



Lights Out in the Reptile House: A Novel

Jim Shepard

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A shy and apolitical herpetologist-in-training finds the weight of history bearing down on him as the effects of repression ramp up in his country

In an unspecified country that combines elements of Chile under its military regime, South Africa under apartheid, and Italy under fascism, fifteen-year-old Karel Roeder asks only to be left alone to learn from Albert, his mentor at the zoo's reptile house, and to devote himself to his girlfriend, Leda. But both Leda and Albert lead him into increasingly proscribed areas of thought and speech, and thus into conflict with a newly ascendant party that intends to prosecute a border war against an officially despised ethnic group and criminalize dissent. Citizens have been disappearing and surveillance in the name of safety has become all-pervasive. When Kehr, a special assistant of the civil guard, billets himself at Karel's house for unknown reasons, Karel finds his already tenuous hold on his own innocence crushed as Kehr—tribune, inquisitor, and metaphysician of terror—instructs his unwilling protégé in those moments when history is let off the leash.

Lights Out in the Reptile House is at once a dystopian political parable, a meditation on totalitarianism, and a moving coming-of-age story, as its protagonist struggles to understand his own values and meaning even in the most extreme of crucibles.

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