Tenderness by Alison Macleod

About this book

On the glittering shores of the Mediterranean in 1928, a dying author in exile races to complete his final novel. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a sexually bold love story, a searing indictment of class distinctions, and a study in sensuality. But the author, D. H. Lawrence, knows it will be censored. He publishes it privately, loses his copies to customs, and dies bereft.

Booker Prize–longlisted author Alison MacLeod brilliantly recreates the novel's origins and boldly imagines its journey to freedom through the story of Jackie Kennedy, who was known to be an admirer. In MacLeod's telling, Jackie—in her last days before becoming first lady—learns that publishers are trying to bring D. H. Lawrence's long-censored novel to American and British readers in its full form. The U.S. government has responded by targeting the postal service for distributing obscene material. Enjoying what anonymity she has left, determined to honor a novel she loves, Jackie attends the hearing incognito. But there she is quickly recognized, and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover takes note of her interest and her outrage.

Through the story of Lawrence's writing of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the historic obscenity trial that sought to suppress it in the United Kingdom, and the men and women who fought for its worldwide publication, Alison MacLeod captures the epic sweep of the twentieth century from war and censorship to sensuality and freedom. Exquisite, evocative, and grounded in history, *Tenderness* is a testament to the transformative power of fiction.

For discussion

1. The novel begins with several different epigraphs from various sources, including writer Gwyn Thomas during the book's obscenity trial, D. H. Lawrence's wife, Frieda, and Lawrence himself. How does the range of these quotations complement the different narratives that comprise the novel? Consider how each stands for the novel on its own, and also as part of a chorus, a symphony of voices and stories.
2. Out of the novel's range of narratives, the author chooses to open the story in Lawrence's and Frieda's points of view, after the publication of *Lady Chatterley*. Discuss this choice with your book club—what effect does opening the novel in this period have on the overall reading experience?
3. Lawrence described the form of the novel as the "bright book of life." When he tried to cut the so-called hot bits from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, he said, "The book bleeds." In *Tenderness*, MacLeod writes: "A novel into which one poured life became a life . . . coursing through its lines as blood courses through veins, as milk rises in a breast, as sap surges in wood." Is a novel more than the sum of its ideas? Is a story more than its plot? Can a novel, as a vessel of human consciousness, come "to life" as its covers open? Can that life meet—or even transform—that of another?
4. Early in the novel, Frieda thinks to herself, "English in England was a trap in which one revealed, without realizing, the details of one's station" (MacLeod, 8), seeming to echo shades of Connie Chatterley's remark, "Talk is beastly: especially if you live in society,"

in *Lady Chatterley.* The power—and barriers—of language is an essential element of *Tenderness* and of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* itself. What are some other instances in *Tenderness* where language might also be described as a "trap" or otherwise creates constraints?

5. D. H. Lawrence, in the character as imagined by MacLeod, thinks of his relationship with Frieda as "one great beast of burden; he was the beast, and she, the burden" (19). How would you describe "Lorenzo" and Frieda's relationship, and how does it change over the course of the story? As arguably the central relationship of the novel, how does it compare to the other portrayals of romantic relationships, from Jackie and Jack's, to Lawrence and Rosalind's, Dina and Nick's, and Hoover and Clyde's (and all others in between)?
6. "Once upon a time, she had hoped to write fiction for the *New Yorker.* Now, she was the fiction" (49). Describe MacLeod's portrayal of Jacqueline Kennedy in *Tenderness*, a real woman so often turned into fiction. How does MacLeod make her character, as well as the other characters based on other real people, come alive in her novel?
7. "Who didn't sometimes need the sudden flare of transformation? Who wasn't afraid from being cut off from the quick of life?" thinks Jackie at one point in the novel (57). How do sex, romance, and intimacy provide "transformation" for the characters in *Tenderness*?
8. "Mystique was not the same thing as allure . . . Mystique distanced. Allure beckoned," asserts Jackie (65). How do these conceptions of "mystique" and "allure" manifest in the female characters in *Tenderness*? Do you agree with this sentiment?
9. In the section, "Lady Chatterley on Trial," the definition of *shameless* in regards to Connie Chatterley's actions is reframed from something indecent to something empowering: "Cast[ing] off inhibition and shame" (77). In what ways do the characters in *Tenderness* act within this definition of *shameless*?
10. In the same section, it is said that "Lawrence doesn't regard the relation of Lady Chatterley and Oliver Mellors as extramarital. It is a true marriage" (78). What is a "true marriage" according to both Lawrence and *Tenderness*? What "marriages" in *Tenderness* would you consider "true"?
11. "Kennedy, on the other hand, was young, inexperienced, and 'liberal'—which, in Hoover's terms, was just another way of saying 'immoral'" (101). In what other ways is "immorality" defined in the societies portrayed in *Tenderness*? How does it change—or not change—from Lawrence's time to Jackie's?
12. "She did not need an inner life, she would reply to her husband, because she had married a writer, and he had inner life enough for them both," thinks Frieda in regards to her marriage to D. H. Lawrence (183). Contrast this sentiment with Jackie's training at boarding school to "cultivate a persona," an aim that Jackie understood to serve as "not the effacement of a self, but rather, the creation of a private space within, the only truly private life most society women could hope to enjoy" (67). Do you see a difference between an inner life and the "shelter" of a persona? Despite her assertions, do we see examples of Frieda's own inner "private space" surface in the novel?
13. D. H. Lawrence used Sir Clifford Chatterley's wheelchair as an "outward manifestation of an inward paralysis, the paralysis of an entire generation who closed their eyes to the

truths of war" (36). From Jackie's pregnancy to Harding's eczema, elements of the body are prominent throughout *Tenderness*. Could these examples—as well as any others you can think of—also be outward manifestations of something? In a book centered around the importance of the body as well as the mind, how do bodies prevent or invite tenderness and intimacy?

14. "There were, she told herself, two kinds of women: those who wanted power in the world, and those who wanted power in bed," thinks Jackie at one point in the novel (221). This is something Jacqueline Kennedy herself apparently said. Do you agree that these groups are mutually exclusive? Do we see examples of each group in *Tenderness*, or any overlaps between the two?

15. Similarly, Jackie thinks "Sex was the only state in which a women could achieve . . . the power of self-possession, of being alive in one's self and one's body" (221). By the end of the novel, how do we see Jackie—or any of the other female characters—achieve self-possession, through sex or otherwise?

16. Jacqueline Kennedy apparently loved the art of Corot. When Lionel Trilling visits Jackie's home in Hyannis, he bumps into the Corot painting *Diana and Actaeon* hanging in her home: "For the ancients, a man's direct gaze upon a mortal woman was an act of over-familiarity at best, and a claim at worst, a wordless declaration of possession. But to spy upon a *goddess* was to trespass upon deity; on the private sphere of an immortal. It was a violation of the sacred, and nothing less than profane . . . Did Diana in that moment, Jackie wondered, know the power of her own curse?" (229). Discuss this passage, and the introduction of this particular painting into the narrative, in relation to Harding's intrusion into Jackie's life. How does the male gaze infiltrate Jackie and the other female characters in *Tenderness*, and what are the powers of their respective "curses"?

17. In conversation with Trilling, Jackie asks, "How can we as people come to love variousness and difficulty—in the way we do in literature and stories and poetry—when we are in love with modern conveniences, with . . . endlessly straight highways, with . . . segregated lives and perpetual economic growth?" (234), echoing Lawrence's earlier internal musings of "[England's] people now had more and more—bigger houses, proud water closets, stuffed furniture, new motor-cars—but they no longer knew how to feel alive in their lives" (22). How does the novel portray the challenges posed by society's advancements complex intellectual thought, or the ability to "feel alive"?

18. In her letter to Michael Rubinstein, Barbara Wall notes that Lawrence's work "is haunted by the figure of the 'useless male'" (417). Is power a complex thing in MacLeod's rendering of public figures such as Hoover and J. F. Kennedy? Do the stories of less overtly powerful men—Lawrence himself, Perceval Lucas, Agent Harding, or the witness Richard Hoggart—cast another light on what "male power" in the world might also mean?

19. We often find the character of J. Edgar Hoover regarding a photograph of young Shirley Temple throughout the novel: "Kids are great company," he thinks to himself (477). Does his fixation on this photograph surprise you? What might it suggest about his character and his perceptions of purity versus obscenity?

20. The novel gets its title from Lawrence's original working title for *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* After reading, how would you define *tenderness* and how is it explored throughout MacLeod's novel?
21. Is the human imagination—as we connect with a good story—somehow "bigger" than we are, or bigger than we might be in our day-to-day lives? As Jackie notes in *Tenderness*, Lionel Trilling wrote: "Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind we will not like." Is the human imagination—as fed by novels, art, photographs, and film—an overlooked source of power and transformation?
22. As Mel Harding listens to Cathleen reading a tender passage aloud from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, it "draws him to her like a spell." How, for you, does the prose or story of a novel you've enjoyed cast a spell? What are its pleasures? Have you "disappeared" into another world? Did the rhythm of its language and descriptions draw you in? Did it possess a form of "magic"? Did it grip you? Did it "enchant" or enthral?

Suggested Reading: *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* by Therese Anne Fowler, *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles, *The Master* by Colm Tóibín, *Winter* by Christopher Nicholson, *Isadora* by Amelia Gray, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows; *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *The Rainbow*, and *England, My England* by D. H. Lawrence.

Alison MacLeod is the author of three novels, *The Changeling*, *The Wave Theory of Angels*, and *Unexploded*, which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2013, and two collections of stories, *Fifteen Modern Tales of Attraction* and *All the Beloved Ghosts*. She is the joint winner of the Eccles British Library Writer's Award 2016 and is Visiting Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Chichester. She was raised in the States and Canada and lives in Brighton.