

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

Notable Quotes

- "The world is not as it seems, Gemma. But then, it never is, is it?" — A recurring sentiment that hints at the hidden magical reality Gemma is discovering.
- "We are not meant to be perfect. We are meant to be whole." — A reflection on the pressures faced by the girls and the acceptance of their true selves.
- "There are no monsters in the world, Gemma, only people. And sometimes, they do monstrous things." — Said by Gemma's mother, foreshadowing the human element of evil and betrayal.
- "Magic is not a game, Gemma. It is a responsibility." — A warning given to Gemma as she begins to understand the true nature of her powers.
- "Sometimes, the only way to find yourself is to get utterly lost." — A thought Gemma has while navigating the complexities of the Realms and her own identity.

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.