THE LAUREATE: ‘Not to be construed as real’

By Elizabeth Friedmann

[Laura (Riding) Jackson’s biographer separates fact from fiction in the movie and reminds us why truth matters.]

*The Laureate,* released in January 2022, was written, directed and produced by William Nunez and is based upon a critical period (1926 – 1929) in the lives of the writers Laura Riding and Robert Graves and the artist Nancy Nicholson, to whom Graves was married at the time. The movie stars Dianna Agron as Laura Riding, Tom Hughes as Robert Graves, and Laura Haddock as Nancy Nicholson. Its plot line: After reading her poetry and criticism, Graves (who is suffering from PTSD after his World War I experience) invites the American poet Laura Riding to collaborate with him on a book about modern poetry. She arrives in England and lives with the couple, and a strong bond develops among the three. However, Riding – portrayed at first as a free-spirited vamp – reveals her sinister nature by encouraging the Graves’s young daughter Catherine to step out of a high window, saying a magic staircase will appear to save her. Catherine, mesmerized, does as she is told but is pulled back inside by Laura at the last minute and told she was just being “tested.” Laura then sexually seduces both Nancy and Robert, causing waves of jealousy in both, and finally brings a fourth person into the situation, which results in Laura’s attempted suicide and Robert’s being under suspicion for attempted murder. In the movie’s final scenes, Robert is cured of his PTSD, but Nancy asks, “Was it all worth it?”

As the *Variety* film reviewer pointed out, “These people were terribly complex, and even amid its quite-ample intrigue, ‘The Laureate’ makes some simplifying choices.” Granted, it is the task of the filmmaker to make a movie that will entertain, and a biopic routinely departs from historical fact for dramatic effect. The biographer, on the other hand, has the responsibility of telling the story of a life as accurately as possible, carefully considering the authenticity of her source material. But often movie-goers would like to know just how much of the story is real and how much is biographical fantasy. As the biographer of Laura Riding, I am in a position to answer this question.

Apart from the relentless sexual hyperbole – yes, Laura slept with both Robert and Geoffrey, but not at the same time; and yes, Laura and Nancy loved each other, but there’s not a shred of evidence that their relationship was sexual – the film is structured on dramatic incidents that never happened and portrays the characters and their relationships in a way that is little more than caricature and cliché.

Take, for instance, the film’s portrayal of Laura as a literary critic. The movie reviewer Glenn Kenny (RogerEbert.com), who gave the film 1 ½ stars, notes that Riding’s character “gushes that she ‘just adores Byron, Keats and Shelley – Mary Shelley, that is!’” The critic supposes that the director probably thinks that this is an appropriately bold thing for Riding to say. “But in fact,” he points out, “it’s kind of dippy, making a category error that Riding, whatever her other faults, simply was not prone to as a literary critic.” He reminds us that “Nunez is hardly the first male to take a misogynistic view of Laura Riding . . . but it’s a little surprising in this day and age, to see such a conception get such a thorough workout in a not-cheap period movie.” One thing we have learned in this day and age is that even the most outrageous lies, if repeated often enough, will be accepted as fact.

Nunez’s misogynist view of Laura Riding is certainly widespread, primarily based on biographies of Robert Graves written between 1982 and 1995 by Martin Seymour-Smith, Richard Perceval Graves (Robert’s nephew), and Miranda Seymour, whose misogynist views are even more pronounced than those of her male compatriots.

The Catherine/magic staircase story, or the first version of it, appeared in Seymour’s 1995 biography of Graves and was attributed to an interview the author had with Catherine Nicholson (Graves) Dalton two years earlier. By then in her seventies, Catherine Dalton had never mentioned this incident to any other Graves biographers, including Richard Perceval Graves, her cousin. Miranda Seymour explains that Catherine’s fear of Laura Riding caused her to hold her tongue for sixty-four years. I find this highly unlikely, but there is no limit to Miranda Seymour’s fertile imagination. Later, in an article for the *Daily Mail*, for example, she claimed that a scarab ring that had once belonged to Riding cast an evil spell on her, causing her marriage to collapse, her house to be burgled, her job to be terminated and her dog to die. (I’m not making this up.)

According to Seymour, Riding’s *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* has a “threatening” tone. She must be the only person who thinks so. “I wish every child in America owned this book to hear its way of thinking about thinking,” wrote the poet and critic David Shapiro when the book was republished in 1993. And the author Rosellen Brown wrote, “What I’d have given to have an advisor as passionate, as daring and original as this.” The book’s first reviewers were equally enthusiastic. “Give this volume to a child:” Michael Roberts wrote in *The Poetry Review* (1930), “it tells so simply that an adult may find it difficult, how it is good to live straight, independently of the tortuous conventions of others.”

At the end of *The Laureate,* after the credits roll, there is this:

The Laureate is inspired by historical figures and events and accordingly the incidents, dialogue and characters appearing in the film are not to be construed as real.

But for those who have seen the film and are curious to know what is real and what is biographical fantasy, here are some questions and answers:

*Did Robert Graves suffer from PTSD after his war experience*?Yes. But then it was known as “shell-shock.”

*Did Robert Graves read Laura Riding’s poems and criticism in T.S. Eliot’s* Criterion *magazine?* No, Laura Riding never published in *The Criterion.* Graves read her poems in *The Fugitive,* a magazine published in the U.S. by a group of writers including Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren. She won that magazine’s literary prize, not *The Criterion’*s. Her critical essay on poetry was published in another American literary magazine, *The Reviewer.*

*Was Robert Graves responsible for the Hogarth Press publication of Riding’s book of poems*? Yes, but bizarrely, in the movie’s scene just before the Catherine scene, Laura receives a rejection letter from Hogarth Press, probably to suggest that her treatment of Catherine is an act of vengeance on Robert.

*Did Robert agree to write the T. E. Lawrence biography only if the publisher brought out Riding’s* The Close Chaplet? No. *The Close Chaplet* had already been published by Hogarth when Robert contracted with Jonathan Cape for the T. E. Lawrence book. Later Cape published books by both Riding and Graves.

*Did T. S. Eliot make a pass at Laura?* No. This is a fiction by the screenwriter, perhaps to blame Robert’s break with Eliot on Laura.

*Did Laura consider herself discriminated against for being a Jew and a Pole?* There is no evidence of this, and the film’s assertion could be interpreted as backhanded anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

*Was Nancy happy with Laura’s presence in the household?* Yes. Nancy approved of their close working relationship and its effect on Robert’s psychological health. She also approved of their sexual relationship, even supplying them with contraceptives.

*Did Nancy become jealous of Laura and/or Robert?* There is no contemporaneous evidence that she did. Even after Laura’s fall from the window, Nancy was hoping for a reconciliation with them both.

*Did Geoffrey Phibbs meet Laura and Robert at a wild party in Hammersmith?*  No. Geoffrey met with Graves in London to talk about Riding’s work, and afterward wrote Robert to ask him to find him a job in England. Later he and his wife (yes, he had a wife, who was having an affair with the novelist David Garnett) came to London, she to study art and he to call upon Graves and Riding. They invited him to work with them on publishing projects for their Seizin Press, and he arrived a month later with only a knapsack and five pounds. According to Robert’s written account at the time, Laura lent him money and Robert lent him clothes.

*Did Laura and Robert burn Geoffrey’s books and clothing?* No. Robert gave Geoffrey some of his clothes (see above) and because Geoffrey’s library – 300 books he had shipped from Ireland -- included many duplicates of books Laura and Robert already had, they were sold to raise money for Geoffrey’s support. Geoffrey also contributed other funds, which were used to buy another barge to be moored alongside the barge on which Nancy and the children (there were four children, not just the one daughter, Catherine) were living.

*Did Laura hire a German secretary (Elfriede) to seduce Robert in order that she could spend more time with Geoffrey?* No. However a German woman named Elfriede married their friend Norman Cameron in the 1930s.

*Did Geoffrey Phibbs say that Laura “wants to have me, possess me, fuck me”?* Probably not. These words were added by the biographer Martin Seymour-Smith to an account of Robert Graves’s written just after his meeting with Phibbs. The original account was 320 words, and Seymour-Smith expanded upon it by adding dialogue and details from his own imagination. When challenged, he asserted that his additions were based “on many accounts Graves gave me on many occasions.”

*Did Geoffrey Phibbs leave the others because he was afraid of Laura?* No, he left because Robert asked him to, in private, when Robert became jealous of his relationship with Laura -- and also because his wife decided she wanted him back.

*Did Laura say “Goodbye Chaps” before she fell from the window?* Yes.

*Did Laura attempt suicide because she wanted to control Geoffrey?* For Laura’s explanation of her actions, see my biography. Her motivations were unconventional and complex and misunderstood by many of their friends. For example, T. E. Lawrence, who visited her in the hospital, wrote to Charlotte Shaw (Bernard Shaw’s wife) that “for love of an Irishman (who did not love her any more)” Laura had “thrown herself down four stories,” and this story began to circulate widely in London literary circles.

*Did Robert Graves jump out of the window after Laura?* Doubtful. The first person Laura wrote to after her fall was Gertrude Stein, who was a close friend and confidante.

Too weak and in pain to write herself, she dictated the letter to Robert. In it, she told Gertrude,

There is only one thing and that is that I did go out of the window and some people were with me at the time. Some went out & some didn’t really. Robert went out with me. . . . Gertrude does not have to: she was never inside the window.

Obviously, Laura’s “out-the-windowness” is metaphorical, but she may have said something like this to T.E. Lawrence when he visited her, because in his letter to Charlotte Shaw he added that Graves had jumped after her. This was first reported by Martin Seymour-Smith. It is not mentioned in the document Graves wrote at the time, describing the incident, and upon hearing it he denied it. Miranda Seymour conjectures that the fact that Robert spent a week in the hospital suggests a “violent form of descent.” Graves was treated in the hospital just days after Laura’s fall, but, as he reported at the time, he became ill with stomach pains, and according to his cousin Richard Perceval Graves he was being treated for intestinal ulcers.

*Did Geoffrey and Nancy live together after Laura’s fall?* Yes.

*Did Nancy give Robert a doll to represent Catherine?* Not exactly. Nancy did sew a rag doll for both Robert and Laura when they were leaving to go to Vienna together with her blessing (left out of the movie). The doll wore a dress like one of Catherine’s, a bonnet like one of Jenny’s, and some of Sam’s blond curls on her head, and Nancy said she had a kind heart like David. (Remember, there were really four children.)

*Did Laura tell Robert to forget about her?* No, they had a productive personal and working relationship for the next nine years.

*Did Laura, as Nancy says in a voiceover at the end of the movie, make Robert’s poetry better?* Yes, there is general consensus that Laura’s influence was beneficial to Robert’s poetry.

*Did Laura’s strength, as Nancy says, help him to control his demons?* Yes.

*Did Laura help him to write one of his most enduring books,* Goodbye To All That? Yes. And also another of his most celebrated works, *I Claudius.*

*After enumerating Laura’s contributions to Robert’s life and work, Nancy’s character asks, “At what cost?”*  So let’s look at the aftermath of this period of their lives. Nancy and Geoffrey were together for five more years, and her children remember him as a loving father-figure when they were growing up. Having divorced his first wife, Geoffrey later remarried and continued to write and publish poetry. Nancy and Robert also divorced, and Nancy remained single until her death in 1977. The previous year, her work was on exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Laura and Robert were together for nine more years, running the Seizin Press, publishing books together and separately, and making a home for themselves on the island of Majorca in Spain until they were forced to evacuate at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. After the war, Robert returned to the house they had built with his second wife, Beryl, and lived there until his death at the age of ninety. Laura returned to America and married Schuyler Jackson, poetry editor for *Time* magazine, and they continued to work both separately and together on writing projects. After his death in 1968, she remained in their small, rustic cottage in Florida, writing and publishing until her death in 1991. *The Times* of London called her “among the most gifted women of the twentieth century.”

As Glenn Kenny notes in his review, “One thing is certain for all the strain the movie exerts, it never comes close to touching the hem of the writers it purports to depict.”The portrayals in this film of the three main characters, Robert Graves, Nancy Nicholson and Laura Riding, are a travesty. Robert Graves was not a weak dependent man bewitched by a conniving woman, but a gifted writer who had been badly shaken by his experience of war and who, with the personal and professional support of a fellow writer, Laura Riding, went on to become one of England’s most celebrated poets and authors. Nancy Nicholson was not a jealous wife who felt inferior to her husband’s lover, nor a jealous lover who felt inferior to her husband. She was a woman who championed women’s rights and a prolific artist whose work was highly recognized during her lifetime.

But the most egregious misrepresentations in the film are directed at Laura Riding, depicted as a frivolous manipulative flapper, a sexual predator who dominated both men and women, a madwoman who attempted suicide. (Her contemporary and first English publisher, Virginia Woolf, was openly bisexual and succeeded in her suicide attempt; yet rather than being demonized, she is universally praised as a powerful woman and great writer.)

Perhaps the most disturbing element in the movie is the disparaging of Riding’s work. In one especially reprehensible scene, her character flippantly says, “The truth is what matters, along with these divine potato pancakes.” Truth-telling was a serious matter to Laura Riding throughout her long life. What she came to see as deficiencies in poetry’s truth-telling ability caused her to renounce poetry in favor of “something better in our linguistic way of life.” The dictionary project derided in the movie became a monumental study of the nature and function of language, written with her second husband, Schuyler Jackson, and published after her death by the University Press of Virginia.

Central to its theme is the idea of language as the primary means for human beings to fulfil their responsibility of communicating truthfully with one another. Such truth-speaking, the authors assert, will result in a recognition of the universal nature of being. “The fundamental use of language,” they wrote, “is to serve the needs of human minds as they perform the functions – the performance of which *is* their humanness – of applying the universal sense of being to being in its material diversity.” For Laura Riding, and for Laura (Riding) Jackson, as she came to be known, language is “the basis of the human capacity of truth, the mind-seated law of spiritual understanding.”

That such a champion of truthful speaking has become the victim of damaging lies is a further example of our disjointed times.