



Assembly Press
Nightshade
BOOK CLUB GUIDE

Book description

Longing for glamour and riches and freedom, Zelda is a young woman who chafes against her Romany identity and her family's poverty. Everything changes when she's lured away from working alongside her mother and aunts and other migrant workers in the tobacco fields and is hired as a "Gypsy good luck charm" by charismatic Trixie Tormentine.

What starts out as a summer of ease and access to the unfettered wealth of the Tormentines—Trixie's disturbingly attractive husband Jack owns the tobacco farm that employs Zelda's family and friends—unspools into dangerous displays of power and manipulation. One of the Romany family's puppets, grandmother Puri Dai, acts as Zelda's confidante and mentor, and warns her about the devil of the tobacco fields, a harbinger of death and destruction. As Zelda struggles with her simmering feelings toward the Tormentines, the devil appears to her one night in a motel parking lot. Can Puri Dai's love pull Zelda back from the brink and into a new future? The fate of her family depends on it.

Notes on the characters

Nightshade's Romany characters practice Anglo-Romany cultural codes, centuries-old traditions centred on strong notions of purity and defilement, Romany devotion to family and community, and deep respect for nature and mother earth.

Young Zelda, her mother and her two aunts are inspired by stories about the women of my dad's family—illiterate, hardworking, poor—who came to Canada dreaming of a better life. A principal (non-human) character, Puri Dai (Grandmother), is based on a puppet made by my father. The beating heart of *Nightshade*, she's the size of a child, is over one hundred years old, and is our fragile and beloved family guardian.

Paternal family ties

My father, Leonard Hutchinson, came from a family of English Romany entertainers, the Hutchinsons and Lees. They travelled in their vardo (caravan) across Lancashire in the north of England, performing at fairs with their troupe of large puppets. Leonard's father also carved and painted the wooden horses for carousels. Around 1910, the family immigrated to Canada and settled in Tillsonburg, where they picked tobacco, painted signs, built houses, and travelled across the region, entertaining at the garden parties of wealthy farmers.

Like Zelda, my father had dreams that took him away from his family. After teaching himself to read and write, he studied painting and printmaking in Hamilton, Ontario. Considered the foremost Canadian printmaker of his generation, he documented the Depression years in southern Ontario, and became the first curator of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. His prints are in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Art Gallery of Ontario, as well as in other museums and private collections.

Historical setting

Tobacco production in Norfolk County got underway in the 1920s and reached its heyday between the 1950s and 1970s. In the 1980s, production was beginning to decline due to anti-smoking laws. During the '80s, Canada began to bring in Mexican and Jamaican migrant workers to southern Ontario. Today only about 1,000 families still grow tobacco, and Tillsonburg has enacted a bylaw against outdoor second-hand smoke.

Nightshade is set in the 1980s southern Ontario tobacco belt in Norfolk County in the general vicinity of the existing towns of Tillsonburg, Courtland, Simcoe and Delhi; however, the novel's settings—the motel housing the women, the Tormentines' tobacco farm where they worked, and later the women's own house—are fictional. Tobacco Road and the Tobacco River are fictional. And the migrant workers in *Nightshade* are women from Guatemala, for reasons specific to the story.

Southern Ontario Gothic and the tobacco belt

Southern Ontario Gothic is a genre of regional fiction based in and around Southern Ontario. Authors of Southern Ontario Gothic may use surrealism or magic realism to indicate a sense of displacement, dread, or moral hypocrisy. Typically, Southern Ontario Gothic's critiques of race, gender, or politics are set in small towns or rural spaces. Authors writing in this genre include Timothy Findlay, Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood, and Jane Urquhart.

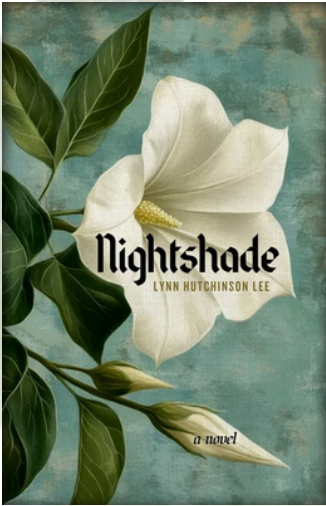
The magic realism in *Nightshade* not only conveys an unsettling sense of place, but also the danger that lurks under human (and non-human) motives and actions, punctuated by hallucinatory theatrics and commentaries on injustice played out by family puppets, who are autonomous in their own right.

Roma and racism

Since being expelled from India about 1,000 years ago, Roma have been—and continue to be—subjected to systemic persecution, violence, and discrimination. They were hunted for sport in Germany, enslaved in Romania for over 500 years, and evicted and driven from villages and towns across Europe.

In England, in 1547, Romanies were branded and also enslaved; in 1562, anyone identified as “Egyptian” or “Gypsy” was to be put to death. Today, in England, 9 out of 10 Romany children report racist abuse, suffering bullying and physical violence. Roma children in Hungary are placed in segregated schools. In the Czechia, Romany women were clandestinely sterilized in the 1970s. These are only a few examples.

Although seen as inherently nomadic, most Romanies moved because of forced evictions. In fact, most Eastern European Roma are sedentary. Younger generations of Romanies are now seeking higher education, and while many work in professional setting, academia, and the arts, post-secondary education is still unattainable for most Roma. I find hope in my dad, and in *Nightshade*'s protagonist Zelda, who both dreamed of a larger world.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A gorgeous, Gothic coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of the 1980s Southern Ontario tobacco belt, *Nightshade* delivers magic realism, intrigue, danger, delicious retribution, and a tangled nest of family relationships through the POV of a young Romany woman.

01

How does Zelda's desire for glamour and freedom shape the choices she makes throughout the story?

02

In what ways does Zelda struggle with her Romany identity, and how does that internal conflict influence her relationships?

03

What do the Tormentines represent to Zelda at the beginning of the summer, and how does that perception change?

04

How does power operate in the relationship between Zelda, Trixie, and Jack?

05

What role does wealth play in creating both opportunity and danger in the novel?

06

How do you interpret the figure of the "devil of the tobacco fields?" Is it literal, symbolic, or both?

07

What does Puri Dai represent in Zelda's life? How does her guidance contrast with the Tormentines' influence?

08

How does the setting (tobacco fields, motel parking lot, itinerant/migrant life) shape the mood and themes of the story?

09

Do you see Zelda's attraction to the Tormentines as empowerment, exploitation, or something more complicated?

10

What do you think the novel ultimately suggests about freedom—what it costs, and what it truly means?

