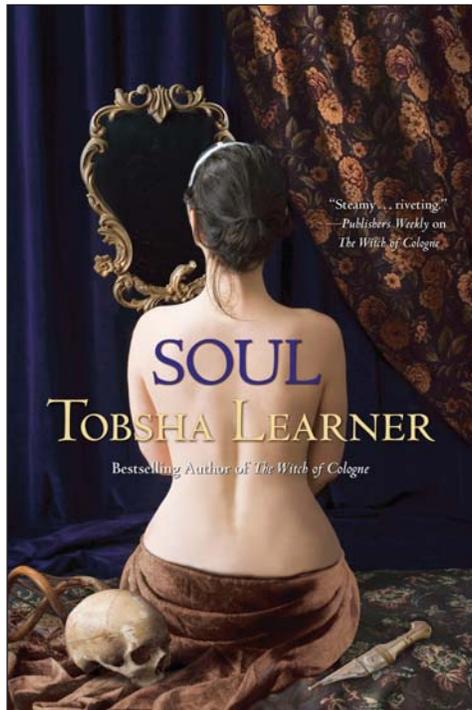


Tobsha Learner

Soul



“A historical romance
that transcends its genre.”

—VOGUE ON *THE WITCH OF COLOGNE*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in London, England, where she trained to be a sculptor, **Tobsha Learner** is a renowned playwright and short story writer whose works have been performed and published throughout the world. Her short fiction collection, *Quiver*, was an international success. Learner has also written for radio, television, film, and the theater, and travels regularly between the United States, Great Britain, and Australia.

ABOUT THE BOOK

What makes us who we are? Our genes or our lives?
Can love conquer all?

Tobsha Learner's debut novel, *The Witch of Cologne*, is an erotically charged novel of people swept inexorably along by events they could not control. In *Soul*, Learner relates the story of Lavinia and Julia Huntington, passionate women trapped in emotional whirlpools that threaten to drown them and everyone they love.

In nineteenth-century Britain, Lavinia is married to an older man who seems to appreciate her lively curiosity. Lavinia proves to be an apt pupil in both the study and the bedroom, glorying in the pleasures of the physical.

In twenty-first century Los Angeles, geneticist Julia is trying to identify people who can kill without remorse. Stunned to discover that she seems to possess the trait she is looking for, Julia is reassured of her emotions by her intense passion for her husband and her delight in her pregnancy.

In the past, Lavinia's desire for her husband grows, but his passion for her cools as he becomes fascinated with another. In the present, Julia's overwhelming love for her husband causes him to leave her.

Lavinia and Julia feel the tortures of passion unspent. Cold logic tells them that the deaths of their tormentors will bring them peace. Separated by a hundred years, two Huntington women face the same decision. Their choices will echo far into the future.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Learner draws an historical comparison between phrenology and genetics, Darwin and creationism, the onset of the American Civil War and the fall-out of contemporary American Foreign policy—do you think by raising such comparisons she is commenting on the nature of progress or suggesting history in some ways merely repeats itself?
2. *Soul* is very much a story about power. What are the greatest differences between Julia and Lavinia in terms of the types of power that they have, or lack, in the world—intellectual, familial, social, economic, professional, and maternal?
3. The prison of Lavinia's marriage has its basis in the consolidation of economic power solely in the hands of a man. What have been the most important elements in the establishment of women's independence in the western world over the last century? What commodities, abilities, and freedoms do we take for granted that Lavinia could never gain access to?
4. Learner's characters talk frequently about nature vs. nurture, about genetic imperatives vs. free will and moral responsibility. Is Lavinia a moral person? What code of ethics does she follow? What are her strongest priorities?
5. Why do you think that Julia is able to avoid killing Klaus—and therefore avoid either going to jail or losing her own life—while Lavinia is compelled to kill James? Do you think that Lavinia's decision was the right one, either morally or in terms of her struggle for survival? Does Julia represent a more evolved version of her great-grandmother, or does she simply have more choices?
6. Genetic propensities are triggered or not triggered by external factors such as stress, physical environment, and even diet. How do the external circumstances that trigger the propensity to kill without remorse in both women differ?
7. Post-traumatic stress disorder has a huge impact not only on combat soldiers but also their families and friends. The notion of genetically profiling men who would not suffer from it is morally complex—how does Learner address this issue?
8. Learner portrays Klaus as someone who has frequently failed to stand up for himself, yet when he leaves Julia, he does so in an aggressive and self-centered way. Is he actually a narcissist, or simply someone who took years to learn how to prioritize his own needs? Is he a modern-day cad? How does he compare with James, his parallel in Lavinia's story?

9. What do you think of Julia's decision, early on in the book, to accept the Defense Department contract? Is she ethical in her thinking about her work? Can you envision situations in which her super-soldiers could be essential to public safety or national security? How do you feel about her decisions at the book's end?

10. Gabriel is an enigmatic character. Do you think that he loves Julia, or does he seduce her for professional gain? Given their age difference, what do you make of the fact that he genuinely seems to care about her well-being? How does this relate to his own up-bringing?

11. Much of Lavinia's story revolves around differences between culture and manners in Ireland and England. Are these always differences of class? What other factors go into creating the rift that Lavinia so often feels as an Irishwoman in Mayfair?

12. How do you think Julia's story would have unfolded had she not miscarried? Would Klaus have come back to her? Would Carla's pregnancy have influenced his decision? Do you think that having a child would have altered Julia's anger toward Klaus or her decisions about harming him?

13. The Irish Famine was one of the great crimes perpetrated by an indifferent England—in what way were the English aristocracy implicated?

14. The ambassador for the Confederate States did indeed have an embassy in Mayfair and the Confederacy was active in campaigning for support in Britain. What economic hold did they have over the manufacturing industry in England?

15. The genetic imprint that Julia, Lavinia, and Julia's soldiers share begs the question of whether war—the use of lethal conflict to settle differences—is inherent in our nature. Is war a necessary part of life? Can you envision a society—a town, state, or nation—that could function entirely without internal armed conflict? Do such societies already exist?

PRAISE FOR TOBSHA LEARNER'S *THE WITCH OF COLOGNE*

“In the tradition of books about strong Jewish women, which includes *The Red Tent* (1997) and *Sarah* (2004)... Fans of sweeping historical dramas will be enthralled by Ruth's story... This is the kind of all-consuming novel that readers hate to see end.” —*BOOKLIST*

“This steamy, riveting page-turner is also a paean to the triumph of a woman's spirit.” —*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

“A historical romance that transcends its genre.” —*VOGUE*

“Bawdy, romantic, and filled with well-developed characters.... Fans of historical fiction involving religion, science, and romance will savor every page of this impossible-to-put-down book.” —*LIBRARY JOURNAL*

“Richly painted on a historical background, filled with emotional turmoil.” —*PLAYGIRL*

“A fast-paced, meticulously researched and beautifully written story.... A captivating read.” —*GOOD BOOK GUIDE*

“Lerner has brewed a simmering pot-boiler with a generous quivering of spice. The novel will appeal to readers who delight in the worlds conjured in Geraldine Brooks’s *The Year of Wonders* and Anne Rice’s dark historical romances. Like Rice, Lerner writes with a leaning toward eroticism.”

—*AUSTRALIAN BOOKSELLER & PUBLISHER*