

BOOKS

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It's not dystopian if the book's world already exists

Lansens' thriller puts two girls at the centre of a war on women waged by Trump's America

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Lori Lansens isn't the most famous citizen to have lived in Calabasas, Calif. That honour goes to the Kardashian family. Or perhaps Drake, who rapped about the suburban gated community in his 2016 track, "4pm in Calabasas."

But as a Canadian-born writer originally from Chatham, Ont., Lansens was in a unique position to observe life in this enclave outside of the rich and famous. She could go to the grocery store in sweatpants and not worry whether her manicure-less nails would be snapped by paparazzi. She watched her two teenage kids interacting with their friends, a cross-section of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, and noticed the disparities in wealth.

Calabasas life provides a surreal yet recognizable backdrop for Lansens' new novel, **This Little Light**. Set in the year 2024 over a 48-hour period, the nail-biting thriller is told through a series of blog entries by Rory Miller, a teenager on the run with her best friend, Fee, after they've been wrongly accused of bombing their private all-girls high school during a purity ball. As the two teens



This Little Light, Lori Lansens, Random House Canada, 288 pages, \$24.95.

evade the drones and helicopters hoping to score the bounty placed on their capture by a charismatic right-wing Christian leader, Rory discovers on social media that she is accused of aiding the Red Market, an underground network that is reportedly selling illegally aborted fetal tissue to cosmetic companies.

In 2015, Lansens — a former screenwriter and author of the bestsellers *Rush Home Road* and *The Girls* — began taking notes for her fifth novel, *This Little Light*, partly in reaction to watching then-presidential candidate Donald Trump grow in power and influence.

"I was sitting on the other side and watching it as an outsider, as a Canadian living in America," Lansens says. "I was cynical enough to say I believed that he could become the president."

At the time, Lansens' daughter was 13

years old, slightly younger than her protagonist Rory and her clique of friends. The book speaks to a generation coming of age under the message that women's autonomy and body rights are valueless. When the recording of Trump boasting about "p--- grabbing" was released, Lansens was scared by the fact that so many people dismissed his crass claims of sexual violence.

"We're saying to our young girls, 'your leader is a misogynist. Your leader is backed by the Christian right, and religious fanatical organizations and white supremacists,'" Lansens says. "This is the world that you're growing up in as you're trying to understand your place and your womanhood."

Although *This Little Light* — which has already been optioned for television — shares commonalities with recent female-driven novels set in the future such as Joanne Ramos' debut, *The Farm*, and Margaret Atwood's upcoming *The Handmaid's Tale* sequel, *The Testaments*, Lansens hesitates to call her book dystopian because "this is where we are now." While she depicts a chilling near-future where abortion is illegal and the Christian right has increased its power, the story is so closely tied to the present that the Kardashians are still popular, and even steal a scene or two.

If there is a novel that *This Little Light* could better be compared to, it's *The*

Catcher in the Rye, which is also set over two days. Just like J.D. Salinger's iconic Holden Caulfield, outspoken Rory is struggling to make sense of her privileged world as she straddles the careless pleasures of youth with impending adulthood. She calls out hypocrisy and lies with gunslinging outrage as she's hurt by the grown-ups who are supposed to be protecting her. Every man in the book, from Rory's father to the political leaders, betrays her.

"She's going to tell us, 'this is how I feel about you adults. This is how I feel about the world; this is how I feel about me in this world,'" Lansens says. "I wanted to kick that idea and present this young girl's voice."

As much as Lansens' daughter helped her hone the cultural references and language, *This Little Light* is also like *The Catcher in the Rye* in that it will resonate with readers who have left their own precarious teen years behind but still worry about where our world is heading.

"I tried as much as possible to channel my own 16-year-old self and my own questions about religion and about femininity, womanhood and justice," Lansens says. "There were also a lot of thoughts and feelings that I had as a woman that I've been saving up as I've been finding my own voice."

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