

A Light on the Magdalena

Junelle M. Preston

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A girl works to break free from her family's restrictions in the musing coming-of-age novel A Light on the Magdalena.

In Junelle M. Preston's coming-of-age novel *A Light on the Magdalena*, a girl tries to find her place in the world.

In the 1960s, bookish Ellie lives with her Christian missionary family in Colombia. But Ellie's simple life near the river changes when she receives two books for her birthday that shake her moral and religious beliefs: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. The books continue to play a prominent role in the story throughout. They are centered as representations of "sorrow and evil"—concepts that Ellie had never considered before.

For Ellie, the books' revelations about society are different but illuminating: she is surprised by Stowe's depictions of the brutality of slavery in the US and by Frank's insights into the Nazi regime in Germany. Both force her to reconsider the messages of faith that her family has taught her—and has shared with others. She questions God's will and mercy more as the book progresses. And as she navigates her new feelings of self-awareness, she discovers that an ex-priest who acted as her mentor has dark secrets of his own.

Ellie is described as a "Dad's girl," and her father as a man "focused on salvation." The books are her gateway to adulthood; they are the nexus for her development. She starts to question her parents' messages to others, which had always seemed right to her before; she recognizes that she's grown up surrounded by privilege. This new knowledge is described as "devastating and a dark, incomprehensible abyss": Ellie feels that she can't talk about it with anyone else. Her parents, who had been a source of comfort for her in the past, become passive antagonists in her tale. Better developed is Ellie's courageous aunt, Lizzie, who supports her newfound independence and serves as a strong new role model for her as she grows.

Descriptions of the stunning, peaceful setting of the Magdalena River and the Colombian landscape prove crucial to Ellie's story, at first representing reassurances and simplicity. They result in an immersive atmosphere that's further fleshed out with interesting historical details about missionary life in rural Colombia and on the river.

A Light on the Magdalena is a coming-of-age novel in which a girl raised in a missionary family reconsiders her morals and religious beliefs.

ANNA MARIA COLIVICCHI (October 26, 2022)

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