

The Taker
Alma Katsu
Reading Group Guide

INTRODUCTION

This hauntingly atmospheric love story opens in the northernmost corner of Maine, when a distraught young woman is brought into the emergency room, and treated by a doctor who is strangely drawn to her—even though she has just admitted to killing a man and leaving him in the frozen North woods. The woman has an enchanting story to tell—the sweeping story of a love affair from 200 years before. Full of immortality, alchemy, sensuality, and betrayal, *The Taker* is a tale of love across time that will not soon be forgotten.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does Luke leave his home to follow Lanny? Is his willingness to leave his life behind a sign of strength or of weakness? What would you have done if you were in Luke's position?
2. Do you think it was fair of Jonathan to ask Lanore to end his suffering? Did Lanore owe it to him? Do her actions in Maine absolve her of her long life of transgressions?
3. What separated Lanore from the other immortal members of Adair's court? Consider Alejandro, Tilde, Dona, Uzra, and their various stories of origin.
4. Discuss the evolution of Lanny's character, from a coy, young girl from the backwoods of Maine to a world-traveled, immortal hedonist. Is Luke destined to be just another fling, or is there something deeper to their budding love?
5. Do you believe that Lanny ever loved Adair? Why do you think she was so drawn to a scheming madman?
6. How did you react to the violent tendencies of the members of Adair's household? Consider Lanny's first night in the mansion, the abductions of the local Bostonians, and the bizarre sexual proclivities of the immortal house-goers. Do you believe there might have been a secret society of hedonists living in Boston during this period?
7. The traveling priest, later revealed to be a member of Adair's flock, recognizes a spiritual unease and some inherent wildness deep within Lanore's soul. Do you think he was right? Was Lanny, to some extent, wicked? How do you explain her actions in the chambers in Boston, or her initial involvement in Sophia's death?

- Are her choices that of someone trying to take control of her life or someone losing control of herself?
8. On her return trip to St. Andrew, Lanore encounters Magda, the town whore. Magda warns Lanore, "...don't fall in love with your gentleman. We women make our worst decisions when we are in love." Do you believe this to be true? Could Lanore have been saved from her complicated fate if she wasn't so in love with Jonathan? Why do you think Lanore was drawn to Magda in the first place?
 9. Do you think Luke made the right decision in leaving St. Andrew behind for a life with Lanny in Paris? What of his obligations to his family? Do you agree with his decision regarding the fabled vial?
 10. Were you surprised by Adair's true identity? Do you believe Lanny's plan to trap the physic worked?
 11. After everything Lanny had told Luke about the fantastical and magical, do you think there was some greater significance to the vision of his mother momentarily rising from the dead?
 12. The story's narrative unfolds in three different time periods, following three distinct characters. Which of the three was your favorite to read, and why? Who did you feel the most sympathy for?
 13. Why do you think the author chose to title this book, *The Taker*? Are there multiple "takers" in the story? If so, who are they? What does Lanny take from Adair, Jonathan, and Luke? What does she give them?
 14. Did Jonathan ever truly love Lanore? Did he have such a capacity? How would you characterize Lanny's feelings for Jonathan? Is it love or obsession?
 15. At the heart of *The Taker* is a fairytale about a woman coming into her own. As Lanny eventually explains, alchemy is an effort to transform the *person* into something more pure, self-assured, and strong. Compare Lanny's story to other well-known fables, like *Pinocchio*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, or any of *Aesop's* valued lessons. What similarities do you see? What sort of classic temptations are placed before Lanore, and what is it that she ultimately takes away from her endless trial of self?

EXHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. List and discuss the things that you would see or accomplish if you were granted immortal life. Would endless time eventually wear on you, as it did Lanny and

- Jonathan, or is it something that would provide endless stimulation and inspiration?
2. Visit www.AlmaKatsu.com to learn more about the author, and read of her colonial American influences, her ancestry, the origin of her name, and more about her upcoming book, *The Taker*.
 3. Adair sketches his immortal followers, creating stunning images of Uzra and an incomplete portrait of Jonathan. Try your hand at drawing during your next book club meeting. As a group, select an object, an image, or even someone from your book club to sketch!
 4. There is a cinematic quality to *The Taker*, as the narrative spans states, continents, and centuries. Discuss with your book club who you would cast for Adair, Jonathan, and Lanny in a film version of the story.

A CONVERSATION WITH ALMA KATSU

Where did you find the inspiration for *The Taker*? In its own way, *The Taker* is an alchemy of genres—mixing romance, the paranormal, colonial drama, with a touch of post-modernism. Did you draw from many sources for the book?

It wasn't until after I'd written *The Taker* that I realized it combined many influences on my life. I never thought I was that big a fan of the American Colonial period, but when you grow up near Concord, Massachusetts you're steeped in it. For instance, I think it might actually be a law that schoolchildren must watch the movie *Johnny Tremain* every year until high school. I think the paranormal influence goes back to childhood, too. Maybe it was that we lived in ancient houses that creaked with every passing breeze or the fact that there were *five* cemeteries in my tiny hometown (two funeral homes within a block from my home!), but as a child I seemed predisposed to believe in the spooky and supernatural. And of course, that's what children do, indulge in magical thinking as a way of coping with their inherent powerlessness.

Science, religion, and magic seem to be at odds throughout the story, with Lanny's transformation never fully explained or understood. Was this your intention? Where do you stand on the confluence of science, magic, and faith?

That Lanny's changed circumstances are not fully explained is intentional, although it is revealed in the third book. Hopefully, readers will be surprised and delighted by what is revealed. Also, though, the mystery was meant to mirror what we experience in real life: We think we know the answer to a question, but it later turns out that we don't. At one time we believed the Earth was the center of the cosmos, with all the heavenly bodies revolving around it. It was touted as a fact (a matter of science, to stretch a point) but was also part of theologians' explanation of God's universe, so it was a matter of religion, too. So when this was disproved, did it mean religion was "wrong"? Is "bad" religion nothing

more than superstition, or magic? Magic, faith, and science seem to me to be part of a continuum of understanding—different ways of looking at the same thing. And you can be blindly faithful to your point of view from any of these three perspectives.

You grew up in a small town in Massachusetts, near the historic town of Concord. How did your background play a role in writing *The Taker*?

I find things from my childhood, small and large, have crept in throughout *The Taker*. The crypt in which Sophia's body is stored is taken from one of the five cemeteries in my hometown, a strange vault covered with sod and grass, with padlocked iron gates barring the doors. (How could you not, as a child, think those gates were there to keep the dead from getting out at night?) The description of the attic space in which Uzra hides from Adair is a ringer for the unfinished attic in my childhood home. There was not, however, a boy like Jonathan for whom all the girls pined.

What would you hope to accomplish with an endless eternity of life?

I'm in the camp that would not wish for eternity, I'm afraid. It is the knowledge that we will die that defines our lives. That's why Lanny and the others are at a loss. They don't know what to make of life, and partly because they're ne'er-do-wells, it doesn't occur to them to apply themselves to something useful. Jonathan figures this out, redeems himself, and because of this, Lanny can't refuse him his wish.

Do you believe that Lanny has a soul mate? Is Luke her chance for redemption, or just another bump in a very, very long road?

Life is a mystery to Lanny, as it is for many of us when we're young. We want to grow up, we're in a hurry to grow up, but we're not really sure what that means. We have our parents' examples, the example of some of our friends or siblings, but what if none of them are satisfactory? What if you want more out of life but not only are you *not* sure how to get it, you're not even sure what it is you want, exactly? What she wanted was experience, and she got more than she expected. She makes bad choices, but let's not fool ourselves: Many people make bad choices in their youth. They divorce, remarry, change career fields, move to a new continent—or do none of these things, and remain in a state of desperation. No one is born with the answers and we have only this one life to find fulfillment, or happiness.

Oh dear, I really got on a soapbox there. To address the part about Luke, that very question is answered in book two. It is Lanny's dilemma, a major test on her way to becoming a thoughtful, caring person deserving of being truly, completely loved.

How did you handle writing the different perspectives and time periods? Did you create them individually, or weave in and out of telling each story as the book is presented?

The book underwent many revisions, but from the very beginning it had the present day story threaded through what is essentially Lanny's life story. The story-within-a-story—Adair telling his tale—came afterwards. I had originally pictured an entire book devoted to Adair, so that big chunk was carved out of that book. All those difficult structural elements—the shifts in time, POV, even verb tense—are what made writing the book so challenging. It's sort of a case study of what *not* to do when writing your first novel.

The immortals of Adair's court are all deeply flawed in their own way. Is there something to be said about the type of people that are given such magical gifts? Were you at all tempted to tell a story about incredibly decent and altruistic immortals? Is that what Jonathan ultimately represents to you, especially with his dedication to his tribes as a bush doctor?

You're coming close to the answer to the mystery, which is explained at the end of the series. Redemption is at the heart of the story. We all make mistakes in youth, behave foolishly, selfishly, do things we regret deeply as adults, so in that way, I think the story will resonate (to a degree) with most people.

I see the "magical gifts" a bit differently. The gift these flawed people are given is immortality, but it must be spent in servitude to Adair, with his hellish disposition. He is their jailer, and they have little hope of pardon. It is a kind of inescapable hell on earth. They have no choice but to accept it.

The long arc of time established in the story, and the hints of Adair's released minions speak to an entire world and slew of characters that we have yet to meet. Do you have plans to continue to tell stories in this established world, possibly as a series?

Absolutely. Readers will meet new minions from Adair's past in the next book, tentatively titled *The Reckoning*. You'll see them contrasted with the ones you know, Tilde, Alejandro, Dona, and struggle with this question of redemption. Some of them will earn redemption at great personal cost.

Who do you see yourself in the most? Lanny, Luke, or Adair?

I didn't think so but writing is a journey of self-discovery, as cliché as that might sound. Your characters behave a certain way and you, the author, struggle to understand why, and in the process of figuring it out you come to see it's a recurring problem in your own life, one you haven't solved. I came to see parts of myself in Lanny. In understanding

Jonathan, I realized that he was drawn from maddeningly aloof and emotionally detached men I have known. I think most women have known a Jonathan or two in their lives!

Who are your literary influences?

I have so many it will sound a bit crowded. What comes through most strongly to me, in this book, is *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland. As you noted, there's probably the influence of the post-modernists in there, too, as I was mad for them for a spell, most notably John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov. I think *The Taker* owes a lot to fairy tales, too. It puts the reader in the funny spot, where on one hand, you're close to stories from childhood—there's magical thinking, and the bloody-mindedness of old fairy tales. One interesting thing about fairy tales is that the morality of an individual's behavior is clear-cut enough so that children are comfortable with their judgments: It's fairly easy to tell who is right and who is wrong. I think in *The Taker*, there are some characters about whom you can make these distinctions easily, but with others—Lanny in particular—the story is a bit more complicated. The story is about redemption, but the whole question of what is a transgression is left up to the reader.

Are you working on another novel? If so, will it be in the same style as *The Taker*, mixing romantic realism and fantastic supernaturalism?

I couldn't stop thinking about the characters in *The Taker*, and luckily Gallery Books is fairly smitten with them, too, so I get to continue their story in the next two books. If all goes to plan, the next book will be slightly different from *The Taker* in that it's a bit more plot-driven, and the third book is different again in that it's more fantastical. Hopefully the trio will make for an enjoyable story that never gets stale and always takes the reader to new places.