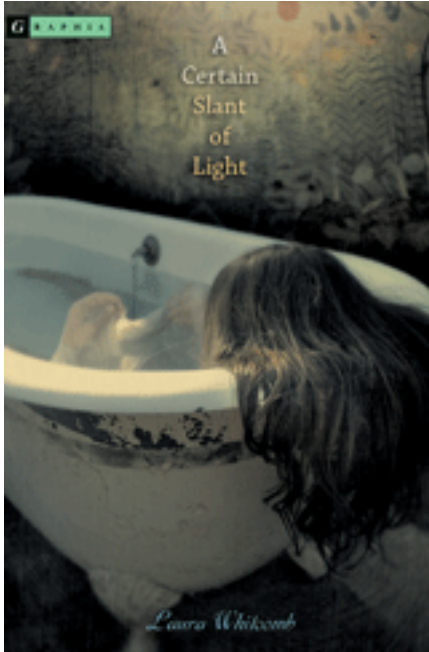


A Reader's Guide



A Certain Slant of Light

by Laura Whitcomb

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About the Book

In the class of the high school English teacher she has been haunting, Helen feels them: for the first time in 130 years, human eyes are looking at her. They belong to a boy, a boy who has not seemed remarkable until now. And Helen — terrified, but intrigued — is drawn to him. The fact that he is in a body and she is not presents this unlikely couple with their first challenge. But as the lovers struggle to find a way to be together, they begin to discover the secrets of their former lives and of the young people they come to possess.

About the Author

Laura Whitcomb grew up in Pasadena, California, where she lived in a mildly haunted house for twelve years. She has taught English in California and Hawaii. The winner of three Kay Snow Writing Awards, she was once runner-up in the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest for the best first sentence of the worst science fiction novel never written. She is involved in community theater and volunteers backstage in various productions, plays a wench in the pirate reenactment group BOOM, and sings madrigals with the Sherwood Renaissance Singers. She lives in Portland, Oregon. This is her first novel.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the metaphor of light play into the story? Why do you think Helen chooses to refer to herself as Light?

2. Helen's first host bears a striking resemblance to the poet Emily Dickinson, who wrote a poem called "There's a Certain Slant of Light." How does this poem encompass Helen's story?

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are

None may teach it—Any
'Tis the Seal Despair
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air

When it comes, the Landscape listens
Shadows—hold their breath
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death

— Emily Dickinson

3. Can you explain/interpret Helen's jealousy toward Mrs. Brown and her affection toward Mr. Brown? Why is he the only host Helen names?

4. What are some interpretations of the nicknames of Helen's other hosts: The Saint, The Knight, The Playwright, The Poet?

5. Among the novel's many themes are those of guilt and forgiveness. Which characters feel guilt? In what ways do they attempt to mask or absolve this guilt to achieve forgiveness? Who feels rightful guilt and who misinterprets tragedy as fault? What effects does guilt have on the actions of the characters?

6. Throughout the story, the ideas of free will and absence of choice are in constant battle. Show examples of moments when Helen and James exercise free will, even when it appears as if they lack choices. Are they robbing Jenny and Billy of free will when they enter their bodies?

7. Whitcomb represents various types of ghosts in her novel. How do they differ from one another? What ties them together and why?

8. How might the story be different if Helen and James were not adults but rather teenagers themselves?

9. The role of religion in Jenny's family is quite complicated. What are the various family members' reasons for embracing religion? How does Helen view their beliefs?