Lauren Groff: Women Only [C1]

In Matrix, l'autrice statunitense ricrea la misteriosa vita della poetessa Marie de France. Un romanzo che parla di amore e di potere, ambientato nell'Inghilterra del XII secolo, in un'abbazia abitata da sole donne.

Lauren Groff is now a well-known voice on the American literary scene. Her work has been translated into thirty languages, and her 2015 novel **Fates** and Furies was chosen by former president Barack Obama as his book of the year. But it was back before that literary success, when Groff was still at university, that she first encountered the narrative poems, known as 'lais', of a 12th-century woman called Marie de France. The twelve poems, written in Medieval French, are vivid and dramatic and immediately captured Groff's imagination. When, years later, Groff attended a lecture about **nuns** in the Middle Ages, she recalled her earlier fascination with Marie de France, and formed the idea for Matrix.

PAST AND PRESENT

Unlike her previous work, **set** in the contemporary US, Matrix is the first novel that Groff has **set** in the past. She admits that she was cautious about

writing historical fiction, worrying that if done badly it can feel like "tourism in time." However, says Groff, in recent years she's felt **compelled** to find a new way to question the urgent **issues** of the contemporary world, especially around women and power. She feels that writing a story **set** in the past gave her the freedom to do that. The historical context became a "radical tool" allowing her **to address** **troubling** contemporary **issues** that would have been harder to explore in a novel **set** now. Almost nothing is known of the real Marie de France, but that, for Groff, is part of the **appeal**. Groff **acknowledges** that the character of Marie in Matrix may be very different from the historical figure, but historical **accuracy**, though important, is not her primary focus. Around her imagined Marie, Groff is free to build a fascinating and dramatic **tale**...

MARIE'S STORY

When seventeen-year-old Marie is sent by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine to take charge of a **neglected** **abbey** somewhere in rainy England, she finds a **miserable** place of hunger and chaos. But over the decades, under Marie's charismatic leadership, the **abbey**'s fortunes change as the women there **cut themselves off** from all that exists outside the **abbey** walls. Away from the male hierarchies of **the wider world**, and especially the Church, the women create their own power structures. The result is impressive, but not always utopian. To find out more, Speak Up talked with Groff. We began by asking her why she decided to make Marie's **abbey** an all-female community that actively excludes men. **Lauren Groff (American accent): **Part of the historical research was me just getting incredibly frustrated by the fact that women in male narratives through history have been sort of relegated to the shadows along the walls and not fully embodied as humans. **Especially so** in medieval texts. And so I just wanted **to flip the script** a little bit. Men exist in this book but they're not really visible, they're not individual, they're a sort of a mass at the sides of the room. And even the animals are female.

RICH AND COLOURFUL

While Medieval French poetry might sound difficult and academic, Groff **stresses** that the lais were always "fresh" to her. The rich, colourful imagery of the novel reflects this, as she explains. **Lauren Groff:** The lais of Marie de France, they're so wild! There's a queer **werewolf** story, right? There's a story about lovers who get frozen at the top of a mountain. There's a story about an enchanted boat. There are **fairies**... It's just full of magic and an **other-worldly** kind of sensibility that feels very ancient. I just love... I love them.

A FLEXIBLE TITLE

At first sight, the title Matrix may not seem very 12th-century, but Groff had good reason for choosing it. **Lauren Groff:** I felt **as though** I needed to in some ways **reclaim** the word as the feminine **source** of power that it is. Because it means 'mother', right, of course, 'mother of all'. It doesn't necessarily mean computer-generated reality which is Keanu Reeves running around with a gun. So I just thought that that was such a flexible, incredible word that has been reduced. And it's my job as a fiction writer to take things that have been **flattened** and reduced and make them complex again.

TRUTH AND FICTION

Very little is known about the historical figure of Marie de France. Groff explains how she addressed this. **Lauren Groff:** One of my moral obligations for writing a book **set** in this time period I think was to be as close as possible to verisimilitude, and the truth of what might have happened. Even while creating a **whole cloth** fictional version of Marie de France because we don't know anything about her. So what I had to do was actually I went back to the work that she herself wrote, particularly the lies and the **fables**. And every time I came across a detail, a word, an image, an idea that felt bright and **bold** and full of life, indicative of a deeper human sensibility that put it onto the page, I took it out and put it into a prose poem. And it was out of that prose poem that I was able to make the character of my Marie de

France. And she came out **larger than life**, full of hunger, full of ambition, not necessarily beautiful in her own mind or other people's minds. But just so full of force and vitality that that was the character that I had to write. Whether or not that's true, nobody knows.

MARIE DE FRANCE

Little is known for sure about Marie de France except that she was one of the first recorded female writers in Europe. She was probably a noble woman and may have spent time living in a religious community, although there is no **hard evidence** for this. In the 12th century, Marie wrote a collection of narrative poems, known as 'lais', dealing with romantic and magical themes. The lais are written in Anglo-Norman, a dialect of Mediaeval French that was spoken by the nobility in England at that time. It's thought that Marie was originally from France but wrote in England, possibly for the court of King Henry II. Her lais tend to give female characters a more prominent role than was common in writing of the time.

Glossary

- **whole cloth** = di sana pianta
- **accuracy** = precisione
- **to flip the script** = ribaltare il copione
- **tale** = racconto
- **stresses** = evidenziare
- **other-worldly** = dell'altro mondo
- **source** = fonte
- **larger than life** = esuberante
- **hard evidence** = prove schiaccianti
- **compelled** = sentirsi spinta, obbligata
- **acknowledges** = riconoscere, ammettere
- **bold** = audace
- **cut themselves off** = tagliarsi fuori, segregarsi
- **as though** = come se
- **the wider world** = il resto del mondo
- **fables** = favole
- **issues** = questioni
- **abbey** = abbazia
- **miserable** = misero, deprimente
- **reclaim** = rivendicare, riscattare
- **set** = ambientato
- **troubling** = preoccupanti
- **neglected** = trascurata
- **flattened** = appiattire
- **Fates** = destinos
- **to address** = trattare
- **Especially so** = soprattutto, specialmente
- **nuns** = monache
- **appeal** = attrattiva, richiamo
- **At first sight** = a prima vista
- **werewolf** = uomo lupo, licantropo
- **fairies** = fate