novel, this is the final step in dealing with the infamous wall: we are not on one side or another, we are not building it, climbing it nor breaking it. We are inside of it. There is life within the thinnest barrier.