

Nightbirds

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid to Upper Secondary



SYNOPSIS

Magic may be illegal in Simta, but you can find it if you know which whispers to heed. None as tantalising as the ones about the Nightbirds, Simta's best kept secret. These privileged girls have the ability to gift their magic to others with a kiss—something the church would have them killed for. But protected by the Great Houses, their identities safe behind masks, the Nightbirds are well-guarded treasures.

Matilde, Æsa and Sayer spend their nights bestowing their unique brands of magic to well-paying clients. But this Season's Nightbirds find themselves at the heart of a political scheme that threatens their secrets and their safety. When they discover that their magic is far more than they were ever told, they see the carefully crafted Nightbird system for what it is: a gilded cage.

Now they must make a choice—to remain kept birds or take control, remaking the city that dared to clip their wings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate J. Armstrong has always had a fondness for adventure. After graduating college, she left her home state of Virginia and has never really looked back. She's explored many places and vocations, working as a high school English teacher and a nonfiction writer and editor for publishers such as National Geographic. In 2018, she started *The Exploress*, a women's history podcast with a cult following and over half a million downloads. She is also the co-host of *Pub Dates*, a podcast that takes readers backstage to join her on the journey to publication for her book, *Nightbirds*. When she's not writing or recording, you will find Kate hiking mountains, trying out cocktails, finding excuses to dress up in historical attire or reading way past her bedtime. She lives in Melbourne, with her husband and their noble greyhound, Galahad.

STUDY NOTES

BEFORE READING

ENGLISH

- Apart from helping readers follow the story, why do you think so many fantasy novels include a map or maps in the frontmatter?
- Did the prologue involving Teneriffe Maylon's visit to the Nightbirds draw you into the story and make you want to find out more? What sort of questions did it pose for you?
- How does Kate J. Armstrong build the world of Eudea/Simta in the novel's prologue and opening chapter? Were some aspects of the world similar to ours—either in the present or in the past? What aspects made it entirely

original? Did mixing the familiar and original seem intriguing to you?

- ‘Matilde ignores her. “Must you say it like that?”
“Like what?”
“Like what we do is whoring.”
“Well, isn’t it?”’ (p 29)

Whose side would you choose in this argument about the Nightbirds: Matilde or Sayer?

- ‘. . . “If there is one thing I’ve learned in my travels, it’s that making something illegal doesn’t abolish it. It only chases it into the shadows, where those who trade in it don’t have to play by any rules but their own.”’ (p 152) Does the prohibition of magic in Eudea actually stop its use? How is its use in the upper echelons of Eudean society different to its use on the streets of Simta? How does prohibition of magic empower the upper echelons of Eudea, such as the Pontifex and Suzerain? Research the Prohibition era in the USA to find out more about how ineffective the ban on alcohol was at that time. What are the pros and cons of prohibiting various kinds of sex work and substances in Australia, today?
- The Nightbirds are often described as witches in the novel. Research how witches were viewed at different times in European history: from relatively harmless individuals around the 10th century to the essence of evil from the 14th to 17th centuries. Who benefited most from this change and how did witch hunts ensure that these same people kept control of power?
- Is religion portrayed as a positive institution in *Nightbirds*? How would you describe characters such as the Pontifex, the Red Hand and Eli?
- ‘Something in her words makes Matilde think of her sire’s butterfly collection. It still hangs above his massive oak desk. She remembers him pinning them so gently to their bed of velvet, making sure the air was dry and cool enough to keep their wings pristine. The butterflies were well loved, coveted by other collectors. She never stopped to consider how disturbing they were. Dead bugs on display, pinned down just so others could admire them. Beauty trapped forever under glass.’ (p 187) In what way is a Nightbird like one of these butterflies? How might it be significant that Matilde—not Æsa nor Sayer—is the Nightbird who makes this connection? Is it possible to draw a link between the Nightbirds, butterflies and young girls in contemporary society?
- ““They wouldn’t pull such tricks if I were a man, of course. But a woman has to work twice as hard to make people respect or fear her. She has to be much tougher than the men.”’ (p 349) Did this conversation between Epinine and Matilde influence your opinion of Dennan’s subsequent actions? Do you think what is true in Eudea is true in our world?
- ‘Matilde slips on her Goldfinch mask. It’s like a second skin: her truest face and best lie.’ Masks—literal and figurative—are worn by many characters in *Nightbirds* and in many different situations. In what way do you think wearing a mask—hiding the real you behind an image of what you think the world wants to see—is relevant to the novel’s examination of feminism and prohibition?
- YA (young adult) novels typically explore emotional highs and lows (first love, family and friendship issues) and fundamental themes such as the wish to change society for the better. With this definition in mind, would you describe *Nightbirds* as a YA novel? Give examples of characters, settings and events in the novel to back up your answer.
 - What do you think ‘coming-of-age’ actually means? Do Matilde, Æsa and Sayer all ‘come-of-age’ according to your definition? In what way does each change and do you think one, in particular, undergoes the greatest change? What events or characters in the novel facilitated that change?
- Family relationships—both positive and negative—and family secrets are an important theme in *Nightbirds*. What similarities does Matilde’s family (official and unofficial) share with Sayer and Æsa’s families? Think about the (grand)mother / daughter relationship in each, as well as the (grand)father / daughter in each case.
- The story ends with Matilde, Æsa and Sayer separated but determined to bring change to Eudea. What would you like to see happen to them in the next book, the final book in the duology?