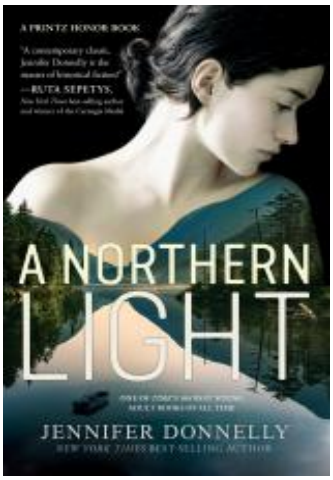
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

A Northern Light

by Jennifer Donnelly



About the Book

Sixteen-year-old Mattie Gokey has big dreams but little hope of seeing them come true. Desperate for money, she takes a job at the Glenmore, where hotel guest Grace Brown entrusts her with the task of burning a secret bundle of letters. But when Grace's drowned body is fished from the lake, Mattie discovers that the letters could reveal the grim truth behind a murder.

Set in 1906 against the backdrop of the murder that inspired Theodore Dreiser's **An American Tragedy**, Jennifer Donnelly's astonishing debut novel effortlessly weaves romance, history, and a murder mystery into something moving, and real, and wholly original.

Discussion Guide

1. Why is Pa so against Mattie working at the Glenmore Hotel? Do you think he is a good father? Why or why not?

2. Referring to Mattie's promise to her mother, Weaver says, "God took her life and she took yours." Why does he look at the situation that way? What might have been her mother's motives? Do you think Mattie is obliged to keep that promise? What would you advise Mattie when she wonders if it would be all right to alter the promise?

3. Miss Parrish says Mattie's writing is bad. Miss Wilcox says it is a gift. Why are their opinions and subsequent advice about her writing so different?

4. Why does Royal race his horses when Mattie tells him that nothing is more exciting than books? Why does Mattie agree to marry him?

5. Mattie says at the Glenmore she learned "when to tell the truth and when not to." Under what circumstances might it be better not to tell the truth?

6. Why would Grace Brown want the letters destroyed? Shouldn't Mattie tell someone about the letters as soon as Grace's body is fished from the lake? Why doesn't she?

7. Mattie wonders what would happen if characters in books could change their fates. Are there characters in Mattie's story whose fates you'd like to change? Which ones? In what way? Why? How about characters in other favorite stories?

8. Do you think it's possible for Mattie to pursue her love of books without sacrificing the love of another person?

9. Why does Weaver react so violently to the man at the train station when he knows that a similar situation led to his father's death? How else might Weaver have handled the situation?

10. What does Miss Wilcox mean when she says that voice is not just the sound that comes from your throat but the feeling that comes from your words?

11. Weaver wishes there were happy endings in real life. Are there?

12. Why does Mattie finally decide to leave all she knows for a new life in New York?

Author Bio

Jennifer Donnelly?s first novel, THE TEA ROSE, was a Book Sense pick and a Romantic Times Book Club top pick. Donnelly is also the author of the critically acclaimed novel THE WINTER ROSE, and of the award-winning young adult novels A NORTHERN LIGHT and REVOLUTION. She lives with her family in upstate New York.

Critical Praise

"A breathtaking tale . . . Donnelly's characters ring true to life, and the meticulously described setting forms a vivid backdrop to this finely crafted novel . . . Outstanding."

A Northern Light
by Jennifer Donnelly

Publication Date: May 7, 2019
Genres: Historical Fiction
Paperback: 416 pages
Publisher: HMH Books for Young Readers
ISBN-10: 035806368X
ISBN-13: 9780358063681