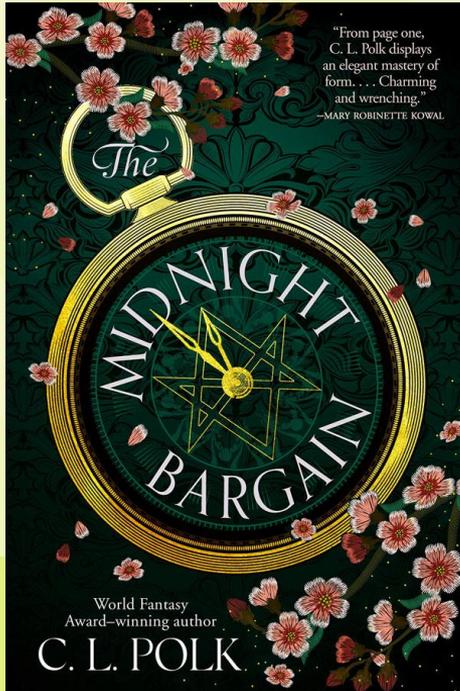


Book backgrounder: **The Midnight Bargain**



As Beatrice makes her debut at "bargaining season" — an annual event where wealthy young men and women gather from all over the world to make advantageous marriages — she harbours secret plans that will upend society. Rather than get married, Beatrice plans to bind a greater spirit and become a full magician.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **Curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students. (You can find a PowerPoint version of this document on Curio.ca)



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *The Midnight Bargain* and watch C.L. Polk discuss their book.



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Acknowledgments

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Critical Thinking Questions / Inquiry Activities: Written by Jason Himsl
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Book Description

Beatrice Clayborn arrives in the seaside town of Bendleton for Bargaining Season, a time where upper class young men and women attend exclusive parties, mingle at society events and forge social alliances, in an effort to negotiate advantageous marriages.

Beatrice participates under pressure from her family to find a good match, a young man from a wealthy family whose fortune could save the Clayborns from financial ruin.

On her way to the first event of the Season, she makes a quick stop at a bookshop, looking for something in particular: a grimoire that would help her continue her magical education. As women in Chasland are

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



barred from formal magical studies, these grimoires are written in code, so that women could pass them along, learning in secret without attracting suspicion from the established, exclusively male Chapterhouses. Worse still, what little magic sorceresses are permitted to learn as children is taken from them upon marriage, when they are locked into warding collars that cut off all magical abilities to protect their unborn children from possession by malicious spirits.

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At a bookshop, Beatrice finds the key to her education, a grimoire that contains the spell to bind a Greater Spirit. There is only one issue: another woman of higher social standing, Ysbeta Lavan, spots it at the same time. She is the sister of Ianthe Lavan (heir to the Lavan family's vast business empire) and knows exactly what valuable secret this grimoire contains. Beatrice is forced to relinquish the book to Ysbeta and leave empty handed. Beatrice instead meets Danton Maisonette, a suitor she finds intolerably sexist and who finds her too outspoken, stubborn, smart and unimpressed by his authority.

With the first social event of the night approaching, Beatrice makes a plan to get the grimoire back: she summons Nadi, a lesser spirit of luck, to help her

retrieve it. Nadi bonds with her and agrees to help if she will give Nadi a few things, culminating in a first kiss by midnight. At the dance, Nadi grants Beatrice luck twice: not only does Beatrice capture the attention of Ianthe, securing from him her first kiss, Ysbeta also invites a social connection, bringing her back into proximity with the grimoire.

When Ysbeta calls upon Beatrice the next day, she reveals that while she can detect the presence of grimoires, Ysbeta has not cracked how to read them as Beatrice can. The two come to an arrangement to learn together: Beatrice will teach Ysbeta the grimoire code, if Ysbeta allows her access to the book.

As they see more of each other, Beatrice and Ianthe grow closer, with their mutual interest blooming into

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mutual respect, admiration and attraction. When Beatrice challenges his preconceived notions of the way of the world and the laws and conventions restricting women's magical education, Ianthe proves willing to rethink his own biases and a status quo that serves him well. However, his open-mindedness is put to the test when he leaps to defend Beatrice from Nadi, whom he mistakenly believes is dangerous. He is furious and shaken when he discovers that his sister and Beatrice are trying to learn magic. In a bid to convince them to desist, he lectures Beatrice and Ysbeta on the dangers of women practicing magic and the devastating social consequences of their activities being discovered by someone less forgiving.

Shortly thereafter, the Lavan matriarch privately attempts to persuade Beatrice to break off her

courtship with Ianthe, insinuating that Beatrice lacks the refined upbringing, family wealth and social connections to one day take on Mrs. Lavan's duties as the Lavan family matriarch.

With the walls closing in, Beatrice returns from a session of magical study with Ysbeta to find that her younger sister Harriet has tattled to their parents that she's been secretly associating with spirits.

It all comes crashing down. Beatrice's father bars her from further social interaction and dabbling in higher magic, and he vows to marry her off as soon as possible. He allows her three days to secure a proposal from Ianthe, but he warns her that if she fails, he will immediately contract for her the best match he can manage.

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As the next day progresses, lanthe's rival Danton Maisonette reveals that he has discovered Beatrice's secret and attempts to blackmail her into giving up her courtship with lanthe to make way for Danton's sister. When Beatrice refuses, Danton uses magic to spook Beatrice's horse, causing a near-fatal accident. lanthe rides to her rescue. After this incident, united in purpose with her spirit friend Nadi, Beatrice marches straight through the crowd and punches Danton in the face, igniting what would be a reputation-destroying scandal if it were not for lanthe's very public attachment.

Ysbeta urges that they must attempt to bond the Greater Spirit immediately, before either of them are married off. Beatrice believes they're not ready, that

the Greater Spirits will consume them and take control of their bodies exactly as lanthe had warned... but with Ysbeta's own dreaded marriage contract days away from being finalized, Beatrice agrees to help her.

The night before the attempt is to be made, at a lavish party hosted by his parents, lanthe proposes. Beatrice knows that if she says yes, she will have to give up her magic, so even though she loves lanthe, she refuses him. lanthe, though disappointed, understands her decision. Heartbroken, they go their separate ways.

But Beatrice's father will not let her live a life of magic. The next morning, he announces he has

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found a suitor who will marry her despite the scandal: Danton Maisonette, who does not love her but finds that after his actions, no other sorceress will have him. The warding collar is clasped around her neck, her connection with Nadi severed, and her magic extinguished.

Beatrice is on the brink of losing all hope when Ianthe and Ysbeta surprise her at her wedding dress fitting. With the help of several other women magicians, they spirit Beatrice away and undo the warding collar. The three of them decide that they must all attempt the ordeal of binding a Greater Spirit before Beatrice's escape is discovered.

Ysbeta attempts the ritual first and is unable to control the Greater Spirit of Knowledge, who attempts to

subsume her. Ianthe and Beatrice, and their Lesser Spirits, rush to Ysbeta's aid, but the Greater Spirit proves too strong for all of them. Nadi, newly returned to Beatrice, urges her to allow Nadi fully into her soul, promising that together they can defeat the Greater Spirit.

Despite all the cautionary tales about manipulative, malicious spirits, Beatrice chooses to trust Nadi, and finds that together, they not only defeat the Greater Spirit, but consume part of its power, turning the Lesser Spirit into a Greater Spirit of its own. Ianthe does the same, and in the end, all three are in possession of Greater Spirits, as Ysbeta bonds what remains of their assailant in a bid to reconcile.

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It happens that this Greater Spirit of Knowledge knows the secret to protecting unborn children from possession, eliminating the greatest barrier to women's magical freedom.

Two years later, Beatrice is pregnant with her second child and is delivering a lecture at the very Chapterhouse in Bendleton that was denied her at the beginning. Ysbeta is off exploring ruins halfway across the world, uncovering the mysteries of magic. Ianthe, now happily married to Beatrice, uses the knowledge gained from Ysbeta's spirit companion and gives up his own Greater Spirit, whose presence acts as a shield and guardian against malicious lesser spirits, for the duration of the pregnancy.

It is a new age, in which Beatrice and Ianthe plan to travel the world with their young family and teach everyone their secret so that all sorceresses may practice magic safely, never to be collared again.



Primary Characters

Beatrice Clayborn (white, 18 years old) – A young sorceress who wants to become the first woman in Chasland to bond a Greater Spirit and become the first recognized female magician... before she can be married off in the upcoming Bargaining Season to save her family from imminent financial ruin.

Ysbeta Lavan (Black, 19 years old) – Stunning and brilliant, Ysbeta Lavan has an iron will and is determined

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to live life on her own terms, including learning magic on her own and becoming a sorceress like Beatrice. Initially wary of each other, Ysbeta befriends Beatrice as the two work to survive the Bargaining Season and overcome the societal norms keeping women from practicing and being recognized for their magic. With no interest in romance and determined to avoid marriage, Ysbeta becomes Beatrice's co-conspirator in their shared quest to gain greater magic, as well as in helping Beatrice to secure Ianthe's love.

Ianthe Lavan (Black, 21 years old) – A handsome young magician, brother to Ysbeta and heir to the Lavan family's vast fortune, Ianthe is well on his way to becoming a respected Magus when Beatrice catches his eye during the Bargaining Season. Soon,

his understanding of power, privilege and the way the world works will be turned upside down by his growing relationship with Beatrice and his front-row seat to her and Ysbeta's plight.

Nadi (spirit, eternal) – A precocious lesser spirit of luck, Nadi is invoked by Beatrice to aid her in her efforts to become a fully recognized Magus. Beatrice offers Nadi the experience of human pleasures — running along the beach at night, drinking champagne, eating strawberries — in exchange for supernatural luck. The little spirit is instrumental in Beatrice's magical and personal development, and will ultimately be the key in her quest.

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Key Themes

 **WOMEN'S BODILY AND POLITICAL AUTONOMY** – *The Midnight Bargain* highlights the issue of a woman's right to choose her own destiny, autonomously and without punishment. It is a story about the fight for women's bodily, political and social liberation, and finding new solutions to age-old, ingrained injustices.

 **PATRIARCHY** – C.L. Polk said that the treatment of women in the world of *The Midnight Bargain* — the way magical education is reserved solely for men with wealth, the warding collars women are required to wear throughout their marriages, how they are bartered by their families for wealth and influence

during Bargaining Season — was a way of reflecting patriarchal injustices in the real world. Despite the many luxuries and privileges women experience, their access to magic, wealth, education and society is conditional and controlled by men, most of whom don't consider the plight of the women in their lives. One of the main themes of *The Midnight Bargain* is that even the most well-intentioned of its male characters has benefitted from and contributed to the oppression of women, and must assist in building a more equitable society, even —and especially — at their own expense.

 **INTERSECTIONAL CLASS STRUGGLE** – While Ysbeta and Beatrice come from different backgrounds, they are united by their struggles to learn magic and

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pursue the lives they want in a society that curtails women's rights and freedoms. They build solidarity and sisterhood as they come to rely on each other's help to advance in their goals

 **SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY** – C.L. Polk investigates and challenges the pressures of using marriage, education and other social avenues in order to increase one's standing in the world, especially for women, who do not benefit from the patriarchy and the opportunities men are given. Beatrice and Ysbeta must consider unconventional avenues in order to gain or achieve what their male counterparts can access freely. They must rely on each other and pursue magical education in secret; even then, they

have no guarantee of rising higher in the world, only a risk that they'll upset the status quo and the people whose power it upholds. Polk also illustrates the other side of the coin: how acting selflessly or for love may diminish one's status and come with great cost.

 **LOVE AND ROMANCE** – A key theme of the novel is the many ways people love one another, the ways in which individuals grow into affection: not only initial attraction, but through mutual respect, and challenging each other in action and thought, as equals in a world that does not treat people equally.

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About the Author

C.L. Polk (they/them) is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of the critically acclaimed debut novel *Witchmark*, which was also nominated for the Nebula, Locus, Aurora and Lambda Literary

Awards. It was named one of the best books of 2018 according to NPR, Publishers Weekly, BuzzFeed, the Chicago Review, BookPage and the B&N Sci-Fi and Fantasy Blog. They live in Alberta, Canada.

C. L. Polk's awards/accolades

- World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, winner (2019)
- Nebula Award for Best Novel, finalist (2019)
- Locus Award for Best Novel, finalist (2019)
- Aurora Award for Best Novel, finalist (2019)
- Lambda Literary Award for Best Novel, finalist (2019)



Watch C.L. Polk discuss their book:
www.curio.ca/canadareads

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Other Books by C.L. Polk

- *Witchmark* (2018)
- *Stormsong* (2020)
- *Soulstar* (2021)



Notable Quotes from Reviews

“Polk expertly balances propulsive pacing, a rich multicultural world, and a vivid and subversive cast of characters. Readers will be swept away by this powerful and passionate fantasy.”

– Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

“An expertly concocted mélange of sweet romance and sharp social commentary.”

– Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

“Polk’s foray into a society of magic and politics places the woman in the secondary role, but neither Beatrice nor Ysbeta will stay in place. Fans of romantic fantasy set in a multicultural world will find this a fascinating read.”

– Library Journal, Starred Review

“Polk’s contribution to the genre is smooth and confident, with prose that reads like running a hand over velvet. [They use] historical fantasy not to simply dismiss outdated mores on sexuality and desire but to engage with the contemporary issues of birth control and parental leave, which remain frustratingly controversial in much of the world. A sleek, beautiful book with a quietly serious heart.”

– Amal El-Mohtar, The New York Times Book Review

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CBC Links

- Canada Reads Book page: [The Midnight Bargain](#)
- Canada Reads Author page: [C.L. Polk](#)
- [Interview with C.L. Polk on CBC's The Next Chapter](#)
- [What Rosey Edeh said about The Midnight Bargain](#)



Other Links

- [A Fantasy Worth Savoring: The Midnight Bargain by C. L. Polk](#)
- [clpolk.com](#)



Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *The Midnight Bargain* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. Genre fiction — novels covering areas ranging from fantasy, sci-fi, horror, mystery to romance — is viewed by some as less valuable or less artistic than realistic literary fiction. Is it important to rank types of books this way? What types of books have engaged you most as a reader?
2. Read the excerpt of *The Midnight Bargain* at www.curio.ca/canadareads. The Lavans are described as “one of the most powerful families in

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in the trading world.” What evidence of this power do you see in Beatrice’s interaction with Ysbeta and Ianthe Lavan?

3. Parents are generally understood to have an obligation to protect their children. What responsibilities do children have toward their families?
4. In an interview, C.L. Polk said “A lot of people, when they hear fantasy, they think of elves, orcs, trolls, magic treasure and journeying through the woods. This is a lot of what fantasy was, but a lot of what fantasy is now is examining social systems — what they're like and what they could be like.”

Think of a favourite fantasy novel or movie. What social commentary was the novelist or filmmaker trying to make?

5. Status and power in *The Midnight Bargain* are determined by three main factors: family, wealth and gender. Who is granted power and status in Canada today? What characteristics and abilities are valued? What steps can we take to help ensure that people aren’t unfairly left behind?
6. Artists, filmmakers and novelists have often proved strong agents for social change. Why do creative works have such power to shift people’s thoughts and actions?

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7. In *The Midnight Bargain*, C.L. Polk takes two distinct genres, historical fiction and fantasy, and combines them. What are genres that you would like to see mashed together? What plot and characters can you imagine for such a story?
8. Beatrice Clayborn develops strong relationships with both Ysbeta and Ianthe Lavan. What characteristics do you value in a friend? What about a potential romantic partner? What significance do you see in the similarities and differences in these lists?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students can watch video clips about efforts that societies have made to control women's bodies, both historical and modern. Video clips can be found on websites such as www.cbc.ca and www.curio.ca. They can extend this research by looking at successful attempts by women to fight for their rights and combat these attempts at control.
2. Students might investigate successful genre mashups. Have students brainstorm a plot, setting and characters for a mashup of genres they enjoy. They could then write, storyboard or film a short excerpt for this story.

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3. Students can research the relationship between women and the supernatural, both as a source of oppression and as a liberating force. Students might then connect their findings to figures in popular culture.
4. Students might investigate how attitudes and practices around marriage have evolved over time and across cultures. They can use their findings to predict where they think views about marriage will progress in their lifetimes.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *The Midnight Bargain* and watch C.L. Polk discuss their book.