

# Reader's Notes for *The Star Locket*

by

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## **SYNOPSIS**

On a rainy night in 1887, Sally Taverner and Estée Merton meet dramatically in a riot outside the Starberg Opera House—and realise each is the other's doppelganger. Each girl is in possession of a star-shaped medallion, which, joined together, form a locket, and their chance meeting sparks off a chain of destructive magic which reaches back to the time before their birth.

While Sally is sought out by Esther, a beautician and perfumier with sinister contacts, Estée is introduced to members of a small, and rapidly diminishing group called the Casimirites, founded to offer passive resistance and obstruction to dangerous magical practices. Occultism is on the rise in Starberg, and the remnants of the old Queen's Guard have formed a dark and dangerous core operating out of the cellars of the ducal palace. The separated locket was a check to their power, but safeguarding it is an even weightier piece of magic. Sally and Estée are in fact one person. Only one twin is real, the other is simply a magically fashioned, soulless shadow, who, when the magic is reversed or the locket destroyed, will evaporate as if she never existed.

As the Casimirites and their enemies close in for their final clash over the control of the star locket, torn loyalties threaten to compromise everyone's safety. With both sides bent on its destruction, the dissolution of one twin will inevitably result. The problem is, there is no way of telling who is real and who is not.

## **WRITING STYLE**

*The Star Locket* is a character-driven novel, which focuses on the thoughts and feelings of three teenaged characters at the centre of the action, Sally Taverner and her double, Estée Merton, and Stephen Melhuish. A lot of effort has also been put into creating believable supporting characters and placing the action in a vivid and realistic setting.

This is also a very fast-paced novel, with a lot of suspense and action as the drama unfolds.

## AUTHOR INSPIRATION

The *Star Locket* was several years in the writing and was conceived as a “companion” novel to an earlier book of mine called *Fireworks and Darkness*. For that earlier novel I had created a decaying, corrupt, Baroque kingdom called Ostermark, where dark magicians had infiltrated the court and were manipulating politics to their own advantage. After spending twelve years on the book, I had ended up with an extremely real imaginary world, which I was reluctant not to revisit.

*The Star Locket* is set about 175 years after *Fireworks and Darkness*, in the Ostermarkan capital of Starberg. It has a completely different cast of characters (though some are descended from characters in the earlier book) and can be read completely independently of *Fireworks and Darkness*, so it is not really a sequel in the conventional sense. I especially loved the challenge of pushing the history of my imaginary country forward into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, of seeing how it developed, and looking at it through the eyes of a new set of protagonists. While I was very fond of the characters in *Fireworks and Darkness*, leaving them behind didn't really bother me. What really interested me was the further development of the themes I dealt with in that first book—issues of faith and free-will, and the extent to which our origins and upbringing influence the person we become.

At the heart of the story is the mystery of the identity of the two identical girls. The doppelganger and the magical talisman are two of the great themes of speculative fiction, and I really enjoyed putting my own spin on them. Sally/Estée and Stephen were all very enjoyable characters to write for, and I particularly enjoyed the challenge of fleshing out the relationships between the secondary characters, especially Richard Greitz, the Procurator, and his lover, Esther Trier.

## STUDY NOTES

**The plot of *The Star Locket* hinges on the true identity of two unrelated girls who look exactly alike. What are some other fictional treatments of identical twins or doppelgangers? What is the origin of the doppelganger legend, and how does it tie into the novel's plot?**

**According to author Natalie Jane Prior: *“I wrote the characters of Estée and Sally as if they were the same person. It was the only way to do it, really. They think the same, speak with the same voice, react the same way to given situations. There were plenty of times where I was writing dialogue and freely swapping it from one to the other of them, because it made no difference who said it. So, they really are the same person, with a few differences allowed for***

**background and upbringing. I was also absolutely scrupulous to give them equal space on the page so you couldn't argue that I was favouring one girl over the other."**

**With this comment in mind, which of the two characters do you warm to, most? Why do you think this is the case?**

*[Author's Note: I have found it very interesting that readers seem to consistently prefer Estée to Sally. What makes them like her better is not the fact that she is a nicer character, but the fact that a lot of the action is seen from Stephen's point of view. Because he's in love with Estée, there's a partiality there which the reader picks up on without realising it. Also, I think readers feel sorrier for Estee because she has lost her adoptive parents and is down on her luck. Sally, in contrast, gets sucked in by the other side for a while, and even though this is not her fault, you lose a bit of sympathy for her in the process. In other words, it's all a trick to do with point of view, and the way the characters are positioned in relation to the reader.]*

**Did you guess who was the real girl and who was the magical copy? Why do you think it had to be the way it was? And did you fall for the trick at the end?**

*[Author's Note: I always make up my plots while I go along, and for a very long time I didn't know which one of the two girls was going to disappear at the end. For quite some time it was going to be Sally, but in the end, though it disappointed some readers, I realised it had to be Estée. This is because the most important character from a thematic point of view is actually Stephen (think about this), and Sally's dissolution wouldn't have the necessary impact on him. The hard thing to do was to keep the reader in suspense until the very last moment.]*

**Consider the character of Richard Greitz. How sympathetic do you find him, considering that he is the villain? How do you square the fact that he is devoted to his lover, Esther, with his utter ruthlessness in other areas? What about Esther? Do you admire her for being able to put her love for Greitz before the truth? How do you think she managed to bury her early principles?**

**Can you think of any real-life parallels to this situation? Have you or someone you know ever been placed in a situation where love runs into conflict with personal principles?**

*[Author's Note: I've always been intrigued by stories of brutal dictators, Nazi officials, war criminals, and so forth, who are remembered fondly by their families as being loving husbands and affectionate fathers. I also find it unnerving that the wives of these men often know about their activities, and yet are somehow able to gloss over them. The relationship between Greitz and Esther Trier is a fictional exploration of this phenomenon—how a woman who was strictly reared to know what is right has nevertheless managed to live for fifteen years in a relationship with a ruthless occultist who has committed mass murder and will readily kill again to get what he wants. Writing about the unravelling of this relationship was a fascinating and*

*rewarding part of the composition of this novel.]*

**One of the most important themes in *The Star Locket* (and in *Fireworks and Darkness*) is that of free-will. Discuss some of the ways this theme is treated in the book/s.**

**What has Stephen Melhuish learned by the end of the book? What about Sally Taverner? What do you think the future holds for both of these characters?**