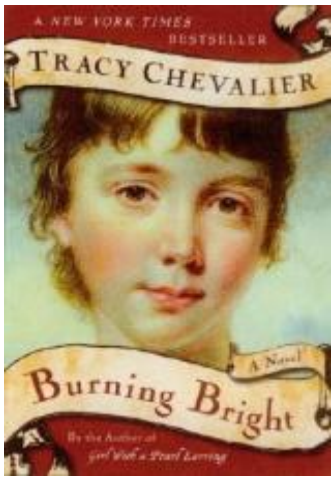
Burning Bright

by Tracy Chevalier



About the Book

Burning Bright follows the Kellaway family as they leave behind tragedy in rural Dorset and come to late 18th-century London. As they move in next door to the radical painter/poet William Blake, and take up work for a near-by circus impresario, the youngest family member gets to know a girl his age. Embodying opposite characteristics --- Maggie Butterfield is a dark-haired, streetwise extrovert, Jem Kellaway a quiet blond introvert --- the children form a strong bond while getting to know their unusual neighbor and his wife.

Set against the backdrop of a city nervous of the revolution gone sour across the Channel in France, **Burning Bright** explores the states of innocence and experience just as Blake takes on similar themes in his best-known poems, **Songs of Innocence and of Experience**.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss your first impressions of the main characters. Who did you like best initially? Which, if any, surprised you by the end? Whose transformation was most complete?

2. The Kellaway and Butterfield families, though very different, also have some similarities. Compare and contrast the parental relationships, as well as the sibling relationships, within the two families.

3. Throughout the novel, attention is paid to the differences between city and country, with Maggie and Jem each representing their home turf. Which does Chevalier portray more sympathetically --- city (Maggie) or country (Jem)? In what ways?

4. Why do you think Chevalier chose to set her novel in 1792? Why not a few years earlier, or later?

5. William Blake?s first two appearances in the novel are quite striking --- first, in his bonnet rouge on page 19, and then when Jem and Maggie spy on him having sex in his backyard (page 27). What significance does this have for him as a character? What did you expect of him after these prominent glimpses?

6. Before reading Burning Bright, were you familiar with Blake?s work? How did it color your experience of the novel?

7. Read and discuss the poem from which the book?s title is taken, ?The Tyger.? (An excerpt is on page 275.) What is its significance in terms of the novel and the characters? Why do you think Chevalier chose a phrase from this poem for her title?

8. Two of Blake?s most famous works are Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. How do those works relate to the characters of Jem and Maggie?

9. Life in Georgian times was unpredictable and dangerous---several characters lose family members, and fire is a constant threat. How does Chevalier use this precariousness to enrich the story? What role does economics --- and class --- play?

10. Reread the conversation about opposites on pages 71?73, and discuss your own take on the subject. Which character do you agree with most?

11. Burning Bright is set in and around Astley?s Circus, a popular real-life attraction in 1790s London. How does Tracy Chevalier use the circus as a character? What does it represent?

12. On page 86, Philip Astley tells Blake that the two men are in the same business: ?We are both dealers in illusion.? In what ways is he correct, and how is he wrong? What purpose do these two characters serve in the novel?

13. On page 199, Laura Devine tells Maisie, ?What you want is not worth half the value of what you?ve still got.? What did she mean by that? How might it resonate with Maisie later in the novel? And for the other principal characters?

14. Beginning on page 216, Maggie tries exceptionally hard to preserve Maisie?s virginity, eventually turning to William Blake for help. Why does she go this far when nobody else seems to care?

15. How much did you know about the political background of the story? Would you have signed the loyalty oath like the one on page 236? What did it reveal about Dick Butterfield?s character when he signed? About Thomas Kellaway?s when he refused?

16. When it is finally revealed on page 261, how does Maggie?s experience on Cut-Throat Lane color her character? Why does Jem react the way he does?

17. Discuss the novel?s ending. Which volume do you think Blake intended for Maggie, and which for Jem? What do you think the future holds for these two characters?

18. Chevalier has said, ?I like writing about the past because I come to it fresh and clean. I feel more comfortable

analyzing it and deciding what is important than I do about the present. Also, I live this contemporary life every day --- I don?t feel the need to write about it too. I would rather write about something that I don?t know and want to learn about. I?m not an historian and so when I choose a time to write about --- seventeenth-century Holland, early twentieth-century England, fifteenth-century France --- I know nothing about it and so have no preconceptions or prejudices. I can be more objective. I learn a lot too, which keeps my mind active.? What are your reasons for reading historical fiction?

Author Bio

Tracy Chevalier is the *New York Times* bestselling author of such novels as GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING, which has been translated into 45 languages and made into an Oscar-nominated film, a play and an opera. Born and raised in Washington, DC, she lives in London with her husband.

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