

# BURN BRIGHT

MARIANNE DE PIERRES



## TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marianne de Pierres is the author of the multi-award-nominated Parrish Plessis and Sentients of Orion series. The Parrish Plessis series has been translated into eight languages and adapted into a role-playing game. She is also the Davitt award winning author of the Tara Sharp humorous crime series, written under the pseudonym Marianne Delacourt. *Burn Bright* is her first novel for young adults. Read more about it at [www.burnbright.com.au](http://www.burnbright.com.au).

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

**Marianne de Pierres says:** 'The desire to explore so many different ideas fueled this story. The first was the notion of a dystopia masquerading as a utopia. Ixion is not the place it is thought to be. How does that affect the individual when they realise? Will some persist in remaining ignorant, while others opt for trying to change their environment?

'Then I wanted to know more about the divide between youth and their elders. Why is it that the generation gap persists? What things keep the generations apart?

'The theme of repression is also recurrent in much of my work and found its way strongly into *Burn Bright* with the portrayal of the Grave society – especially the fundamentalist Seal sub-section.

'Then there was the social order. Ixion and Grave are essentially patriarchies but Suki represents a society where the ruling class is a matriarchy. How does this shape her behavior and her interactions?

'Finally, I wanted to explore my own (remembered) youthful desire to throw off rules and responsibility. Can you ever really do that?'

## GENRE

**Does *Burn Bright* fit a particular genre of fiction? Author Marianne de Pierres says:**

'*Burn Bright* is a hybrid that contains elements of dystopian, science and paranormal fiction. The underlying SF premise concerns the races that have been trapped on this world by the gravitational pull of the Tri-Suns. The Ripers have brought certain technology with them that allows them to make biochemical changes to the runaways so that they don't need to sleep.

'The window dressing of the world, however, is very much steeped in paranormal traditions, with the use of vampire-like creatures, bats, darkness, and gothic elements that include churches with Gothic architecture, velvet and lace clothes and dark make-up.

'The dystopian element is shown in the deep underlying dysfunction of Ixion and Grave. Both societies/environments are fraught with danger and difficulty and extremes despite veneers of civility.'

## STRUCTURE

As the book begins, readers are thrown into the action with Retra as she leaps from land onto the barge that will take her to Ixion – Retra's emotional and physical journey has begun.

The novel is divided into two parts: 'Retra' and 'Naif'. The parts represent the evolution of the main character, Retra, as she sheds her past and discovers her courage, determination and character, taking on a new name as part of her journey.

Marianne de Pierres says, 'Retra resonated with the words *repression* and *restriction*, which are totally indicative of her lifestyle and upbringing on Grave. It is tight, closed word that connotes control. *Naif* on the other hand resonates with *naïveté* and innocence and suggests softer, more eager images. It is a fresh gentle sound. Naif is the Latin variant of the word *naïve* or innocent, which is an apt description of her as she is reborn and begins to learn how to show and understand her emotions.'

- *Discussion question:* Why does Retra change her name? Do you think Naif is an appropriate name for her? What images or emotions do you associate with the two names?

## STYLE

Marianne de Pierres writes in a spare, elegant style that focuses on evocative imagery, action and emotional impact. *Burn Bright* is written in third-person but focuses strongly on Retra: what she feels, how she acts. The reader only sees other characters through Retra's eyes.

- *Writing task:* Choose a scene from the book and rewrite it from a different character's perspective. Some examples might include:
  - (1) Rewrite the scene where Retra can finally talk to Joel from Joel's perspective. How does he feel about seeing his sister again?
  - (2) Rewrite the scene on the barge where Retra meets Cal from Cal's perspective.

## THEMES

- Dystopian and utopian societies
- Individuality vs state authority
- Power and powerlessness
- Repression
- Youth and beauty
- Coming of age
- Responsibility
- Freedom
- Family
- Friendship

## MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

### The 'obedience strip'

Retra has been forced to endure a procedure to implant a strip on her thigh that can punish her at any time with extreme pain. Learning to manage and overcome pain has been a major element of her journey and her ability to escape to find her brother.

- *Discussion questions:* Why should Retra have had to wear an obedience strip as punishment for a crime her brother committed (running away)? Is this fair? What does the obedience strip represent in her society? Is it effective as a punishment or deterrent?

## Bats

Bats appear in the novel in various ways: from the Rippers referring to the young people as 'baby bats', to the bats that fly overhead 'like a black rainbow across a dark canvas' (p. 30), to the White Wings gang, named after bats, to the giant bats called 'echo-locaters' or 'draculins'.

- *Discussion questions:* What do bats represent in the novel? How has the author taken gothic conventions such as bats and subverted them in this science fiction story? How did your understanding of the term 'baby bats' change after you read the ending of the novel and found out what happens to those who become too old to live on Ixion?

## Churches and religious iconography

Ixion has been built around the side of an inactive volcano. Many different religions over hundreds of years had built their own temples, but they have all since been abandoned, and are now locations for the party-goers on Ixion.

Consider this quote from page 38, where Rollo is explaining the island's history:

'Some say that when it rose up out of the sea, people thought it was a holy place. That's when there was still day and night. Monks from different provinces came here and built churches. They tried to outdo each other and impress God. God didn't like what they were doing so he took the light away ... Another version reckons that all the nearby provinces wanted to claim Ixion as their own land, so they fought over it. Every time one of them won a battle they built their own holy place. Then someone would come and fight them for it, take it and build another church. They say there was so much death that the colour leached out of the sky.'

- *Discussion question:* How do the settings, such as the decaying, crumbling churches, contribute to the atmosphere in the book? Does the idea that there were civilisations and societies before the current one make Ixion feel more transient, more fragile? Why were so many churches built there and abandoned?

## Darkness and light

Ixion is a world of darkness, with no sun. 'Darkness is our comfort,' says Lenoir (p. 46). The paths are lit, and the humans must stay on the paths at all times, or, as Test says: 'Should you venture off them and into the dark, you will not return. Remember, when you live in a place of darkness you also live with creatures of the dark.' (pp 47–48) Retra is drawn to the darkness: 'either end of the terrace disappeared into darkness, and the edges drew her in the same way a precipice held fascination to those fearful of heights' (p. 51). What she discovers on the island are the Night Creatures, who live in the darkness off the paths.

- *Discussion question:* Discuss the symbolism of night and day, light and dark, in the novel. What does the dark represent? Why are the humans urged to 'burn bright'?

## Music

Music has a strong influence on the characters throughout the story. Music is integral to the lifestyle on Ixion: 'No rules. No punishment. Only music and laughter and freedom' (p. 5); 'In Ixion music and party are our only beliefs' (p. 46).

Retra is strongly affected by music, especially as she wasn't allowed to listen to music as a child: 'She pressed her hands to her ears to shut out the raw, thick pulse of it. It stripped her mind of everything and lodged in her belly, churning and quivering.' (p. 28) Markes' soulful guitar playing 'drew her as if it were the cool spring rain she craved' (p. 72). Retra finally gives in to the music, and dances 'as if suddenly they were one dancer, one sound, one heartbeat' (p. 86).

- *Discussion questions:* Why do you think music was not allowed in Grave? Can music play a role in emotions, in politics, in changing history?

In the book the song 'Angel Arias' contains a hidden code. Investigate real songs in human history that have played a role in changing events or influencing people. Some examples might include 'Strange Fruit' sung by Billie Holiday, or the protest song 'We Shall Overcome', and their influence on the Civil Rights movement in the USA; 'Do They Know It's Christmas' by Band Aid, which raised millions of dollars for charity; or the lasting influence of John Lennon's song 'Imagine', with its message of peace.

Imagine being in Retra's head, and hearing loud music for the first time. How would it affect you?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which is dystopian and which is utopian: Ixion or Grave? Can the two worlds exist without the other?
- Which characters are 'heroes'? Is Joel? Is Retra? Is Rollo? Is Ruzalia hero or villain?
- Studies of Society:
  - Is the Generation Gap a useful and meaningful part of society? Or should we be working to reduce it? Discuss.
  - Suki's home is ruled by women. What other cultures are based on a matriarchal system?
  - Marianne de Pierres says: 'The story can be seen as a metaphor for modern society's obsession with youth and beauty, and the devaluing of age (to the point that age will do anything to retain youth, even scavenge from their children).' Discuss. Find examples from magazines and pop culture of ways that the media and advertisers portray and promote youth and beauty. Are the messages positive, or can there be harmful results?
- Comparative Texts:
  - Watch the movie *The Lost Boys* and compare outcomes for Naif/Retra with Sam. Both attempt to rescue siblings from losing their way in new and dangerous circumstances. Which of them has more success and why? Compare the roles of adults in both texts.
  - Choose another science fiction or dystopian fiction story, and identify the similarities with *Burn Bright*.
  - For instance, in MT Anderson's *Feed*, characters are constantly bombarded by advertising messages and information, yet seem unaware that their planet is crumbling and changing around them. How is this similar to *Burn Bright*, where many of the party-goers don't seem to care, or want to know, about anything other than having fun?
  - You could also compare *Burn Bright* to *The Hunger Games*, looking at the portrayals of youth and beauty in each book, and the importance placed on appearance. Compare the ways that these respective societies have consolidated their power and authority – Grave through repression and rules, Panem through forcing the Districts to undergo the Hunger Games

each year. Given the upheavals in the *Hunger Games* series, make predictions what will happen in future books in the Night Creatures series. Can the Grave/Ixion worlds continue as they are?

- Compare *Burn Bright* with various vampire stories, from *Dracula* to *Twilight*. Could *Burn Bright* be considered a vampire story? Why or why not?
- Research/History: Pick a period in history to research child rights and write about some of the rules and restrictions placed upon children in history. e.g. child labour during the Industrial Revolution. Compare it to rights for children in the current day.
- Author Analysis: The author is known to write across different genres (crime, science fiction, fantasy). Identify the different genres at work within the text and discuss whether they blend effectively in *Burn Bright*.
- Personal Reflection: How would you react to Retra/Naif's discovery in the Church of Danksoi? Would you have left with Ruzalia? Or stayed to fight with the gangs? Rewrite the last chapters, giving the novel a different ending.