



MIDNIGHT AT THE ELECTRIC

Jodi Lynn Anderson

Jodie Lynn Anderson was born in Annapolis, Maryland but moved all over the world during her childhood. She briefly worked as an editor for HarperCollins before quitting to write full time and is now the author of 11 young adult and middle grade novels. Of these, her most popular are the Peaches and May Bird trilogies and the stand-alone novel, Tiger Lily. She currently lives in Asheville, North Carolina with her husband and son where they've taken in "an endless parade of stray pets."

Other Works by Jodi Lynn Anderson:

Loser/Queen

My Diary from the Edge of the World

The May Bird Trilogy

The Peaches Trilogy

The Vanishing Season

Tiger Lily

“Midnight at the Electric” was released in June of 2017 and was later awarded The New York Public Library’s Best Book of 2017. It follows the stories of three different girls whose lives are inexplicably linked through time. The main frame of the novel follows Adri, a sixteen-year-old biologist and engineer who lives in Miami, Florida in 2065. Climate change has wreaked havoc on the world, and a select number of highly intelligent and specialized youth are being sent to join the growing colony on Mars. She’s been accepted into the program and is set to take off in four months, but Florida has mostly been swallowed by the sea and she’s relocated to a distant relative’s home in Kansas to train for her new life. In the home, she finds an old journal from 1934 and a stack of letters from 1919. In the journal, Adri learns the story of Catherine Godspeed, who lived in Adri’s new house during the dust bowl in the 1930’s. The diary follows her as she tries to care for her sick little sister and struggles with the decision to leave her family’s home to try to save her. The letters were written fifteen years earlier by seventeen-year-old Lenore Allstock and addressed to her childhood friend Beth Abbott, later Beth Godspeed. Lenore’s story starts in England following the aftermath of World War 1, in which her brother had just been killed. She fights with her feelings of grief and desires to escape her mourning family, and so her story follows her attempts to leave and reconnect with her childhood friend in America. After finding the letters and the diary, Adri becomes obsessed with the mystery of what happened to the girls and how she came to find their stories over 100 years later. Through her attempts to connect the missing pieces and learn the fates of Catherine and Lenore, she discovers something about herself and finds the strength to leave her home planet for something new and terrifying.

Text Complexity: Accelerated Reader Bookfinder gives “Midnight at the Electric” an ATOS Book Level of 5.5 and 9.0 AR points, suggesting that it’s suitable for readers between grades 9–12. It has 227 pages and a word count of 58,355. I found the reader suggestion to be accurate considering the complex themes of time and fate. The language varies within the novel to match the narrator, which may be hard to follow for students under the high school level.

Teaching “Midnight at the Electric”: “Midnight at the Electric” contains a variety of themes that could be applicable in a high school classroom environment. Historically speaking, the novel can be taught alongside lessons of World War 1 or the Dust Bowl. It can also be linked to lessons on climate change or the effects of Industrialization. I would be most inclined to include it in a lesson on creative writing, as it provides an example of a non-chronological narrative in which several stories are linked together with different points-of-view, different writing styles, and recurring images and themes that appear throughout all three stories.

Literary Response: Of the categories of YA literature provided in Professor Warner's "Adolescents in the Search for Meaning," the one I feel "Midnight at the Electric" fits into most is the third category – books about identity, discrimination, and struggles with decisions. Adri's interest in the stories of Catherine and Lenore is built primarily on the fact that they seem to be connected to her in some way, and she feels that by learning their history she's learning her own history. One of the largest overarching themes of the novel is the three main characters struggle with leaving home, whether it be to head for Mars, New York, or America. The book meets all of the Exeter qualities, but the one that seems most prominent is the second – exciting plots that include secrecy, surprise, and tension brought about through narrative hooks and a fast pace. The very thing that kept me most interested throughout reading was wanting to know how all the stories are connected and how each of the girls ended up.

Quote # 1:

"As the minute hand approached twelve, everyone went quiet. And then, exactly at the stroke of midnight, the flaps of the tent parted and a man – middle-aged, trustworthy looking – emerged, stepping up to a small wooden podium. He was not flashy, not handsome. He had no top hat or blinding white smile. He was bald, in a threadbare suit, stooped and tired looking, like so many of the men in the crowd. He cleared his throat and looked around at all of us with kind gravity.

'It is a time of upheaval and uncertainty,' he began. 'The world is changing beneath our feet. Death is around every corner. Fear and despair lurk in every house.' People around me murmured agreement. I crossed my arms to stave off a chill. 'But it is possible to outrun it,' he went on, thrusting one finger slowly up in the air, 'to outstrip it, to outsmart it.'" (58)

Significance: This quote illustrates the moment Catherine goes to the Electric at midnight for the first time, which we know right off the bat is significant because of the title of the novel, "Midnight at the Electric." At the Electric, a man has claimed to have in his possession an orb that provides healing and eternal life to those who hold it in their hand. This is a small representation of one of the overarching themes of the novel – the fear of death and the desire to extend beyond Earthly limitations in order to escape it. For Catherine, this intrigues her because she'd like to save her sister from the dust that's killed several children already. Similarly, the entire point of colonizing Mars is to avoid the destruction humans have caused and extend life onto another planet. The colonists are even given nanotherapies that have the potential to extend their lives by hundreds of years so that they can continue their work. This quote also relates to the third narrative, Lenore's, because her entire story centers around her desire to escape her mourning family after her brother's death. Accepting that she grieves him too would be accepting her own mortality, and she wants more than anything to run from it.

Quote #2:

“Mama keeps saying we ought to move the tortoise inside, but – tucked inside her dust-crust shell – she weathers the storms better than anyone.” (62)

Significance: One of the recurring images throughout the novel is that of the tortoise, Galapagos. He’s living at the house when Adri arrives, and the mention of his name in a letter from Lenore in 1919 is what causes her original fascination with the discovering their story. He is also mentioned frequently throughout Catherine’s story as her mother’s beloved pet. As the narrative unfolds, it’s the presence of Galapagos that reminds the reader constantly that the stories are all interconnected. Galapagos represents the passage of time and the idea that the past is always lingering within the present, even though sometimes it may be more hidden than an animal that can live to be over 100 years old.

Quote #3:

“It was a foggy morning – stepping out of the train into the city, I could swear I smelled the North Sea already. The gulls were circling, the breeze was soft, and it all felt so exciting. I stood on the docks with my ticket along with the rest of the crowd, and the line moved along slowly. There was a crowd of people protesting, circling with picket signs and shouting about poison in the air. I couldn’t hear myself think for all the noise.

“I stepped up to the edge of the gangway just like the person did before me. I handed over my ticket to the porter. That’s when I was overcome with terror. And I knew immediately that I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t get on.” (192)

Significance: This quote is important for several key reasons. First, that it introduces the concept of manmade environmental destruction. As the quote is from Lenore’s story in 1919, it represents the start of the pollution that will eventually lead to Adri’s dystopian-style Earth and the necessity for travel to other worlds. It’s especially interesting that Lenore considers the protests to be noise preventing her from thinking, which shows the general unconcerned attitude of the public that allows the pollution to continue. The second part of the quote represents a theme common between each of the three stories – the excitement of leaving home accompanied by fear. In Lenore’s case, all she wants to do is move to America and yet she is unable to when the time comes. For Adri, she struggles throughout the narrative with being both excited that she was chosen as one of the few colonists and terrified to leave everything that she’s used to behind. In contrast to the stories of Lenore and Adri, Catherine struggles with her commitment to those who refuse to leave their home. She desires to leave with her sister and go somewhere safe, but she is held back by her mother and the man that she loves who can’t bring themselves to leave home. Each of the stories revolves around young girls who are faced with the decision to leave everything they know, and the fear and uncertainty that comes with it is a huge theme throughout the novel.