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Chocolat

***Chocolat* 1999, is a novel by Joanne Harris. It has also been made into a film starring Juliette Binoche (2001).**

To a tiny French village comes Vianne Rocher, a single mother with a little daughter. She arrives on Shrove Tuesday, just before the season of Lent in the Christian church when Christians are asked to enter into a period of prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter and the recounting of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Vianne moves into the old bakery opposite the church and the notion of 'opposite' is quickly established. Francois Reynaud, the curé of the parish, looks on her with suspicion, particularly when he realizes that in this season of Lent she intends to open a chocolate shop *La Celeste Praline*. Vianne's heavenly chocolates are therefore temptations to Reynaud's flock, turning them away from the Lenten discipline of the Church and offering them pleasure and delight. Reynaud therefore sees Vianne as a bad influence and a disturbed of his tight-knit flock.

But Vianne offers the community much more than this. Through chocolate and hospitality and care, Vianne comes to befriend and help people. Although she undermines the priest's authority, through her marginalized and forgotten people start to blossom again. An old woman finds new life, a battered wife finds she can leave her abusive husband, children rebel against authority, outcasts find a welcome. Vianne may be accused of being a witch and putting a spell on people through her temptations, but her particular gift is listening and seeing into people's hearts, and finding ways for people to find their own inner strength and be set free.

As Easter approaches, it is a question of whose philosophy will win over the hearts and minds of the people. Reynaud will celebrate the Easter services, Vianne will hold a chocolate festival. Which will win, - the authority of the Church and the importance of self-denial, or pleasure and delight and the celebration of the new life of Spring?

Joanne Harris herself says:

'The shops are never so full of temptations as they are at Easter. I wanted to write a book about that conflict between indulgence and guilt, with chocolate as the central metaphor.

For in *Chocolat* it is love, and not faith, which ultimately holds the key to salvation. Reynaud fears love (and pleasure, which he equates with sin), whereas Vianne embraces it and encourages its free expression. Because of her love for her daughter Vianne must try to exorcise her past; Reynaud is condemned to relive it in sterile isolation. But no-one in this story is beyond redemption; Vianne and Reynaud are both forced to confront their demons in the end, and I like to think that they both learn something about themselves in the process, and are both able at last to rejoin the human race.'

Some questions to think about:

- ⊕ **Why is Reynaud's religion unattractive?**
- ⊕ **In what ways do you think people outside the Church see the Christians as being like Reynaud?**
- ⊕ **What does the chocolate stand for in this novel?**
- ⊕ **What do you make of Vianne's 'magic'?**
- ⊕ **What qualities does Vianne have that makes her so good with people?**
- ⊕ **What is the role of hospitality in this book?**
- ⊕ **Which of the characters knows the most about love?**
- ⊕ **Which side of the street would you be on, on Easter Day?**