

BOOK REVIEW

Author Lori Lansens creates a reality a few election cycles removed from our own

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- Title: This Little Light
- Author: Lori Lansens
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It's the night of the American Virtue Ball at Sacred Heart High School in Calabasas, Calif. Clad in quasi-bridal white dresses, 16-year-old girls have just stood up in front of their peers and made a pledge – to their fathers – that they'll remain virgins until marriage. Dads push pearl “promise rings” onto their ring fingers, everyone claps, and it's time to party – as in watch Jagger Jonze, the charismatic rocker who launched this particular franchise of purity balls, perform his hit single Thank God For American Girls.

And then a bomb goes off.

This Little Light opens in the aftermath of the explosion. “We're trending,” writes Rory Miller, caught between horror (the entire world thinks she blew up her school!) and something approaching glee (her blog has never had so many hits!). Holed up in a 7-by-8-foot shed, hiding from police dogs and news helicopters circling above, she's watching herself go viral for a crime she didn't commit. Like most 16-year-olds, she'd dreamed of being internet famous ... but not as one of the #VillainsInVersace. And not with her “partner in crime,” Felicia, her best friend, who is curled up in a feverish sleep nearby. And definitely not with a million-dollar bounty on her head.

Preparing an account of her innocence – ready to go live on her blog should they be discovered – Rory is writing on a laptop handed to her by a man named Javier. He lives in a trailer adjacent to Rory and Felicia's hiding place, and so far, at least, seems inclined to shelter them. In a detail revealing the social dynamics of the area, this laptop was actually a gift to this man by Rory's parents, immigration lawyers who came into contact with Javier because he was their gardener's cousin.

As Rory begins writing about her life, and the events leading up to the night of the American Virtue Ball, all of the noise and chaos outside fades away. It's not because the reader isn't kept up on it – Rory is obsessively checking social media and the cable channels, a voyeur watching

the narrative of her own predicament twist and turn and trend – but because you find yourself so drawn in by the storyteller herself.

Funny, perceptive and (at turns) heartbreakingly young, Rory offers biting observations on the rarified world of private schools, culs-de-sac and evangelical Christianity she's grown up in. I hesitate to call it a dystopia – this is an imaginary world only an election cycle or two removed from our own reality – but the Calabasas (and America) Rory paints does bear a few Gileadean touches that significantly shape the narrative. Abortion, for one thing, is now illegal in most states, and a stridently pro-life conservative group called The Crusaders has increasing political and cultural sway.

At the same time, Rory's Calabasas is not dissimilar to the uber-privileged, celebrity-approved collection of gated communities you might recognize from episodes of *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*. It's a toxic combination of status-conscious consumerism and a perverted strain of Christianity that is more concerned with the appearance of virtue than virtue. None of this escapes Rory's keen eye for hypocrisy and the abuses of power committed in religion's name.

And while Rory feels like an outsider (she's both Jewish and descended from Canadian parents), this is also all she's known. She wrestles with things common to many teenage girls – yes, there's a boy she's crushing on – in a voice that sounds right for Gen-Z without leaning too hard into trying to sound like “the youth.” Experience has taught her to discern duplicity, particularly in her school's microcosm of conservative Christianity, and she has interesting things to say about faith (or rather, the losing thereof), friendship and what it's like to be a girl whose dad has left your family for another woman.

Compelling female narrators, of course, are a hallmark of Lansens's work. The same deft conjuring of personality that made *The Girls* (her acclaimed novel about the world's oldest conjoined twins) so unforgettable is at work here. So compelling, in fact, is Rory Miller that she almost begins to feel like a character in search of a plot. She is so vivid, so colourful, so absorbing a voice to spend time with that everything else feels two-dimensional.

And while there's nothing particularly lacking in the “thriller” aspect of this novel – you'll still care who set the bomb and framed Rory – it feels a bit like an HBO mini-series protagonist superimposed into the confines of a 42-minute network drama. Supporting characters are thinly sketched. For example, if you think a male authority figure is abusing his power, he probably is. And there's nothing on the suspense side of this equation that turns out very differently than I thought it might in say, Chapter Three.

That does not, however, make the climax of this book any less devastating. It closes with the literal snuffing of a “little light,” which is sad – but not as tragic as imagining how much better Rory's story could have been if she'd been given a narrative worthy of her depth and brilliance as a character.