

Fear Itself  
Candida Lawrence  
October 1  
ISBN 1-932961-01-1  
5" x 7 1/4"  
224 pages  
\$19.95  
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### **A Reader's Guide to ...*Fear Itself***

#### **About the Book**

For Candida Lawrence, the grief following her repeated miscarriages nearly becomes unbearable, especially when a growing, nagging suspicion forces her to piece together the commonality of her miscarriages and her association with national labs secretly involved in building atomic weaponry. What she discovers is horrifying – a government knowingly subjecting its citizens to low levels of radiation.

In *Fear Itself*, Lawrence takes readers back to an unprecedented time in America, a time when secrets seemed to be the very foundation of this country and male-dominated society. World War II has ended, yet America continues to secretly wage war...a new war against its own as scientists create and test atomic weaponry across the United States. Lawrence and her husband work in several government facilities during the 1940s and 1950s, where their health was regularly monitored for reasons not quite clear to them. Lawrence, however, begins to feel a “cosmic angst” – a fear and discomfort based on intuition. Before long, she realizes her anxiety and distrust are warranted.

In her first two books – *Reeling & Writhing* and *Change of Circumstance* – Lawrence relays vivid accounts of her failed marriage and child custody battle that eventually led her to kidnap her children from her abusive ex-husband, living on the run under assumed names so that she could raise her children in safety. Now in *Fear Itself*, Lawrence looks at the years before her children were born when she grapples with her identity as a young

wife and graduate student, when she struggles to conceive a child, and then much later, when she arrives at an unsettling acceptance of the conditions life has dealt her.

In this memoir, Lawrence becomes a voice for hundreds of thousands of Americans who were unknowingly exposed to dangerous levels of radiation. By sharing this disturbing and heart-rending account, Lawrence not only tackles her own personal struggle to heal herself but also to bring to light difficult political and social issues of growing importance today.

### **About the Author**

Often called a survivor in the truest sense of the word, Candida Lawrence is a portrait in resilience. Her memoirs recall in searing detail her persistent attempts to conceive a child, her failed marriages, and her determination to raise her children away from their father. Candida is her false name, adopted in 1965 when she and her children chose new identities and went in to hiding.

Lawrence is the author of three autobiographical narratives. She lives and writes in Mill Valley, California.

### **Discussion**

1. The events of this book take place during a time of significant social and political upheaval in the United States (for example, nuclear weapons production during the cold war, the growing women's rights movement, Joseph McCarthy's crusade against communism). How has the sense of trust in the government and other authority figures changed since the 1940s and 1950s?
2. As the narrative begins, Lawrence sets the scene for later disappointments by recalling her classroom experience with the Pledge of Allegiance. She's puzzled when her father tells her she doesn't have to recite the pledge: "...you cannot promise to respect a country today when it might not behave well next month, or tomorrow. Understand?" he tells her. What is the role of government? Is it meant to be a protective force watching over its

citizens? Is it meant to steer the public toward a greater awareness, that is, toward a more enlightened, compassionate view of the world?

3. Even at a young age, Lawrence is plagued by a sense that she doesn't fit in. These feelings peak when she and her first husband tell friends in Berkeley about their pending divorce. Lawrence feels she's losing the only community in which she's ever belonged. What has bonded these friends? Why are they so angry about the divorce?

4. How does Lawrence react when she learns that her husband knew Mical, their stillborn daughter, had been dead long before she was delivered? A few months later, when Lawrence becomes pregnant again, she chooses to have an abortion. Her husband tells her she is "brave...considering." What does he mean?

5. The most significant men in Lawrence's life – her father, husbands, lovers, bosses, doctors – are all nameless in this book. What is Lawrence's opinion of these and other "men who make things"? How do they impact her life?

6. Durevol, the youthful free spirit, is very unlike the other men Lawrence knows. Although he's had no formal schooling, he's an architect, painter, sculptor, musician, and dancer. Lawrence tells him, "Probably no one forced you to *do* anything or *be* anybody, so you just grew and did things, and here you are!" How comfortable is Lawrence with the conventional roles of women at the time?

7. Toward the end of the book, Lawrence is in Nevada investigating the environmental damage caused by above-ground bomb testing. What drives her to pursue this information? Who does she blame for the far-reaching effects of this testing?

8. *Fear Itself* is a book about significant losses. After her divorce from her first husband, Lawrence says, "We get scratched and mottled by acid air, but we don't shatter." Years later, she refuses follow-up treatment after a radical mastectomy: "No chemo, no radiation, please...I've had enough." Although her body may have been ravaged by radiation, is Lawrence able to heal her spirit?

9. Lawrence says there's no palliative to ease the loss she feels from her mastectomy. Would her feelings be different if her cancer had not been the direct result of exposure to a contaminated environment?

10. What lessons have we – the public and the government – learned about the reckless use of radiation, pesticides, and pollutants? What does it take to motivate public interest to prevent potential hazards to people and the environment? What does it take to bring these issues to the forefront?

11. Lawrence chooses to reveal her experiences by narrating her memoir. Interspersed with her memories are excerpts from books and newspapers investigating the circumstances around Americans' exposure to radiation. How does the addition of these accounts impact her story?

### **Recommended Reading**

Susan Griffins. *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War* (1992)

Candida Lawrence. *Reeling & Writhing* (1994)

Candida Lawrence. *Change of Circumstance* (1995)

Eileen Welsome. *The Plutonium Files: America's Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War* (1999)

Terry Tempest Williams. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1992)

### **Praise for ...*Fear Itself***

"This is a powerful book, recording an unintended and eventually hidden though insidiously consequential way that 20th century inventions of violence damage and destroy lives. The author tells her story in a terse, refreshingly authentic voice, wry at times, yet unflinching when faced with complex, often tragic revelations. The story is one we should all know if we are to chart a better future for those who come after us."

– Susan Griffin, author of *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*

“Candida Lawrence’s valuable story, which begins in her childhood, is frightening in its detailed information about the American lives (old and unborn) lost to the secret keepers of the national and corporate nuclear industries.”

– Grace Paley