



Lila: A Novel of Trials and Triumph

Mae Schick

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The stoicism of pioneers on the Great Plains is brought vividly to life through one young woman's struggles.

More than one hundred thousand Germans immigrated to the United States from Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. They brought with them traditional roles, recipes, and religions, along with grit and determination, as they settled across the Great Plains and prairie lands. In *Lila*, Mae Schick highlights one young woman's journey to reconcile the often harsh old-world values with those of the vibrant, new generation coming of age in the 1920s.

Lila is responsible, dutiful, and hardworking. She once dreamed of becoming a teacher, but since her mother's death, she has taken care of her younger brothers and sisters and helped her father on the farm, finding solace in baking for her family and neighbors. When her emotionally distant father becomes abusive at the urging of his new wife, Lila escapes with the help of Fischer, a charismatic troublemaker.

Set amid close-knit Russian-German communities in North Dakota and Montana, Lila's cultural background plays a key role in shaping her life, personality, and decisions. The narrative opens on Lila's father's dairy farm in simple present tense and remains there throughout the opening chapters. Later, lapses into past tense begin occurring either mid-sentence or for several paragraphs at a time, breaking up what is otherwise a well-crafted tale.

Schick populates Lila's story with fascinating historical snippets of everyday life from this obscure but widespread group of immigrants, from the *Evangelisch-Lutherische* Church Sunday school and meetings to Lila's famous recipe for *pflaumenkuchen*. The men and women in *Lila* both embrace and struggle with their heritage of stoicism and forbearance, which has been passed down generation after generation.

This attitude is reflected in the parceling out of information as the narrative unfolds. Emotions and tempers build, only to be abandoned momentarily or altogether for the start of a new direction or chapter, leaving specific details and outcomes up to the imagination. In one instance, the ladies in Lila's social circle embrace their lot: "None of the diffident women meeting together and looking for shelter in the presence of other disquieted souls discuss their personal misfortunes... There is a tacit understanding that each must suffer her personal sorrows and humiliation."

Lila is a true character study of particular interest to descendants of German, Russian, or any Eastern European immigrant families. Young adults will sympathize and relate to Lila's early struggles, while adults will appreciate the subtleties and quiet successes as she matures and comes into her own.

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