a great and terrible beauty

by Libba Bray · Language: EN

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Overview

A Great and Terrible Beauty by Libba Bray introduces Gemma Doyle, a sixteen-year-old English girl living in India in 1895. Her life takes a dark turn when she witnesses her mother's apparent suicide, a traumatic event that also reveals Gemma's latent ability to see ghosts and visions. Sent back to England to attend the austere Spence Academy for Young Ladies, Gemma struggles to adapt to the rigid Victorian society and the strictures of boarding school life. She quickly forms an unlikely friendship with three other girls: the rebellious and beautiful Felicity Worthington, the quiet and studious Ann Bradshaw, and the vivacious and romantic Pippa Cross.

As Gemma's visions intensify, she discovers a hidden magical world known as the Realms, a place of immense beauty and danger. She learns that her mother was once part of a secret society called the Order, tasked with protecting the Realms from a malevolent force known as the Rakshana. With her new friends, Gemma begins to explore her burgeoning magical abilities and delve deeper into the mysteries of the Realms and the Order's past. The girls find themselves entangled in a dangerous quest to understand their powers, uncover the truth about Gemma's mother's death, and protect the delicate balance between their world and the magical one, all while navigating the social pressures and expectations of their time. The novel explores themes of female friendship, power, grief, and the struggle for agency in a restrictive era.

Key Takeaways

- Embrace your unique gifts and inner strength, even if they set you apart from societal norms.
- True friendship can provide solace and power, helping you navigate difficult and mysterious challenges.
- Question the established order and seek your own truth, rather than blindly accepting what you are told.
- The past holds secrets that can profoundly influence the present, requiring courage to uncover and confront.
- Grief is a complex journey, and processing loss can unlock hidden strengths and understanding.
- Societal expectations, particularly for women, can be restrictive, but inner freedom is always possible.

• Magic and the mundane often intertwine, revealing a deeper, more mysterious reality beneath the surface.

Chapter Summaries

A Life in India

Gemma Doyle lives in India in 1895, a privileged but restless existence. Her world shatters when she witnesses her mother's mysterious death, which is ruled a suicide. This traumatic event also awakens Gemma's ability to see unsettling visions and communicate with spirits, leading to her being sent away to England for her own good.

Spence Academy for Young Ladies

Arriving at the strict and traditional Spence Academy, Gemma struggles to fit in. She endures the bullying of the popular Felicity Worthington and the snobbery of other girls. However, she soon forms an unlikely bond with Felicity, the quiet Ann Bradshaw, and the romantic Pippa Cross, finding a semblance of belonging amidst the rigid rules.

The Whispers of the Realms

Gemma's visions intensify, leading her to a hidden cave on the school grounds. There, she discovers a portal to a magical dimension known as the Realms. She learns that her mother was connected to this world and possessed similar abilities, hinting at a legacy of power and responsibility that Gemma is now inheriting.

The Order's Legacy

With Felicity, Ann, and Pippa, Gemma begins to explore the beautiful yet dangerous Realms. They discover that Gemma's mother and her friends were part of a secret society, 'The Order,' dedicated to protecting the Realms. The girls decide to reform the Order, each discovering their own unique magical talents within the mystical world.

Unveiling the Past

As the girls delve deeper into the Realms, they uncover fragments of the Order's history and the truth behind Gemma's mother's death. They learn about the malevolent Rakshana, dark entities seeking to corrupt the Realms, and the sacrifices made by previous generations. Gemma also encounters Kartik, a mysterious Indian boy who seems to know more than he lets on.

The Winterland Ball

The annual Winterland Ball becomes the stage for a dramatic confrontation. The girls, now more skilled in their powers, must face the growing threat of the Rakshana and the manipulations of Circe, a former member of the Order with her own dark agenda. Gemma must make a difficult choice to protect her friends and the balance of the Realms.

Themes

- Female friendship
- Hidden power
- Societal expectations
- Grief and loss
- Magic vs. reality

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a great and terrible beauty about?

A Great and Terrible Beauty is about Gemma Doyle, a teen in 1895 who, after her mother's mysterious death, is sent to a strict English boarding school. There, she discovers she has magical abilities, can enter a hidden magical dimension called the Realms, and is connected to a secret society called the Order, tasked with protecting the world from dark forces.

Is a great and terrible beauty worth reading?

Yes, it is worth reading for its unique blend of historical fiction, dark fantasy, and coming-of-age themes. Readers who enjoy strong female friendships, atmospheric Victorian settings, and a touch of gothic mystery will find it engaging. It's the first book in a trilogy, offering a rich world to explore.

How does a great and terrible beauty end?

Spoiler: The book culminates in a confrontation at the Winterland Ball, where Gemma and her friends use their powers to battle Circe and the Rakshana. Gemma makes a difficult choice to seal the Realms from Circe's influence, but not without significant personal cost and a sense of unresolved danger, setting up the next book in the series.

Who should read a great and terrible beauty?

This book is ideal for young adult readers and adults who enjoy historical fantasy, particularly those with a gothic sensibility. Fans of stories featuring strong female protagonists, complex friendships, magical boarding schools, and Victorian-era settings will likely appreciate Libba Bray's intricate world-building and character development.

How long does it take to read a great and terrible beauty?

On average, it takes approximately 8 to 10 hours to read A Great and Terrible Beauty. This estimate is based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's length of around 400 pages.

Best Quotes

“I am Gemma Doyle, and I am not afraid.”

This declaration by Gemma signifies her growing courage and acceptance of her destiny. It marks a pivotal moment where she confronts her fears and embraces her unique magical abilities, asserting her will against the dangers of the Realms and the expectations of her restrictive world.

“We are not meant to be caged.”

This line reflects the collective yearning of Gemma and her friends for freedom from the oppressive Victorian societal norms and the patriarchal control of the Order. It encapsulates their desire to break free from limitations and embrace their true power and agency within the magical world.

“You are a vessel, Gemma. A conduit for the power.”

Spoken by a magical entity or guide, this quote defines Gemma's inherent connection to the Realms and her unique ability to channel its magic. It highlights her crucial role in the unfolding magical conflict and sets her apart as a central figure in the story's supernatural elements.

“Do not trust the gypsies.”

This warning, often given to Gemma by those wary of Kartik and his people, underscores the deep-seated prejudice and mistrust prevalent in the magical world. It hints at the complex and often dangerous alliances and rivalries between different factions, particularly the Order and the Rakshasi.

“The Temple is not a place of worship, Gemma. It is a place of power.”

This line clarifies the true nature of the Temple within the Realms, emphasizing its function as a source and conduit of magic rather than a religious site. It highlights the practical and potent aspects of the magical world, where power is sought and wielded.

“You have a choice, Gemma. Always.”

This recurring theme emphasizes Gemma's free will despite her destiny and the immense power she wields. It serves as a reminder that even with great responsibility, she retains the ability to make her own decisions and shape her path, empowering her agency.

“We are the daughters of the Order.”

This declaration signifies the girls' acceptance of their magical heritage and their collective power. It represents their unity and their commitment to wielding the magic they have discovered, challenging the old guard and asserting their own identity within the magical world.

“Fear is a choice, Gemma.”

This motivational line empowers Gemma, suggesting that fear is not an inevitable reaction but a state of mind that can be overcome. It encourages her to confront her anxieties and embrace courage, especially when facing the daunting challenges of the magical Realms.

“There is a great and terrible beauty in the world.”

This phrase, which gives the book its title, encapsulates the dual nature of the magical Realms and the power Gemma discovers. It signifies that true beauty often coexists with danger, immense responsibility, and even terror, reflecting the complex journey of self-discovery and magic.

“Sometimes, the only way to save yourself is to abandon the person you think you are.”

This profound statement suggests that true self-discovery and survival often require shedding preconceived notions of oneself. It encourages transformation and embracing one's true, perhaps hidden, identity and power, pushing Gemma to evolve beyond her initial understanding of herself.

Questions & Answers

What is the main setting of "A Great and Terrible Beauty"?

The story primarily takes place in late 19th-century England, specifically at Spence Academy for Young Ladies, a strict boarding school. Gemma Doyle, the protagonist, is sent there after a tragic event in India, where she spent her early life. The narrative also extensively explores a magical, ethereal dimension known as the Realms, which Gemma and her friends discover and learn to navigate.

Who is Gemma Doyle and what is her special ability?

Gemma Doyle is the protagonist, a sixteen-year-old girl with a rebellious spirit and a troubled past. She possesses the unique ability to see visions and communicate with spirits, a power inherited from her mother's side of the family. This ability eventually allows her to access and manipulate magic within a hidden dimension called the Realms, making her a central figure in a long-standing magical conflict.

What is the significance of the Realms in the story?

The Realms are a magical, ethereal dimension that exists parallel to the human world, accessible only to those with specific magical abilities. It is a place of immense power, beauty, and danger, where thoughts and emotions can manifest. The Realms serve as the source of magic, the battleground for ancient magical factions, and the key to understanding Gemma's destiny and the mysteries surrounding her family.

Who are Felicity, Ann, and Pippa, and what is their role?

Felicity, Ann, and Pippa are Gemma's roommates and closest friends at Spence Academy. Felicity is the beautiful, popular, and often cruel leader; Ann is the quiet, intelligent, and studious girl; and Pippa is the romantic, vivacious, and somewhat naive one. Together, they form a powerful coven, discovering and exploring the Realms with Gemma, each bringing their unique strengths and vulnerabilities to their shared magical journey.

What is the Order and what is its purpose?

The Order is an ancient secret society, originally founded by women, dedicated to protecting and controlling the magic of the Realms. Over time, it became corrupted and dominated by men who sought to suppress women's access to magic. Its original purpose was to maintain balance and prevent the misuse of power, but by Gemma's time, it primarily seeks to control those with magical abilities, particularly women.

Who is Kartik and what is his relationship with Gemma?

Kartik is a mysterious young man, a member of the Rakshasi, a group of gypsies tasked with guarding the portals to the Realms and preventing the misuse of magic. He initially appears as an antagonist, warning Gemma away from the magic, but their relationship evolves into a complex alliance and a burgeoning romantic interest. He acts as both a protector and a foil to Gemma, challenging her understanding of the magical world.

What event triggers Gemma's journey into the magical world?

Gemma's journey is triggered by the mysterious death of her mother in India. Her mother's death, which Gemma witnesses in a vision, is not an accident but a magical sacrifice. This event not only sends Gemma to Spence Academy but also awakens her latent magical abilities, drawing her into the hidden world of the Realms and the secrets of her family's past.

What is the significance of the journal found by the girls?

The journal belongs to Mary Dowd, a former student of Spence Academy who also possessed magical abilities and was involved with the Order. It serves as a crucial guide for Gemma and her friends, providing insights into the Realms, the history of the Order, and the dangers they face. The journal reveals the tragic fate of Mary and her friends, mirroring and foreshadowing the girls' own experiences.

How does the book explore themes of feminism and female empowerment?

The book strongly explores themes of feminism by setting its story in a restrictive Victorian era where women are expected to be docile and subservient. Gemma and her friends defy these societal norms by embracing their magical powers, seeking knowledge, and asserting their agency. They challenge the patriarchal Order, which seeks to control female magic, and strive to reclaim power for themselves, symbolizing female empowerment.

What is the main conflict Gemma faces in the story?

Gemma faces a multifaceted conflict. Internally, she struggles with grief, self-doubt, and the burden of her visions and powers. Externally, she must navigate the rigid social structure of Spence, the dangers of the magical Realms, and the ancient struggle between the Order and the Rakshasi. Her primary conflict is understanding and controlling her immense magical abilities while fighting against those who wish to exploit or suppress them.

What does the title "A Great and Terrible Beauty" refer to?

The title "A Great and Terrible Beauty" refers to the nature of magic and the Realms themselves. It encapsulates the dualistic nature of power: its immense allure, wonder, and potential for creation (beauty), alongside its inherent dangers, destructive capabilities, and the sacrifices it demands (terrible). It also reflects the complex, often frightening, yet ultimately empowering journey Gemma undertakes.

What happens to Pippa at the end of the book?

Spoiler: Pippa, driven by her desire for love and freedom from an arranged marriage, makes a desperate choice. She attempts to use the magic of the Realms to escape her fate and be with her beloved, but she oversteps her boundaries and is consumed by the power. She becomes trapped within the Realms, her spirit intertwined with the magic, unable to return to the human world, a tragic consequence of her ambition.

How does Gemma's relationship with her mother's death evolve?

Initially, Gemma is haunted by her mother's death, feeling guilt and confusion. As she delves deeper into the magical world, she learns that her mother was a powerful member of the Order and willingly sacrificed herself to protect Gemma and the magic. This revelation transforms Gemma's understanding, allowing her to move past guilt towards a sense of purpose and a deeper connection to her mother's legacy.

What role does Miss Dabney play in the story?

Miss Dabney is one of the teachers at Spence Academy, known for her strictness and adherence to Victorian propriety. She represents the repressive societal norms that the girls are rebelling against. While not directly involved in the magical plot, her constant surveillance and disciplinary actions create an oppressive atmosphere that highlights the girls' yearning for freedom and their secret magical lives.

What is the significance of the "Temple" in the Realms?

The Temple within the Realms is a central location of immense magical power. It is where the veil between worlds is thinnest, and where the most potent magic can be accessed or contained. It serves as a focal point for the Order's rituals and is the ultimate destination for Gemma and her friends as they seek to understand and control the magic, often leading to significant confrontations.

What is the main lesson Gemma learns about power?

Gemma learns that power, especially magical power, comes with immense responsibility and consequences. She discovers that it can be used for both good and ill, and that true strength lies not just in possessing power, but in understanding its nature, respecting its limits, and wielding it with wisdom and self-control. She also learns that power can be shared and amplified through friendship and unity.

How does the book challenge traditional Victorian gender roles?

The book challenges Victorian gender roles by portraying young women who actively seek power, knowledge, and agency in a society that expects them to be passive and ornamental. The girls defy expectations by exploring a dangerous magical world, forming a powerful coven, and directly confronting patriarchal structures like the Order, which sought to control female magic. They assert their right to self-determination and strength.

What is the role of the Rakshasi?

The Rakshasi are a nomadic group, often referred to as gypsies, who have a long-standing connection to the Realms. Their primary role is to guard the portals to the magical world and prevent the misuse of its power, particularly by the Order. They are often seen as antagonists by the Order, but their true purpose is to maintain balance and protect the integrity of the magic. Kartik is a prominent member.

What is the fate of the Order by the end of the book?

Spoiler: By the end of the book, the traditional, patriarchal Order is largely dismantled or significantly weakened. Gemma and her friends, having gained considerable power and understanding of the Realms, challenge its authority and expose its corruption. While not entirely destroyed, its control over the magic and its ability to suppress female practitioners is severely undermined, paving the way for a new, more balanced approach to magic.

What is the main theme of the series, as introduced in this first book?

The main theme introduced in this first book, and carried through the series, is the struggle for power and self-determination, particularly for young women in a restrictive world. It explores the dual nature of power (both beautiful and terrible), the importance of friendship and unity, and the journey of self-discovery as Gemma learns to harness her unique abilities and challenge the established order.