

The Last River Child

by Lori Ann Bloomfield



A young woman struggles against a small town's superstitious fears at the turn of the last century.

Summary:

In the summer of 1900 a meteorite lands on the day of Peg Staynor's baptismal, barely missing the small church in rural Ontario. This, along with Peg's almost colourless eyes, is enough to resurrect a local superstition that will haunt Peg and her family for years. Many believe Peg to be a "river child," taken over by an evil spirit from the Magurvey river that winds its way through the town.

Feared and shunned throughout her childhood, Peg is blamed for every misfortune, from drought to ailing livestock. When her mother, her fiercest protector, dies suddenly on the same day WWI is declared, fourteen-year-old Peg must face not only the mistrust of the villagers, but of her father. His grief has driven him to take solace in drink and old superstition, leaving Peg with only her head-strong older sister for support.

It will take the terrible reality of the First World War to shake off the grip of old world beliefs. As the town's young men begin to return mentally and physically damaged, or not return at all, the sheltered atmosphere of the town is broken. A bright flame of change will sweep through everyone's lives, leading Peg into the future.

Historical Setting of *The Last River Child*

The Last River Child is a novel set in rural Ontario, Canada in the fictional village of Walvern during the late 19th century and early 20th century. Although it is a work of fiction, many of the events that serve as backdrop for the story are historically true. This weaving together of imagination and reality creates a vivid setting for the novel and makes for a rich reading experience.

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The First World War

A large part of *The Last River Child* takes place during the First World War, a conflict that began in 1914 and lasted until 1918.

When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914 it meant that Canada, as part of the British Empire, was automatically at war. Canada at that time was a young country - less than fifty years old - with a population of only eight million people. Despite this, 620,000 people enlisted before peace was declared on November 11, 1918. On the battlefield, Canadian soldiers earned respect and praise for their bravery, often succeeding where other Allied armies had failed, as they did at Vimy Ridge. Such victories came at a terrible cost, however. During the four years of fighting approximately 67,000 Canadian soldiers died and 173,000 came home wounded in body or mind. For a small village like the fictional Walvern in *The Last River Child* such losses were especially tragic, tearing huge, irreparable holes in the tight knit community.

Ontario Temperance Act

In 1916 the Ontario Temperance Act became law, prohibiting the sale of alcohol in the province. Several provinces in Canada passed similar laws during the same time period, as did the United States. In Ontario, as elsewhere, prohibition created an underground industry of smugglers and bootleggers, like the character of Sadie Sass in *The Last River Child*. The Temperance Act was not repealed in Ontario until 1927.

The Spanish Influenza

Coinciding with the end of the First World War was a flu pandemic commonly referred to as Spanish flu. It lasted from March 1918 to June 1920 and spread to nearly every part of the world, killing between 50 and 100 million people worldwide. Most of its victims were healthy young adults.

The First World War did not cause the flu, but the close quarters shared by the troops helped transmit the virus and soldiers returning home after the Armistice aided in spreading the disease worldwide. In Canada it is estimated 50,000 people died from Spanish flu. Fear of the disease was, understandably, widespread. In *The Last River Child* when it becomes necessary for Peg's sister, Sarah, to go into hiding, Peg cleverly concocts a plan to have her quarantined.

The Birth of Aviation

The early years of aviation are partially chronicled in *The Last River Child* through the character of Charlie. After the real-life aviators Wilbur and Orville Wright successfully flew for the first time on December 17, 1903 the world entered a fascinating period in aviation history. The allure of flight attracted many daredevils and adventurers

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to the skies in homemade contraptions but it was not until the First World War that airplanes began to transform into sophisticated and reliable machines as governments realized their uses in warfare. In the years following WW1 aviation continued to advance at an astonishing rate as speed and distance records were continually being set and broken, and the world was mapped for the first time from the air.

Writing *The Last River Child* involved a great deal of research for its author and she became particularly interested in those daring early aviators. Fans of *The Last River Child* should not be surprised if Lori Ann Bloomfield one day returns to the subject of early aviation in a future novel.

Discussion Points

1. Who was your favourite character? Your least favourite character?
2. How is the time period and setting of *The Last River Child* important to the story? Could the novel have been set in another time? Another place?
3. How would you describe the relationships between the different members of Peg's family?
4. What is your response to Sarah? Could you identify with her and her choices? If Sarah had come of age during the later years of the 20th century instead of the early years how do you think she would have been different?
5. Do you consider the Magurvey River to be a character in the novel?
6. How are Peg and her mother Rose's lives similar? How are they different?
7. How did Rose's own past influence her actions when Peg was branded a river child? Would you have acted differently?
8. Did Peg grow or change in any way through her friendship with Charlie?
9. How is the idea of home explored in *The Last River Child*? What is your own definition of home? Is it a place? A person? A feeling?
10. Letters are exchanged between several of the characters in *The Last River Child*. Were letters an effective means of storytelling? In modern times letter writing has become almost extinct. How do you feel about this?
11. Was Peg's struggle to stay in Walvern similar in any way to the war raging at the same time in Europe?
12. Do you believe Peg will be the last river child?
13. Did the book end the way you wanted it to?