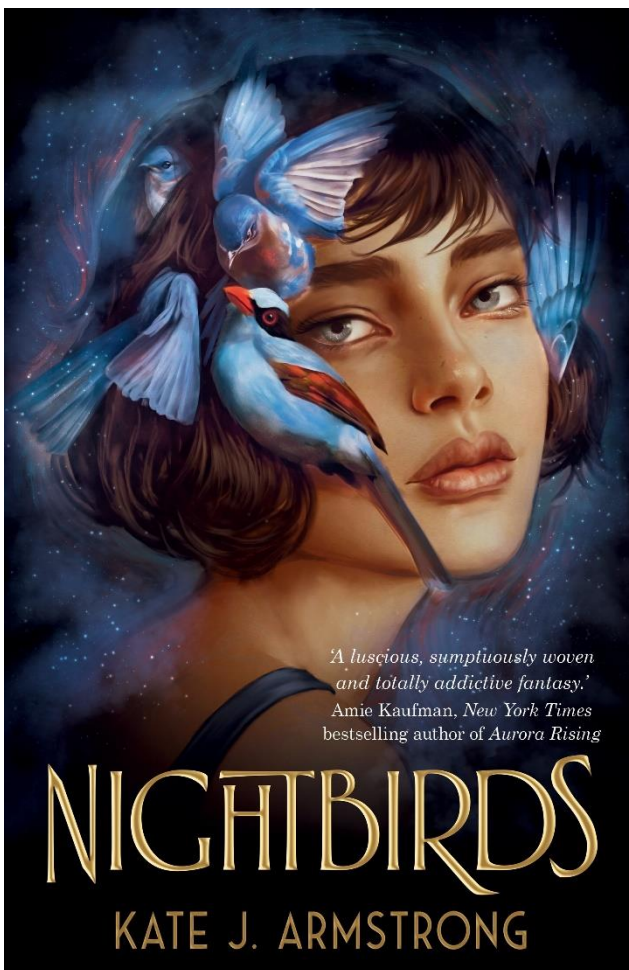


# NIGHTBIRDS

By Kate J. Armstrong



In a dazzling new fantasy world full of whispered secrets and political intrigue, the magic of women is outlawed but three girls with unusual gifts have the chance to change it all.

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Students 13+

## THEMES

Magic, spells, power, female empowerment, politics

## ISBN (AUS)

9781760526900

## SYNOPSIS

Magic may be illegal in Simta, but you can find it if you know which girl to kiss.

In a world full of whispers and clandestine trades, the Nightbirds are Simta's best-kept secret. These high-society girls can gift their magic with a kiss – something the church would have them killed for. But protected by the Great Houses, their identities safe behind masks, the Nightbirds are well-guarded treasures.

Matilde, sure of her place in this glittering world, but not of her Nightbird sisters. Sayer, from the wrong side of the canal with a score to settle. And Æsa, afraid of everything and everyone, including herself.

Soon the girls find themselves at the heart of a political scheme that shakes the world as they know it. When they discover their magic is far greater than they were taught, they see the Nightbird system for what it is: a gilded cage. They must make a choice – to remain kept birds or take control, remaking the city that dared to clip their wings.

Filled with sumptuous, cinematic writing and dazzling details, *Nightbirds* is a breathtaking debut where the most potent magic lies not in a kiss, but in the truth.

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

'*Nightbirds* is a fiercely feminist fantasy that questions patriarchal structures and all the different boxes we try to put girls in. The Nightbirds are a group of magical courtesans who can gift their magic with a kiss. And they do, for a price, and are told that to do so is a privilege. They are coveted, moneyed, and well protected, but they're also surrounded by people who tell them what their power is good for, who give them lots of rules under the guise of keeping them safe. The story explores the many ways in which we punish and shame girls for wanting or having power. It's about girls





finding their voices and using them to push back against those who would silence or control them. It's also about the power of sisterhood: about how female friendship makes us stronger.

'There are definite questions about power and class in *Nightbirds*. Who deserves to have a voice at the table? Should money and privilege dictate how a country is run?

'This is a coming-of-age story about breaking free of other people's expectations, even our family's, to reach our true potential, and discovering the truth for ourselves. It's also about questioning the world around you, and most especially questioning the stories other people tell you about yourself.

'In a world where magic is illegal, it's about what happens when you push a commodity into the shadows (lots of parallels to 1920s Prohibition America). It's also about what happens when the most powerful magic is something only girls can claim.'

## READING GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Apart from helping readers follow the story, why do you think so many fantasy novels include a map or maps in the frontmatter?
- Did the prologue involving Teneriffe Maylon's visit to the *Nightbirds* draw you into the story and make you want to find out more? What sort of questions did it pose for you?
- How does Kate J. Armstrong build the world of Eudea/Simta in the novel's prologue and opening chapter? Were some aspects of the world similar to ours – either in the present or in the past? What aspects made it entirely original? Did mixing the familiar and original intrigue you?

- *'Matilde ignores her. "Must you say it like that?"*  
*"Like what?"*  
*"Like what we do is whoring."*  
*"Well, isn't it?"*" (pp 29-30)  
Whose side would you choose in this argument about the Nightbirds: Matilde or Sayer?
- *'... "If there is one thing I've learned in my travels, it's that making something illegal doesn't abolish it. It only chases it into the shadows, where those who trade in it don't have to play by any rules but their own."' (Page 152)*  
Does the prohibition of magic in Eudea actually stop its use? How is its use in the upper echelons of Eudean society different to its use on the streets of Simta? How does prohibition of magic *empower* the upper echelons of Eudea, such as the Pontifex and Suzerain? Research the Prohibition era in the USA to find out more about how ineffective the ban on alcohol was at that time. What are the pros and cons of prohibiting various kinds of sex work and substances in Australia, today?
- The Nightbirds are often described as witches in the novel. Research how witches were viewed at different times in European history: from relatively harmless individuals around the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the essence of evil from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Who benefited most from this change and how did witch hunts ensure that these same people kept control of power?
- Is religion portrayed as a positive institution in *Nightbirds*? How would you describe characters such as the Pontifex, the Red Hand and Eli?
- *'Something in her words makes Matilde think of her sire's butterfly collection. It still hangs above his massive oak desk. She remembers him pinning them so gently to their bed of velvet, making sure the air was dry and cool enough to keep their wings pristine. The butterflies were well loved, coveted by other collectors. She never*

*stopped to consider how disturbing they were. Dead bugs on display, pinned down just so others could admire them. Beauty trapped forever under glass.’ (Page 187)*

In what way is a Nightbird like one of these butterflies? How might it be significant that Matilde – not Æsa nor Sayer – is the Nightbird who makes this connection? Is it possible to draw a link between the Nightbirds, butterflies and young girls in contemporary society?

- *‘There is a plant that dwells near Illish coves. It floats free, its long tendrils attached to nothing, until it finds another of its kind. They twine their roots, forming huge, connected clusters. It is only then that they unfurl their blooms.*

*This moment feels like that. As frightening as the evening has been, Æsa feels more at home than she has in a long time, tangled up with these girls. Three ocean flowers.’ (Pages 230- 231)*

- To what extent would you say ‘ocean flowers’ are a metaphor for the three Nightbirds and their special friendship?
  - What unique characteristic or characteristics does each bring to the friendship?
  - In what way does their friendship prove the dictum, ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’ in the story?
  - Which enriches our ‘real’ world more: true friendship or rivalry?
- *“‘They wouldn’t pull such tricks if I were a man, of course. But a woman has to work twice as hard to make people respect or fear her. She has to be much tougher than the men.’” (Page 349)*

Did this conversation between Epinine and Matilde influence your opinion of Dennan’s subsequent actions? Do you think what is true in Eudea is true in our world?

- *‘Matilde slips on her Goldfinch mask. It’s like a second skin: her truest face and best lie.’ (Page 35)*

Masks – literal and figurative – are worn by many characters in *Nightbirds* and in many different situations. In what way do you think wearing a mask – hiding the real you behind an image of what you think the world wants to see – is relevant to the novel’s examination of feminism and prohibition?

- YA (young adult) novels typically explore emotional highs and lows (first love, family, and friendship issues) and fundamental themes such as the wish to change society for the better. (a) With this definition in mind, would you describe *Nightbirds* as a YA novel? Give examples of characters, settings and events in the novel to back up your answer. (b) What do you think ‘coming-of-age’ actually means? (c) Do Matilde, Æsa and Sayer all ‘come-of-age’ according to your definition? In what way does each change and do you think one, in particular, undergoes the greatest change? What events or characters in the novel facilitated that change?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate J. Armstrong has always had a fondness for adventure. After graduating college, she left her home state of Virginia and has never really looked back. She's explored many places and vocations, working as a high school English teacher and a nonfiction writer and editor for publishers such as National Geographic. In 2018, she started *The Exploress*, a women's history podcast with a cult following and over half a million downloads. She is also the co-host of *Pub Dates*, a podcast that takes readers backstage to join her on the journey to publication for her book, *Nightbirds*. When she's not writing or recording, you will find Kate hiking mountains, trying out cocktails, finding excuses to dress up in historical attire, or reading way past her bedtime. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, with her husband and their noble greyhound, Galahad.