

# **The City of Ember**

**DuPrau, Jeanne**

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Content Introduction	<p>Lights shine in the city of Ember—but at the city limits the light ends, and darkness takes over. Out there in the Unknown Regions, the darkness goes on forever in all directions. Ember—so its people believe—is the only light in the dark world.</p> <p>And now the lights are going out.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The City of Ember</i> has been made into a major motion picture!</p> <p>Is there a way to save the people of Ember? No one knows. But LinaMayfleet has found a puzzling document, and Doon Harrow has made discoveries down in the Pipeworks. With these clues, they start their search. Contains a satisfying mystery, a breathtaking escape over rooftops in darkness, a harrowing journey in the unknown, and cryptic messages for readers to decipher... The cliffhanger ending will leave readers clamoring for the next installment.</p>

### **Abstract**

The city of Ember was built as the last refuge for the human race. Two hundred years later, the great lamps that light the city are beginning to flicker. When Lina finds part of an ancient message, she's sure it holds a secret that will save the city. She and her friend Doon must decipher the message before the lights go out on Ember forever! This stunning debut novel offers refreshingly clear writing and fascinating, original characters.

## The City of Ember

### I. The world view in The City of Ember

The City of Ember is a young adult novel that is a fantastic allegory for spiritual awakening, though I have no idea if it was intended as such. The story is of a girl who lives in an underground and completely self-contained city created by the “Builders.” The population of the city knows of nothing outside the city, in fact, though they speak English many of the words in it like “sky” are not understood in any terms but metaphorically. The problem is that the city is falling apart, the lights are going out, the vast stores of supplies of light bulbs, canned food, and vitamins are running out. The reader is in on a worse calamity, namely, that a secret message in a timed lock box that was left by the Builders, which was meant to be handed down from mayor to mayor and that would open just in time to explain to the city dwellers how to get out of the city, was lost many generations back. Well, being a young adult novel it’s pretty predictable in that the box is in our hero’s closet, but a nice turn of events it is found by our hero’s baby sister who chews on it for a while before our hero gets her hands on it leaving the message is only partially legible. So the bulk of the story is the deciphering of the message, followed by the experience of trying to communicate its contents to the adults, who of course don’t accept the message (where else is there but here?) which is the equivalent of all prophets experiences of rejection by the status-quo. And finally, there is the adventure of eventual escape. This book reworks the universal theme of Plato’s cave, and of all mysticism. What we think of as the whole universe is but shadow, and further, that to enter that “kingdom of heaven” you must be like a child. The insight that this version of that universal story led me to the part of the answer to why childishness is a necessary component of the transformation. Children haven’t yet become someone. Which means who they are is not yet at stake. For some reason our culture has this question “what are you going to be when you grow up?” Think about the hidden structures and assumptions in that question. Who are you? Have you figured it out yet? Is what you do, who you are? Is what you believe who you are? Is who you associate with who you are? I write these questions myself in shadow not in the condition of childishness, and with all of this, as Quaker’s say, “a notion,” i.e. not something that I have experienced, but rather something I think. But this thing that is mostly a notion for me, that the distinction between notional and experiential living is key to awakening, I am beginning in small ways to actually experience.

## II. Human's fear since the ancient times – Dark

Ember is a city living in fear, ignorance, and ever-increasing poverty: both literal and metaphorical darkness threaten to engulf its hapless citizens. Only two 12-year-olds -- as impoverished and ignorant as everyone else, but gifted with a bit more curiosity and get-up-and-go -- stand between Ember and its plunge into utter blackness, both in the streets and in spirit.

I have never been a person who has been afraid of the dark -- at least, not on its own terms: the pitch-blackness of my room growing up was never a concern, but naturally the same darkness on an urban street at night was a bit unsettling and arousing of my fight-or-flight (usually the latter) instincts. But the mere fact of darkness itself was never the worry for me that it was for others of my age. In fact, it was positively soothing.

The darkness surrounding Ember is, on the contrary, positively suffocating. Much of this feeling arises from the simple yet effective fact that unless there is a working electric light present in a given location, the people of Ember have never been able to view that location for themselves. They have no portable lights of any kind -- not even fire -- and since they aren't certain how even the existing lights themselves function, they are growing increasingly panicked and edging closer to chaos with each passing (and increasingly lengthy) blackout. It's even more terrifying for the reader, who is aware of several scary things the citizens of Ember take for granted -- the lack of the sun and moon and stars, for instance, which plays on the reader's claustrophobic sensibilities in a grandly nerve-wracking manner.

If these images -- darkness, light, a city -- sound familiar, you're not the only one to think so. All while I read this book I kept thinking of that old (well, not that old, I guess) hymn from church:

The people in darkness  
Have seen a great light  
The lord of our longing  
Has conquered the night...

It isn't so much that DuPrau is pushing religious imagery; her story merely uses images in common with both religion and intellectual pursuits (enlightenment, illumination, etc.). Meaning you can draw those connections without having to buy in to the ideology.

There is, in fact, religion in Ember, but it is only vaguely sketched out and has to do more with the imminent return of the mysterious Builders than it does with the questions of light and darkness -- oh, and exodus, salvation, and emergence into the light of day, now that you mention it.

The last scene is particularly good -- so much so that no description of mine can do it justice. Suffice to say that it was an illuminating experience -- with pun fully intended.

### III. A novel blended with fantasy and science

I asked my best friend what kinds of books his children were reading (I'm always looking for books for my niece) and he said his oldest son had read and enjoyed the City of Ember series. So much so that he'd passed them along to his parents, who had read them and found them interesting as well. Add to it a movie coming out and I decided I would give the series a try.

The City of Ember exists inside the darkness, where it's always night. Darkness is held at bay twelve hours a day by artificial light, though the electricity is becoming sporadic and the city is running out of replacement bulbs. Founded many years before, there were some instructions on how to leave the darkness left behind but lost by one of the city's mayors. The city is facing shortages of supplies and the residents live in a sense of paranoia that the lights will go out forever, plunging them into eternal darkness.

It's a fascinating premise for a novel and one that begs a lot of questions, especially when you find certain things about Ember in the novel's final pages. The story follows two children, Doon and Lina, who have completed their schooling and have been given new jobs. Doon wants to fix the city and trades to have a job in the underside of the city, hoping to explore the mystery of Ember. Lina gets a job as a messenger and is able to run across the city, taking messages back and forth and discovering the full extent of the shortages to come. The two eventually begin to share their knowledge and piece together just what's going on in Ember. They also find a bit of the original instructions and try to fathom what they mean (Lina's younger sibling eats part of them).

Lina and Doon discover there's more going on that meets the eye. The Mayor is a corrupt individual, hoarding resources for himself and seeking to discredit or lock up anyone who discovers otherwise. Lina and Doon are soon on a path to being rebels

and forced to flee into the darkness surrounding the City.

A fascinating, compelling story that left me with a lot of questions and some good answers. The book is satisfying in that it offers resolution to some questions but leaves the door open for natural follow-ups.

#### IV. The people live in the city

This juvenile allegory reminded me greatly of *The Giver*. Just as at the start of *The Giver*, the young people of the community of Ember receive their future work assignments, a device which quickly pulls the young reader into the story. Now almost adults, Lina and Doon are able to view their community with fresh eyes, and discover that the generator, the source of electric power on which the town depends, is soon to be exhausted. This will plunge the city into complete darkness. The children discover a secret coded message, leading to a possible escape for the dying town. The heart of the allegory is in the different responses by various citizens to their town's problem: those who deny the problem, those who wait blindly for rescue, those who selfishly hoard as many goods for themselves as they can. It is easy to make application to various groups in our own society. Lina and Doon are among the few who actively search for a positive solution. Even within their own hearts they struggle with conflicts of fear and pride, which might have hindered the saving of the city. An excellent story which made me eager for the next book in the series!

#### V. The roles' interaction—Doon and Lina

"The City of Ember" is all about these two regular kids saving their city. Doon and Lina had never thought of being twelve years old and getting jobs. Lina originally got chosen to work in the sewers as a pipe work's laborer, but Doon knew being a messenger wouldn't do anything to help save the city, so he traded with Lina. Luckily, Lina just so happened to be a super fast runner and that's why she thought messenger would be a perfect job for her. Doon wasn't the kind of boy who loved sports and computer games, he would rather be a quiet gentleman who paid attention to his bug collection all day long, spending more time at the library than on the couch, so it wasn't normal for Doon to scream to others, "The city of Ember is not prospering, in fact everything is getting worse and worse by the minute! The lights go out all the time now and the shortages, the shortages are getting low on everything! If no one does anything about it, something terrible is going to happen!" When Doon and Lina unite together to solve the mysteries of their city, they discover the truths of the past and the present. Some people aren't as trustworthy as they seem to be. When Doon and

Lina figure out the last piece of the puzzle, they're stuck. How should the City of Ember know about the great discovery they had made? I would recommend this book to anyone.

VI. A summary : The story of the writer tell us

DuPrau makes a typical first-time novelist mistake throughout this book: she doesn't trust her reader to infer. In other words, she often over-explains, following up dialogue and action sequences with redundant descriptions of a character's take on what just happened. Another disappointment is that the mystery of Ember unfolds in an entirely predictable manner. There are no great surprises.

DuPrau's characterization of Doon is one dimensional. His spurts of rage create the only complexity in an otherwise flat character. Lina, on the other hand, rings true as a 12-year old throughout the book, with one exception: when her grandmother dies, Lina's grieving process is so brief it feels like the author has ignored something very important.

The book's strongest element was the setting, Ember. Throughout reading the book, I could see the dark, amber lights and the anxious people throughout the city. I hope DuPrau will learn from some of her mistakes and produce a stronger sequel—Ember is rich with possibilities for a greater story.

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