

Culture Watch – “This Little Light” explores religious hypocrisy

Sarah A. Spitz 4 hours ago Calabasas Faux Christians Lori Lansens Milan Cheylov religious right The Golden Rule the Kardashians



Screenwriter and author Lori Lansens discusses her latest novel, “This Little Light.” Courtesy photo.



I was approached to write about Lori Lansens’ newest novel, “This Little Light,” based on a geographic misunderstanding. This “Santa Monica-based screenwriter” actually lives in Tarzana (in the Santa Monica Mountains...) so we had a good chuckle over a typical New York misapprehension about LA.

But her novel’s no laughing matter; it’s an edge-of-your-seat thriller that races speedily and reads easily; it’s hard to put down. It’s the story of “two teenage girls accused of setting a bomb at their Calabasas Christian school in the year 2024, when abortion has been recriminalized, and faux

Christians wield their power recklessly.” It was inspired by the candidacy of the current White House occupant and imagines what life could look like in a second term.

CALABASAS AND A PEDOPHILE PRIEST

It was also inspired by Lori’s own experience. She knew immediately what themes to explore: conspicuous consumerism, celebrity worship, social media, religious hypocrisy, abortion, demonization of immigrants, race baiting, and the cult of personality.

The setting is Calabasas, “a world ruled over by the Kardashians,” Lori says, where she lived for three years and observed from neighboring Agoura Hills for ten. “Did you know that Bloomberg News named Calabasas the richest city in America? Although I didn’t live behind the gates or hobnob with celebrities, I was able to observe the excesses, the big slice of time that people there give over to celebrity and social media pursuits and how damaging that can be.”

Christian hypocrisy played a big part in Lori’s life growing up in Canada. “I was a believer,” she explains. “I loved God, I loved religion, I was in the church choir, went to Catholic school, attended mass alone in the mornings before school with the old Italian and Portuguese women dressed in black, and I stood apart from my family, which was more ambivalent about religion.

“But my parish priest was a pedophile who ended up dying in prison after pleading guilty to 47 counts of child molestation. We knew it at the time, we talked about it, we excused it, and said, ‘Oh, don’t let him get too close,’ but maybe you wanted that so you’d feel favored. Dozens of girls kept the secret, who would believe them? But when the parish refused to baptize my bi-racial cousin, I felt completely betrayed by this hypocrisy that was like nothing I’d actually learned about the teachings of Jesus.”

A NEAR FUTURE

The novel is set in 2024. “I didn’t want to go too far into the future because the point is this is happening now. Sitting down to write this book in 2015 was a direct reaction to Trump’s bid for the presidency and the idea that he was being supported by the Christian right. I was afraid of these faux Christians, I understood them and their power, and my fear and outrage birthed this novel.”

The protagonist, Rory, is a feisty 17-year-old who questions the Christian party line, whose father has left the family to remarry, and whose mother is considered a radical supporting the underground “pink” and “red” markets, pushing against illegal birth control and abortion. Rory’s outspoken blog positions her as the perfect scapegoat for the horrific bombing.

After the bombing, Rory and her friend Fee (Josefina), go on the lam and watch the witch hunt blow up online, on the news and on social media as they’re being chased by rabid mobs. I won’t give away the twist in this plot but it’s a stunner.

VIRTUE OR PURITY BALLS

While trying to keep them both alive, Rory is also trying to solve the mystery of who's really responsible for the bombing, uncovering a shockingly despicable cover up. The irony and hypocrisy come into full bloom in flashbacks, as Rory writes about the buildup to their "American Virtue Ball," a formal event that puts teenage girls in wedding gowns, to receive a ring from their fathers for their promise to remain virgins until marriage.

To my astonishment Lori Lansens told me, "Virtue balls are a real thing. The idea of keeping women pure is so biblical, it made sense in the novel's context that they would become a common phenomenon under a religious-right regime. It takes this odd, insane, possessive patriarchal ideology and throws it into the stratosphere."

THE ENDING

At this point, I have to caution that novel's ending is explosive, and I won't be sharing it. But to Lori Lansens, it's not an ending, "It's the trigger event that starts a conversation beyond the book. It's one story without the ending, but it's an entirely different story with this ending."

"This Little Light" has been optioned as a cable series for Universal. Lori says her next screenwriting project, in partnership with her husband, producer/director Milan Cheylov (whose work on the classic TV series, 24, brought the couple to California), will be a series about reincarnation, "exploring the case study of a child who believes she's having memories of a past life. It's been optioned by Sony."

I asked her what she does for religious or spiritual guidance these days. "I like the idea of God, unattended by any religion, being a force of compassion and caring, within each of us, for our fellows. Rory talks about The Golden Rule, that if everyone followed it, independent of religion or God or any of the other rules that religion imposes, we'd all be better off. We wouldn't be where we are now. That would be enough for me."

Sarah A. Spitz is an award-winning public radio producer, retired from KCRW, where she also produced arts stories for NPR. She writes features and reviews for various print and online publications.