

The Shark Party

Janet Colson

Notes for book groups

A summary

For Carla, February means the pressure of another birthday party for Nathan and his wealthy, New York art-world friends. She buys him a book about Kurt Schwitters, an artist he is thinking of collecting, but a chance encounter with a man in the bookstore changes everything. Patrick, an environmental filmmaker, challenges her relationship and her artistic ambition. In the wake of their fierce attraction, the unscrupulous world that has seduced Carla begins to unravel, and the harder she tries to break free, the tighter Nathan's grip becomes.

The author

Janet Colson has an MA in English and American Literature from King's College, London, where she acted in numerous student productions, taking leading roles to the Edinburgh Fringe. She went on to become one of London's most successful arts fundraisers.

Janet wrote the first draft of *The Shark Party* on the Whitireia Creative Writing Programme in 2012. She has published short fiction in the UK anthology *Words Made Flesh*, and she created the theatre piece 'Dali's Womb'.

Q & A with Janet Colson

What was the inspiration behind writing *The Shark Party*? Were there certain experiences in your life that you were drawing on?

I drew on twenty years' experience in major gift fundraising. I work in the arts. You meet a lot of interesting people, and I've thought about the different ways people deal with wealth and success. The biggest inspiration for me has been the artistic journey itself. I've witnessed it in other artists – contemporary dancers, for example – in how they refine their idiom and develop resilience. I was interested in exploring the reactions of the central character, Carla, who is an artist, by placing her in an environment that runs counter to her creativity.

You must have done a lot of research for this book, especially as it is based in New York. Were there any interesting experiences you had with this?

I used to spend more time in New York than I do now that I live in Wellington, but I did visit Manhattan when we were in the final stages of producing the book. I was lucky enough to run into NYPD Officers Murphy and Marsh, and check a few details about the Domestic Violence Unit operating in the city. One thing was clear – the issue of domestic violence doesn't make a distinction between the social classes. It's happening on the Upper East Side as well as in the Projects. The police officers were really excited about the story.

Another notable moment in my research was about the artists who feature in the book. It was only after I'd fixed on the artists for the novel that I discovered Kurt Schwitters was a big influence on Damien Hirst. Early in Hirst's career he even made collages in the style of Schwitters. When connections between the artists in the novel started happening on their own, that's when things got really interesting ...

***The Shark Party* is an interesting title. What is the story behind this?**

The title comes out of a line in one of the early chapters of the novel. Carla met her partner Nathan, prior to the story beginning, at a fictional party given during the period between 2007 and 2010. This was when Damien Hirst's work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The work consists of a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde in a large tank – hence, 'shark party'. The line presented itself as a title and it worked for me on a number of levels.

The parties you organised in your time in the UK sound as though they were extravagant, and the story of Prince Charles and Camilla is almost scandalous. Can you tell us more about these?

I wouldn't say it was scandalous – His Royal Highness greeted Mrs Parker-Bowles, as she was then, with a kiss on the cheek when she arrived at a party at Somerset House. I mean, he didn't snog her or anything. But royalty and kissing is a funny business, and it turned out to be their first public kiss. The next morning it was all over the papers. It took me a moment to realise it was the same party I'd organised.

Questions for discussion

1. Discuss the significance of the word 'shark' in the title *The Shark Party*.
2. Money and status are themes that occur through the book. How does money, or the lack of it, define the main characters?
3. In what ways are Nathan and Patrick alike, and different, and what do they reveal about each other?
4. Discuss the unravelling of Nathan. Has he always been dangerous? Or has his greed made him that way?

5. Why do you think Carla stayed in an increasingly abusive relationship?
6. Discuss the contrast between how Nathan and Carla see art and the art world, and what that reveals about their characters.
7. The setting in the world of art and the corruption that underlies it may be unfamiliar to some readers. How does this enhance the story?
8. The novel covers many ideas. Which do you think is the most important?

Notes by Erin Donohue. Thanks for assistance to Janet Colson.



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