

"A master of epic love stories"
COLLEEN HOOVER

Light
at
Lavelle

PAULLINA
SIMONS

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *TULLY* AND *THE BRONZE HORSEMAN*

READING GROUP NOTES

TORN BETWEEN WHAT THEY CANNOT HAVE AND WHAT THEY CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT.

It is 1929. The world is about to change.

Finn Evans is a successful Boston banker harboring a secret that threatens to unravel his carefully constructed, idyllic life. Isabelle Lazar, a young Ukrainian farmer, endures unspeakable hardships in her homeland as she fights to save her family from the Soviet Union's iron grip. Barely escaping the Terror-Famine, she washes up alone on America's distant shores.

Fate throws Finn and Isabelle together just as the stock market crash causes a devastating collapse of his world. Amid the Great Depression and the trials of their new lives, an undeniable connection grows between them that they both must hide.

As their intertwined destinies hang in the balance, they discover that even those who have lost everything still have something left to lose.

Light at Lavelle is the breathtaking epic love story from the worldwide bestselling author of *Tully* and *The Bronze Horseman*. Paullina Simons weaves an unforgettable tapestry of love, hope, and fate, showing us that sometimes the greatest battles are fought within our own hearts.

ABOUT PAULLINA SIMONS

PAULLINA SIMONS is the author of fifteen internationally bestselling novels, one non-fiction memoir, a cookbook, and two children's books.

Born and raised in the former Soviet Union, Paullina immigrated with her family to the United States in the mid-seventies. She received her Bachelor's degree in political science from Kansas University. She has lived in Rome, London, Dallas, and now lives in New York with her husband and four children.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

** Please note, these questions contain spoilers **

1. The epigraph that opens the novel is from an unknown source: Fate whispers to the warrior, "You cannot withstand the storm." And the warrior whispers back, "I am the storm." What do you think this means? How does it relate to the novel *Light at Lavelle* as a whole?
2. What do you think is the meaning of the 'light at Lavelle' that is the title of this book?

THEMES

Family

3. The idea of the bonds of family is shown in both Isabelle's and Finn's families and through their responses to the events that befall them. What does this say about the strengths and weaknesses within families? When do family ties help, and when do they hinder?
4. There are two types of families at work here, the ones created by blood and the ones created by a combination of fate and choice. Both types of families face hardships. How does each type face its challenges?
5. There are some lovely moments of humour and levity between Finn, Isabelle, Mae and Junie. What role do children play in this novel, and how do they enhance and strengthen the plot?
6. How does Isabelle's relationship with Finn's daughters mirror or balance the relationship Isabelle had with her own children, who have been tragically lost to her, but with whom she still hopes to reunite during the course of the novel?

7. Finn's and Vanessa's parents are very different people. How is this reflected in the adults Finn and Vanessa have become? How do their individual childhoods help shape them as adults?

8. Does Isabelle's Ukrainian family give more weight to the importance of family ties than Finn's? If so, how do they differ?

9. Finn's biological mother's answer to her extreme poverty was to give up Finn as an infant. How do you feel about the ethics of her choice and the choice of Finn's adopted parents, who kept the truth of his birth hidden from him, even when he became an adult?

Trauma and resilience

10. Isabelle suffers significant trauma in her life in Ukraine. Which of Isabelle's attributes make her able to survive her physical and psychological hardships? Or, was it her hardships that shaped her personality as an adult woman?

In this context, what did you think of Isabelle's reaction to Omelian Marchenko's words that men died first, at which point her memory of the most tragic event of her life returns to her?

How do you feel about her keeping the truth of what happened to her family hidden from Finn? Why do you think she did so?

11. Isabelle and Vanessa react in very different ways to the events and obstacles life throws at them. Why is this, do you think? What elements of their experiences and personalities define how they cope with things?

Mental health

12. Despite a privileged and comfortable upbringing, Vanessa suffers serious mental health issues in *Light at Lavelle*. In your opinion, what are some factors that contributed to this, and why is it so hard for Vanessa to address her illness or to overcome it? What did you think of her years-long treatment with Dr Crawford?

13. What do you think we would call Vanessa's illness if she were treated in the modern day?

14. What do you think of Vanessa's relationship with her daughters? Where is she falling short, and why? What could she do differently to overcome these obstacles, and why is she unable to do so?

15. Isabelle also has mental health issues to deal with that stem from the trauma of her past and the loss of her family. How is her coping mechanism different or similar to Vanessa's? Which woman do you think is more successful?

16. During the events of the Stock Market Crash and the ensuing Great Depression, Finn is forced to behave in ways he never would have contemplated in better times. What is it that compels him? Why do you think he is able to keep going when many people in the same position

(Lionel, for example, and even his own wife, Vanessa) despair and give up?

17. Why do you think Finn is not willing to confront Vanessa about her withdrawal from the marriage and the household, even though he is aware of her struggles? Is his avoidance of her avoidance his own coping mechanism, or is it something else?

18. In your own life, do you find people generally have to have coping mechanisms to deal with stress or trauma or life-changing events? Which of them do you feel are more successful than others, and why?

19. In the book, characters cope with challenges that life throws at them in remarkably distinct and different ways. What do you think of the various ways in which Isabelle, Finn, and Vanessa face life?

Villains

20. The Great Depression in Boston and the Russian repression in the Ukraine bring dramatic changes to the people in those places and times. In one story, characters must respond to a systemic collapse, in the other they confront an organized effort to do them harm. From a dramatic point of view, how does this change the reader's feelings about the hardships faced by the story's characters? And do the "good intentions" of the Russians in the Ukraine absolve their behaviour toward the Ukrainians? Does the end justify the means?

Characters

21. Which of the characters did you relate to most, and why? Which did you like or dislike, and did you change your mind about any of the characters as the story progressed?

22. Do you think Isabelle did the right thing by leaving Finn? Do you think she did the right thing by not telling him the truth? What do you think would have happened had she stayed on the farm and told Finn about her pregnancy?

23. Was there another path forward, another future, other than the one Isabelle chose for her and Finn and Vanessa?

Settings

24. The action of *Light at Lavelle* takes place across three main settings: the small village of Ispas, Ukraine; Boston, Massachusetts, USA; and a farm in Hampton, New Hampshire, USA. How are these three settings described in the novel? What is the effect of interspersing Isabelle's Ukrainian story with the events of her later life in Boston and New Hampshire?

25. The three settings could be said to show us different sides of our characters, and what happens to them when they are removed from their

familiar environments. What does this show us about the characters, and what might it say about people in general who are tested by extreme changes of circumstance?

Language and writing

26. The story of *Light at Lavelle* is told to us in the third person, through the point of view of the two main characters, Isabelle and Finn, and to a lesser extent through the eyes of Vanessa, Finn's wife. What is the effect of switching between these three perspectives? What effect does this have on your understanding of the unfolding events?

27. Towards the end of the book, a different style of narrative is used for Finn and Isabelle, that dispenses with speech marks and blurs the lines between speech and thought. What is the effect of this? Why do you think Paullina chose this style to convey some scenes? Did it enhance your connection with and understanding of these two characters?