

*Dale Loves Sophie to Death*

by Robb Forman Dew

A READING GROUP GUIDE

*A Conversation with  
Robb Forman Dew*

*How did you begin to write novels? Did you always want to be a writer?*

I've been thinking about that a lot lately—why I became a writer, that is. I used to think it was because I had something urgent to say. But I actually started writing before I could even write. I don't know how old I was—four or five—and I would fill pages with wavy lines as though I were writing words. So maybe it's a genetic imperative of some sort. I don't think I've ever asked anyone why he or she became a painter, because I assumed it was simply a deep pleasure because that person was talented. But, of course, I'm sure painting is filled with the same euphoria and misery as writing.

I grew up in a family where everyone seemed to write, or seemed to want to write. I remember being truly startled when a friend of mine avoided a class in college because she would have to write essays, and instead she took a science course. It was the first time I really understood that loving to read—my friend was a great reader—really didn't have that much to do with wanting to write. And I've come to a few conclusions about why people do write. I think that writers really have to write or they become unhappy—even depressed and disoriented. And I think that they're lucky if they also have talent, but whether talented or not, anyone who writes is—for the time the actual writing is going on—imagining that he or she is imposing on some imagined reader a worldview. It's an unconscious attempt at seduction, I think.

*When did you start writing Dale Loves Sophie to Death? How long did the novel take you to write?*

Oh, I think that I was growing increasingly frustrated with my inability to write good short stories. I was getting some of them

published, but I knew they weren't right. I was so furious at myself at one point—for finishing a story and knowing that while some of the writing was good the story didn't work—that I picked up my typewriter and put it in the middle of the driveway so that when my husband came home that evening in the dark he would run over it! Of course, about a half hour later I rushed out and saved it—I couldn't have afforded another, and it had occurred to me, too, that it might ruin our car. Also, of course, how on earth could I have explained it to my husband? But I think my idea was that if my typewriter got run over by a car, then it would hardly be *my* fault if I didn't write.

During my twenties and early thirties I struggled with short stories, and they were published in some wonderful journals, and those editors were extremely encouraging. I began the first chapter of *Dale Loves Sophie to Death* as a story. And I was pretty pleased with the ending for once, but I didn't send it out right away, and I began another story which in the back of my head I knew was not a story; it was a second chapter. But I was too terrified to admit it. By the time I had four chapters I admitted to myself that I was writing a novel.

*How did the response to Dale Loves Sophie to Death—and, in particular, winning the National Book Award—affect your writing, your career, your life?*

I was thirty-five when *Dale* was published and thirty-six when I won the Book Award, and for about five days I was simply elated. It was like being the homecoming princess at Westdale Junior High School. I felt just as Sally Field must have felt when she received her second Academy Award and said, "You like me! You really like me!" And then—since I had won it—it began to seem to me not all that special. And the following year when I was asked to be one of many judges for the award, I realized that my book was probably a choice that was a compromise for most of the judges. It really didn't change my career as far as I know, although it probably made it easier to get publishers to read my manuscripts. But it didn't alter the way I write or cause me to worry about succeeding with my next book.

*In your third novel, Fortunate Lives, you chose to write again about the family at the center of Dale Loves Sophie to Death. Did you always know that you'd return to the Howells family?*

You know, I really can't remember. I know they stayed in my mind, but my second book, *The Time of Her Life*, was the obverse of *Dale*. It was about a less healthy family, and I certainly wasn't thinking of the Howellses then. The Howellses were moving right along with me through my life, though. They were learning the most terrible things you can learn—which were passions and terrors that I only knew through them—and yet in the grand scheme of things they were incredibly lucky. I believe it was the irony of their being safe and comfortable—enviable to so many people on the earth—while suffering a loss that is as bad as anything that can happen to anyone that intrigued me about the Howellses. Well, I guess I was bound to return to them. And I think that in the trilogy I'm at work on now all the families from my books will end up knowing one another or possibly being related. I know there's some sort of connection.

*The setting of Dale Love Sophie to Death—Enfield, Ohio—is almost like a character in the book. Can you talk about the importance of place in your novels?*

It's something I don't think about much except for the actual town or neighborhood—the immediate surroundings, the weather. When I first started writing, the South was the setting for all my stories—I grew up in Louisiana. But it was like struggling to grow while being suffocated by kudzu. I grew up during the civil rights movement—my high school didn't integrate until I was a junior, in 1963. I cared passionately about social justice and race relations, and when I realized that I could not write about the South without tackling those issues on some level, I switched locales. I wanted my stories to happen in a place that didn't need to be explained, because although I'm politically active, politics is unbearably distracting to me when I write fiction.

*What are your favorite books, books that have influenced you, or books you enjoy recommending to readers?*

Well, the usual suspects, I suppose. Austen, James, Virginia Woolf. And I've discovered that when I read many books when I was young I knew they were wonderful but I missed so much of what was brilliant about them. I'm rereading Eudora Welty right now. *Delta Wedding*. She's so good that I didn't realize just how brilliant she was until this reading. How it could have escaped me is mysterious to me. She has such tact and is so careful, but this book is like a pointillist painting. There are so many ways to understand her characters.

I was enormously affected by Fitzgerald, who's so visual a writer, and by Peter Taylor, who has exquisite phrasing. I worked very hard for a long time trying to achieve his sense of ease—the sense that the story already exists and is just being unraveled for you. But the book that made me want to write—and which I came upon, oddly enough, in the Baton Rouge bus station when I was taking a bus to visit my cousins in Natchez—was *The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead. When I got back to Baton Rouge it turned out that my mother had just read it as well. It's an astonishing book. It's a masterpiece, and it always seems to me the opposite, in a way, of *War and Peace*, which I also love for all sorts of reasons but especially for the wonderful story. Each of those books gives you an entirely believable world, but Stead's starts wide and becomes so amazingly intense that finally it's like a laser of compressed emotion. Tolstoy explodes into a universe and gets wider and wider.

*Has it gotten easier, or more difficult, for you to write as you get older?*

Oh, no. And that's what's so wonderful about being fifty-four. At last I thought to myself that whether or not anyone would acknowledge my right to assume authority, I was ready to take it anyway. And I was able to think . . . wider, bigger, with more reach. I was weary of concentrating on a relatively narrow range.

*What are you working on now? You mentioned a trilogy . . .*

*The Evidence Against Her* is the first in a series of three novels, each of which will stand on its own. The second book is tentatively titled *Greenside Lane*, and the third book, also tentatively titled, is *Two Girls Wearing Perfume in the Summer*. The series is

a tale of a particular American family from its inception, beginning with the gradual confluence through marriage of four midwestern families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and that family’s evolution through the 1900s and into the early years of the twenty-first century.

I’m interested in the careless, random, ironic, or merely accidental circumstances from which communal and familial myths and expectations are first derived, and of course, I intend to unravel the intricate—sometimes tragic—consequences of those myths.

I have always been interested primarily in an investigation of character, and that still absorbs me, but I also want to give readers a whole world, so that when they have finished any one of these books they will be able to revisit its landscape in their imaginations. I want any reader to believe that he or she grasps more about the essential lives of the characters than those characters understand about themselves. I want to make it clear that the accuracy of those legends and myths by which we all define ourselves is irrelevant in the long run. We inherit or grow into expectations based on who we are assumed to be because of family, class, gender, race, etc. And much of the struggle of discovering a way to be happy is choosing which myths and legends we embrace and fulfill, and at what point it’s necessary to discard the expectations of anyone else altogether.

## *Reading Group Guide Questions and Topics for Discussion*

1. Discuss *Dale Loves Sophie to Death* as a portrait of a marriage. Do you consider Dinah and Martin's marriage successful? How does it compare with other marriage portraits in the novel—for example, Lawrence and Pam's marriage? Dinah's parents' marriage?
2. Why did Dinah, as an adolescent, consider dancing to be “far sexier than sex” (page 185)? Do you agree with her perceptions about dancing?
3. Discuss Dinah's response to the birth of her first child (pages 174–175). Why was she both embarrassed and enraged?
4. Have you ever had a friend like Isobel? How does Dinah and Isobel's friendship change in the course of the novel?
5. Discuss Dinah's response to Toby's illness. Was she irresponsible in not seeking medical help sooner?
6. The novel offers some very sensual and highly detailed descriptions of food. Discuss the special role that food plays in the Howellses' domesticities.
7. Dinah realizes at a certain point that she has returned to Enfield every summer because she seeks an apology. “She wanted an absolute, blanket apology from Buddy and from Isobel and from Polly and from her father” (page 138). Does Dinah receive such an apology in the course of *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*? Why?
8. Do you consider Dinah responsible for the death of her father's cat? Discuss the role animals play in the novel. Consider, for example, the lost dog that Dinah and her parents

encounter on their walk through town. Consider also the kittens Dr. Briggs brings the Howells children at the end of the novel.

9. “The events that might astonish them now—the only things that could not be foreseen—were the *unpleasant* surprises” (page 187). Do you agree that Dinah’s fate is sealed? That there can lie in store for her no happy surprises?
10. Why do you think Robb Forman Dew chose the title *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*, particularly in view of the fact that Dale and Sophie are not characters in the book? Do you consider the title appropriate for the novel?





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robb Forman Dew received the National Book Award in 1982 for her first novel, *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*. She is also the author of the novels *The Time of Her Life* and *Fortunate Lives*, available in paperback from Back Bay Books, and the memoir *The Family Heart*.

## ... AND HER MOST RECENT NOVEL

*The Evidence Against Her* will be published in hardcover by Little, Brown and Company in September 2001.  
Following is a preview.



There are any number of villages, small towns, and even cities of some size to which no one ever goes except on purpose. There are only travelers on business of one sort or another, personal or professional, who arrive without any inclination to dally, or to dawdle, or to daydream. And yet, almost always in these obscure precincts there is a fine grassy park, a statue, perhaps, and benches placed under tall old spreading trees and planted around with unexceptional seasonal flowers, petunias or geraniums or chrysanthemums in all likelihood, or possibly no more than a tidy patch of English ivy. A good many visitors have sat on such benches for a moment or two, under no burden to take account of their surroundings, under no obligation to enjoy themselves. A stranger to such a place may settle for longer than intended, losing track of the time altogether—slouching a bit against the wooden slats, stretching an arm along the back of the bench, and enjoying the sun on a nice day, comfortably oblivious to passersby and unself-consciously relaxed—without assuming the covertly alert, defensive, nearly apologetic posture of a tourist.

By and large these towns are middling to small, and are never on either coast or even any famous body of water such as a good-sized lake or major river. These are communities that lie geographically and culturally in unremarkable locales: no towering mountains, no breathtaking sweep of deep valleys, no overwhelming or catastrophic history particular only to that place. In fact, with only a few exceptions, these unrenowned districts are all villages, towns, or small cities exactly like Washburn, Ohio, about which people are incurious, requiring only the information that it is approximately forty-five miles east of Columbus.

As it happens, Monument Square in the town of Washburn is not four sided but hexagonal and was a gift to the city from the Washburn Ladies Monument Society, ceded to the town simultaneously at the unveiling and dedication of the Civil War monument on July 4, 1877. The monument itself is a life-size statue of a Union soldier at parade rest, gazing southward from his perch atop a thirty-foot fluted granite column, the pediment of which is just over twelve feet high. Altogether the monument stands nearly fifty feet, and on its west face is the inscription:

Our Country!  
By that dread name  
we wave the sword on high,  
and swear for her to live  
for her to die.

—Campbell

Within a year of the dedication ceremony the common idea among the citizens of Washburn was that the stonemason—imported all the way from Philadelphia, hurrying the work, eager to catch the train, and possibly with a few too many glasses of beer under his belt—had chiseled into that smooth granite the mistake “dread name” as opposed to “dear name.”

In the spring of 1882, Leo Scofield, soon after he and his brothers had cleared the woods and begun construction of their houses on the north side of the square, had written to Mrs. Dowd, who commissioned the statue but who had moved back to Philadelphia soon after its unveiling, to inquire if he might have the mistaken inscription altered at his own expense. He had

attempted to cast his offer along the lines of being an act of gratitude for her generous gift, but Leo was only thirty-one years old then, a young man still, without much good sense. He was enormously pleased by the largesse of his idea—which had occurred to him one day out of the blue—and delighted that he finally had the wherewithal to make such an offer. A slightly self-congratulatory air tinged the tactlessly exuberant wording of his letter, and he was brought up short by her reply:

. . . furthermore, I shall arrange to have the statue removed piece by piece if need be, as it is I who pays out the money each year for its upkeep, should the inscription in any way be altered. I never shall believe in all the days left to me that the preservation of the Union was worth the price of the good life of my dear husband, Colonel Marcus Dowd, who left his post as President of Harcourt Lees College to head Company A. He died at Petersburg. The statue was undertaken at my instigation only as an honor to him. I shall live with nothing more than despair and contempt for this Union and Mr. Lincoln all the rest of my life. As my children do not share my sentiments in every respect, however, I have made arrangements to fund the maintenance of the monument and the fenced area of its surround. I have engaged a Mr. Olwin Grant who lives out on Coshocton Road as a caretaker, and any further questions you may address to him. I implore you, Mr. Scofield, not to raise this matter to me again.

Leo spent several long evenings sitting in the square, contemplating that handsome statue, which towered over the young trees installed by the Marshal County Ladies Garden Club. It was his first inkling of the fickleness of legend, the ease with which one is misled by myth. He wrote a letter of deep and sincere apology but did not hear again from Mrs. Marcus Dowd, nor had he expected to.

He was young and perhaps still a little brash, but he was not an insensitive man, and he applied this glimpse of the possible effect of grief to his own circumstances, admonishing himself to take all the good fortune of his business and his marriage much less for

granted. The spirit of expansiveness that had characterized his outlook up until the receipt of that letter was checked somewhat over the year that followed, and as his business ventures grew increasingly complicated, as his house took shape day by day, as his infatuation with his new wife inevitably grew more complex and profound, he became a man of a fairly solemn nature.

The three houses built just north of Monument Square in the early 1880s for Leo, John, and George Scofield fronted on a semicircular drive and shallow common ground that in the summer became a crescent of feathery grass that bent in bright green ripples across the lawn in the slightest breeze. In time the grass at the inner curve of the drive gave way to a golden velvet moss under the elms as the trees matured and produced heavy shade all summer long.

The houses were comfortable though not grand. They were well built and nicely spaced, one from the other, and for a number of years those three south-facing houses marked the northernmost edge of the town of Washburn, Ohio. During the several years the houses were under construction, and long after, the residential property of those three brothers was known all over town simply as Scofields, whereas the twenty-odd buildings comprising the flourishing engine-manufacturing business of Scofields & Company, begun as no more than a foundry in 1830 by Leo's grandfather, had for some time been referred to merely as the Company.

The second Sunday of September 1888, on either side of a muddy wagon track that led into the east yard of his new house, Leo Scofield, at age thirty-seven, planted eight pairs of cultivated catalpa saplings. Six days later, on Saturday the fifteenth, there occurred the unusual incident of the births—all within a twelve-hour span—of his first and his brother John's second child—a daughter and son respectively—and of the third child of Daniel Butler, a good friend and pastor of the Methodist church. John and Lillian Scofield's first child, Harold, born in 1883, had died before he was a year old, so the Scofields' compound had been childless for some time.

Some years earlier Leo had given up the idea that he and his wife, Audra, would have children. His wife was twenty-nine years old with this fourth pregnancy, and through the early months they both had dreaded and expected another miscarriage. They had been married for eight years when Lily was born. The planting of those young catalpa trees was only a coincidence, of course; Leo hadn't intended any sort of commemoration, but in spite of himself he developed a superstitious interest in the welfare of those trees. He had started them himself from seed six years earlier, and they were just barely established enough to transplant. Several days after his daughter's birth, when it was clear she and his wife and the other mothers and babies were thriving, his brother John and he walked the lane he had created, staking the saplings when necessary to guide them straight.

"And on the ides of the month, John," Leo said. "It's an amazing thing! All the Scofield's are born on the ides of the month." Leo's birthday was March fifteenth, and his youngest brother George's was the fifteenth of October. John's birthday was February fifth, when he would turn thirty.

"Well, but this is September, Leo. The ides of the month was on Thursday. On the thirteenth, this month." But Leo wasn't paying close attention, and John himself, not born on the ides, was just as happy to be a little disburdened of "Scofieldness." He followed along, helping his brother. "But this is really something, isn't it, Leo?" John said. "Here we are. Two *papas*. Only three days ago, Leo—three *days* ago!—we were . . . fancy-free. We were just *not* *papas*."

Leo glanced sharply at John but didn't reply for a moment. He was an elegant figure among the little sloping trees, which were leaning this way and that. Leo was one of those men no more than average height who are somehow imposing because they possess an inherent certainty, a lack of hesitancy, an easy assumption of authority. "No, you're right about that, John. You're right about that. Three days ago we were only two *husbands*."

John had squatted to secure the burlap around the spindly trunk of one of those young trees, and he aimed a considering look Leo's way and finally grinned, acknowledging the edge of chastisement in his brother's voice and feeling a genuine joyousness



spike through him at all his sudden connection to the wide world. "Ah, Leo. Don't you think this'll make a good husband of me? Don't you imagine I get a clean slate now? The first baby . . . Leo, that nearly killed Lillian. And me, too." John's ebullience abruptly fell away. "But Lillian was just . . . It was like she had broken. That was it. That was what she must have been feeling," he mused. "But I was so stupid. I was just scared to death. I didn't know what it took . . . That poor little boy. Poor Harold! I couldn't *do* anything to help, though, Leo! It nearly drove me crazy to see Lillian so sad.

"But this one's so . . . he's so *lively*, Leo. Why, he hardly stays still a minute. Healthy as a horse! And I haven't even raised a glass to toast their health. I haven't touched a drop, Leo. And I won't. I won't." Then John fell back into his usual wry tone, which signified that it was at the listener's own peril to take him entirely seriously. "I'll start all over with the lovely Lillian. And I can, you know. Because at least *she* loves me more than you do," he said, but with a lilting, teasing cadence.

Leo watched John a moment as he stooped to hammer in a stake at an angle that would pull the rope tight, and he thought that even in so small a task his brother was graceful in the uncommon way with which he was at ease in his own body. "There isn't anyone in the world who doesn't love you, John. But that might not be such a good thing," he said, and he was quite serious.

"You're harder on me than anyone, Leo. Even Dan Butler's not so stern!" John straightened up and exhaled a short laugh, leaning his head back to take in the pale sky. "You'll have to go a little easy on me, you know. I've got to get used to it, still! It's wonderful that they're all healthy. As strong as can be. Lillian . . . and Audra and Martha Butler . . . everyone doing so well. *All* of them," he said. "I can hardly believe it!" They moved along, carefully wrapping the tender trunks before they looped and staked the guide ropes.

Leo had left the planting late because it had been an edgy summer and so dry that he had to haul water until the middle of November to irrigate that double row of saplings. The memory of June, July, and August merged into a blur of heat. The days had stretched out dry and hot, eventually falling into unsettling yel-

low green evenings preceding night after night of crackling thunder and hailstorms that lingered over the town with great bluster but produced very little measurable rainfall.

It had been a season that was not much good for planting, and a season that had produced a sort of communal unease, transforming the nearly simultaneous births in mid-September of Lillian Marshal Scofield, Warren Leonard Scofield, and Robert Crane Butler into an event that seemed less remarkable than inevitable. And the unwavering alliance of those three children took on the same quality of inevitability. Lily and Robert and Warren were rarely apart from one another during all the waking hours of their early youth.

But during the first months following his daughter's birth, when the heat finally loosened its grip and September led into one of those autumns of rare clarity in which everything seems to be in perfect balance, Leo made grand plans for his garden. In late November he stood in the wagon yard on a chilly but glorious day so dazzlingly clear that the air itself was charged with a blue translucent brilliance. He stood still and imagined the plot transformed. He became lost in the idea of abundant flowers, blooming bushes, towering trees.

The catalpas stood in fragile regulation, spare sticks once their leaves had dropped. They looked forlornly tenuous on the clear-cut acreage where the Scofield brothers had built their three houses. But by the time Lily was seven months old the following spring and those shoulder-high saplings finally budded and then leafed out, Leo privately exulted at their survival of the unusually brutal, snowless winter.

Leo Scofield was a good businessman, always a little skeptical, a trifle suspicious by nature. But he wasn't at all prone to melancholy; his brooding followed a more pragmatic course—he might fret persistently, for instance, about a minor innovation to a Scofield engine or an antiquated valve design. But it was quite in character, in late April of 1889, when he was a year closer to forty years old than to thirty-five, that the notion of the future flying toward him was only exhilarating. He wasn't at all troubled by the idea of his own mortality. He walked the rutted track between those newly planted trees and imagined his daughter's wedding procession

making its way along a raked gravel avenue beneath the catalpas' eventual leafy canopy under an overarching clear blue sky.

And during the years of Lily's childhood it was a great pleasure for him on the hottest summer days to sit in his fledgling garden, stunned by the Ohio heat and the salty yellow scent of cut grass, with her light, fluting voice ringing out above her playmates' as she directed her cousin Warren and little Robert Butler in some game she had devised.

Leo was continually surprised by and enamored of the solace of the domesticity he had happened into, and in a span of twenty years he transformed that scrubby patch of land into his idea of a replica of an English garden made up entirely of plants native to Ohio. The catalpa trees, however, didn't mature exactly as he had hoped. In fact, he realized three years too late that he had intended to plant an avenue of yellow poplars—stately, flowering trees known locally as tulip trees. But when he had firmly fixed on the idea of his garden, had planned the east yard entrance, and had described the tree he had in mind, asking around town where he might find it, it was probably in the description of the tree's flowers that he had gone wrong. Leo never gave up the private notion, however, that the misinformation he had received was purposeful, that there might be someone in the world who was amused at his expense, and with solicitous pruning he coaxed the catalpas to assume a more elegant shape than was their unbridled inclination.

As the years passed, Leo came to like the pungency of a blooming catalpa, which was heavily sweet but elusive at a distance, drifting over the garden unexpectedly. He admired the tree's soft green heart-shaped leaves, its abundantly frilled flowers, as showy as a flock of tropical birds in the rolling landscape of central Ohio. Daniel Butler, who had done missionary work in Brazil and Cuba, said that in midsummer, when the vining trumpet creeper overran the arbor, dripping with deep-throated red-orange blossoms, the entire garden took on a look of the tropics. Leo had nurtured that flowering vine from a single cutting he had taken from a plant growing on a pasture fence—just a slip of stem cut on the diagonal and wrapped in a handkerchief he had moistened in the ditch alongside the road. The afternoon he had

rounded a bend and come upon the glorious trumpet vine cascading over an unpainted board fence, he had paused for a long time before he had stooped to dampen his clean handkerchief in the brackish water. He was careful of his dignity, and his fascination with and cultivation of his flower garden was the only frivolity he allowed himself.

Even though Leo had forced the sturdy trunks of the catalpas to extend straight up about nine feet before they branched, each tree assumed the self-contained shape of a softened, rounded obelisk. Their crowns didn't form the leafy vault he had hoped for—the branches didn't *arch*, didn't intermingle overhead, really, as he had envisioned. And each year, when the catalpas' fringed and ruffling flowers bloomed and produced their startlingly phallic cigar-brown fruit, and when those flowers began to shed in stringy drifts of petals and oily pollen so that guests arrived showered with residue from the burgeoning branches, Audra would declare that the trees should be taken out.

"They're a nuisance, Leo. I always think that if you want a flowering tree you can't go wrong with a dogwood. Dogwoods won't get so tall, of course, but they are such beautiful trees. And more restrained when they're in bloom. Oh, and sometimes in the spring when the dogwoods bloom early, it looks to me like the whole tree has burst into white lace." But the catalpa trees remained, and Leo's garden and the wide yards of Scofields became the geographical context of the childhood of each of those three children born coincidentally on September 15, 1888.

Robert Butler was a ruddy, brown-haired child, and Warren Scofield, too, was sturdy and round limbed. They were little boys who seemed all of a piece, whereas Lily's pale, attenuated arms and legs, her fragile neck, her knobby wrists and ankles seemed flimsy, as if, in her always hectic activity, she might fly apart, although for a long time it was clearly Lily who was the center and star of that inseparable threesome. At four or five or six years old, Robert wouldn't have known how to articulate the impression that sometimes, in the blue or brassy light of any given day, a word Lily spoke—just the plain, flat sound of it—exploded cleanly into the moment, like a brilliant asterisk glinting through the atmosphere. Nor could he have explained that occasionally Lily's

movements, a sweep of her arm, an abrupt turning of her head, would break through some ordinary instant with a flicker of blank white clarity.

And, of course, Robert had no way to know that his was a kind of perception lost to adults and older children. His mother was happier to see him only in Warren's company. Mrs. Butler didn't dislike Lily; it was only that it gave her a sense of satisfaction to see those two healthy boys absorbed entirely in the company of each other. Robert and Warren appeared to strike a natural balance between them that was disturbed when little Lily was with them, directing them to do this or that, dreaming up fantastic games with evolving rules that were played out for days at a time.

One summer afternoon Mrs. Butler was in the yard of the parsonage cutting flowers for a bouquet and inspecting the rosebushes for disease when the three children came tearing through the yard brandishing sticks, their heads wrapped turbanlike in white damask napkins, with Lily bringing up the rear, urging the boys on in her high-pitched voice. "Gallop, Warren! Gallop, Robert! We must not let them escape! We must run! We must run like the wind!"

Martha Butler's good mood was spoiled as she watched them race across the lawn and down the slope toward the creek. When she mentioned it to her husband that evening—mentioned that the two little boys never had a chance to play together without Lily—he wasn't interested, said he couldn't see what difference it made. And Martha herself couldn't puzzle out her objection, couldn't understand why their *threesomeness* disturbed her. "It isn't natural, somehow, Daniel," she said to her husband. "Three never works out. There's always someone left out. Though, I don't know, not with those three. . . . But it doesn't seem at all right . . . not *healthy* in some way. Well, I just don't know." And she let the subject drop.

But Robert's mother's censure emanating from the vicinity of the rosebushes that afternoon had overtaken and enveloped Lily as she herded their band onward, and she hesitated at the edge of the creek while the boys forged ahead. She was stricken for the first time in her life with self-consciousness. She unwrapped the

napkin from around her head and was never again able to lose herself entirely in an imagined universe. She sometimes cringed in embarrassment when she remembered urging Robert and Warren to “run like the wind.” She had only been eight years old, but for the rest of her life she could not forgive herself that momentary, blatant melodrama.

Lily and Warren’s uncle George returned from a business trip to New York one year with a remarkably fine set of marionette puppets for his niece and nephew’s tenth birthday. George was an elusive and therefore romantic figure to the children and such a favorite of their parents because of his various endearing eccentricities that neither Leo and Audra nor Warren’s parents, John and Lillian, let him know that such intricate toys were far too complicated for Lily and Warren. But as it turned out, the marionettes were immediately popular with Lily and Warren and Robert, too, and for the next five years or so they mounted numerous and increasingly elaborate shows. Robert wrote the plays, Warren took on the most difficult roles, and Lily kept everything organized and filled in wherever she was needed. All during their growing up, Lily relieved Robert and Warren of the effort of choreographing their own childhoods. Lily was forever keeping them from careening off on some tangent or another. It was clear to her that without her guidance they would not *progress*. And she loved Robert Butler always and thought of herself as one half of the whole of herself and her cousin Warren.

For Warren’s part, his whole idea of himself until he was about eleven years old was as one third of this triumvirate. Answering Mrs. Butler’s question, for instance, as to what the three of them had been up to all day, he knew instinctively to turn and weave all their disparate activities into a narrative that satisfied adults. Although he often interchanged the actions of any one of their threesome with those of another, he wasn’t even aware of it; he was only reacting to some parent’s slight uneasiness—only shifting the *details* of the truth to ensure serenity all around.

One afternoon when the three of them arrived at Robert’s house dripping wet, Warren gave an enthusiastic account of his

failed plan to build a fort and laboratory in the big low-branching cherry tree over the horse pond.

“A laboratory! Well, a laboratory. That’s where so many of my canning jars have disappeared to, I guess!” Mrs. Butler said, but her initial alarm at the sight of them had softened. Later Robert reminded Warren that the whole thing had been Lily’s idea. Robert was surprised that Warren had taken the credit, but Warren only looked at Robert, perplexed. Warren knew intuitively that Robert’s mother would never have been pleased with the actual account of their afternoon’s enterprise. Lily was their inspiration; Robert was their conscience; Warren was their ambassador to the outside world. So deeply was each child connected to the other two that each one’s loyalty was unconsidered, their mutual devotion fundamental.

But as they grew older, and by the time they were putting on their puppet shows for children’s birthdays and at the county fair, Robert himself was unable to recall or name the quicksilver charisma Lily possessed that had captured his sensibilities. As an adult, whenever he thought back about his childhood, he remembered Lily always in motion, full to the brim with ideas and energy, but he lost the ability to remember the incandescence with which she had imbued the long hours of his early days. And Warren, too, as he grew older, translated all the emotion of their passionate connection into a manageable version of nothing more than a warm childhood friendship. Only Lily, left behind at the age of twelve when the boys went off to boarding school, understood that it was she alone who was likely to lose the underpinnings of the pleasure of her life, and she was single-minded in her determination that nothing of the sort would happen.

Lillian Marshal Scofield and Robert Crane Butler were married in her father’s garden in an extravagant ceremony on a very hot Saturday in the summer of 1913. In spite of the heat and a long dry spell that caused the broad catalpa leaves to lose their lazy flutter, to pucker and droop a bit; in spite of a succession of cloudless, dusty days that dulled the glisten of all the foliage in the garden, the wedding was as splendid as Leo Scofield had hoped it would be.

There is a way in which a town the size of Washburn, Ohio, with perhaps six thousand residents, comes to a collective judgment, and communally the town had become fond of Lily, who had been in residence all year round when she attended the Linus Gilcrest Institute for Girls. She was among them as she gradually lost her childhood look of frailty and took on a wiry athleticism. Nevertheless, even during her late adolescence, Lily was eclipsed by the celebrated beauty of her mother and aunt—the former Marshal sisters—and by her distinguished and handsome father, her two tall, striking uncles, and especially by her constant summer companions, Robert Butler and her astonishingly good-looking cousin Warren.

No one knew how or why Lily Scofield and Robert Butler decided, in December of 1912, that they would marry the following summer when he returned from New England, where he had gone to college. He had stayed on as an instructor at Harvard to continue his studies and to teach for several academic years. No one knew the details, but, on the other hand, no one was particularly surprised. Lily had gone east to college, too, to Mount Holyoke in western Massachusetts, but had been at home again for almost three years, courted by several hopeful suitors, and she was nearly twenty-five years old.

In fact, Robert had come home for a week that Christmas, and one morning he asked Lily to come along with him to Stradler's Men's Clothiers and help him select a gift for his father. He wanted to ask her advice about the right tack to take with a young woman he had seen a good deal of in Cambridge, his good friend David Musgrave's sister. The weather was crisp but not cold for December, and Lily had on a dark green suit and a brimmed hat that dipped over her face so that Robert could only catch glimpses of her expression. She carried a small, sleek brown muff from which she withdrew one hand or the other to illustrate some point. The muff intrigued him, with Lily's pretty hands plunged into the brown fur, and then he caught sight of her wide orange-brown eyes under the hat brim and stopped still, putting his hand on her arm to make her hesitate. She turned back to glance at him, perplexed, peering out from under her dark, winged



Scofield brows, which were so striking in contrast to the puff of bright blond Scofield hair beneath her hat. She was telling Robert all about her father and mother's recent trip to Chicago, where everything had gone amiss.

But Robert interrupted her. "Ah, well, Lily. Your father wouldn't care if he was stranded in the middle of a desert as long as your mother was with him. I've never known a man to admire his wife as much as your father admires your mother," Robert said. "With plenty of reason, of course," he added. "But I don't know when I've ever been in his company for very long without hearing him talk of those 'Marshal girls.' Of the day he first met your mother. Their 'blue gaze,' he calls it. I've always remembered that phrase."

Claire Musgrave had wide, sweet blue eyes. But as he gazed at Lily it suddenly seemed to him that there was no glance more engaging than Lily's warm tiger-cat-gold consideration. He was disconcerted for a moment thinking of himself and Claire Musgrave closed away together in a tall house somewhere in Cambridge or Boston while Lily carried on, both participating in and wryly observing the familiar life around her. He stood there with Lily and all at once found himself bereft at the idea of being always away from her.

"Why, Lily," he said, "Lily? I wonder if you'd ever think of marrying me?" Lily's expression was no longer vexed; she had assumed a placid look of waiting as she gave him her full attention. She wasn't exactly assessing him, but he saw that she was waiting to hear more. He was still catching up to what he had already said. He hadn't had any idea that he was going to ask Lily to marry him, although he didn't have a single qualm now that the words had been said. In fact, all the disparities and loose ends of his life suddenly seemed to cohere, and his world settled into its proper orbit.

"You're the smartest girl I know, Lily," he went on, in an attempt to explain. "It's not long before you realize that the world's full of pretty girls. Everyone I knew at school seemed to have a sister. A pretty cousin . . . but none with a mind like yours. Or your sense of . . . honor. In all the time I've known you—well, my whole life—I've never heard you say an unkind thing about a

single person! You'd be surprised to hear a girl say terrible things about someone who's supposed to be her dearest friend." But Lily still stood quietly, looking at him with a mildly curious expression, so he tried to make it clear even to himself.

"There's no other girl I've ever met who I could ever care so much about. I must have always been in love with you." And though he was startled to hear himself say it, he knew at once that it was the truth—so vigorous an absolute that suddenly the possibility of her refusal became dreadful. "I don't know that I'd ever be happy if I thought I'd go through my whole life and you wouldn't be with me. I think that all my life . . . Well, I can't imagine there would ever in the world be anyone else I would ask to marry me."

Lily continued to gaze at him in frank appraisal of his earnest brown head, his pleasant and familiar face. She tucked her arm through his and moved them along down Church Street toward Stradler's clothing store. "Of course I'll marry you, Robert. I've always thought I would. I've loved *you* all my life as well."

In May of 1913, Robert returned from Boston, and in late June, Warren traveled back from a branch office of Scofields & Company in Pennsylvania to serve as Robert's best man. On the afternoon of Saturday, June 28, Warren stood next to the groom in the oppressive two o'clock heat of Leo Scofield's garden and looked on placidly with a polite air of expectation.

Lily's mother had arranged for the prelude and wedding music to be performed by a string quartet and a singer from the College of Music of Cincinnati, and although the strings were muted by the heat, the soprano's voice was vivid. Lily's five attendants and the two flower girls, sprinkling rose petals from a basket they carried between them, made their way along the shady aisle beneath those tall trees and emerged blinking in the sudden dazzle of sunlight in the garden, proceeding in traditional hesitation step along the freshly raked gravel path dividing the rows and rows of chairs set out upon the grass.

One by one they arranged themselves across from the groomsmen on the other side of the trellised arbor where huge, clumsy-seeming bumblebees drank from the throats of the trumpet flowers, causing a little uneasiness among the bridesmaids.

Robert's father stood directly beneath the arbor, smiling solemnly, ignoring the bees, and waited to perform the marriage ceremony.

But when Lily emerged on Leo's arm from the shadows of the fervidly blooming catalpa trees, Warren startled visibly, lifting his hand and splaying his fingers across his chest. His gesture expressed not only surprise but dismay, and it appeared to a few of the onlookers that Warren hadn't believed until that moment that it was a *marriage* that was about to take place. It caught the attention of the assembled guests particularly, of course, because Warren was playing out a role that generally fell to the groom. It was Robert, though, who grasped Warren's arm to steady him. Nevertheless, just for a moment Warren's attitude was stripped bare of any pretense, as if he were a man who had lost any possibility of comfort in the world.

Lily saw nothing of that momentary drama. But Warren had been taken unawares by this clear bit of evidence that his youth was over. That he and Robert and Lily had become adults. It was the moment when he understood for the first time—grasped the clean, severe truth of the fact—that the three of them had become who they had become, and from now on the association of their youth would be relegated to nostalgic musings and remembrances. It was the first moment that Warren looked back at the years of his childhood and thought that they seemed to have flown by so fast.

Lily stepped from the filtered light into the blinding sunshine, her hand resting lightly on Leo Scofield's arm, so that she paused for a moment when he did while he waited to get his bearings in the bright day. For just an instant while she hesitated alongside her father she had a cursory glimpse of the waiting bridal party. She caught the gleam of her cousin Warren's fair hair in juxtaposition to Robert's darker head, and a hazy, amorphous happiness clarified itself in one swift thought before she stepped forward once again: Here we are together. The three of us. Here we are again at last. And then she remembered to move forward with care in order to accommodate her heavy satin train. She considered the next step and then the next, her mind fully concentrated on her progress. But in those few seconds, that fragmentary passage of time, she had satisfied herself that Robert Butler and Warren

Scotfield were both hers once again and ever after. And everyone looking on had seen—just during that tiny hesitation as she had stepped from the shadows into the sudden, shimmering, metallic illumination, in her pale dress and with her yellow hair—that Lily was as shocking and slender and brilliant with potential as the blade of a knife.

It was one of those singular moments that is seared into a collective sensibility. In that instant when simultaneously Lily stepped into the garden on her father's arm and Warren Scotfield clutched his heart, there was a redefinition of Lily. That day in 1913, at just a little past two o'clock in the afternoon on Saturday, June 28, Lily accumulated real consequence in the town of Washburn. Within the blink of an eye she acquired a reputation for possessing unparalleled charm and remarkable, if unconventional, beauty. It was the very same moment, of course, that Warren Scotfield was privately acknowledged by many of the wedding guests to have suffered a broken heart.