

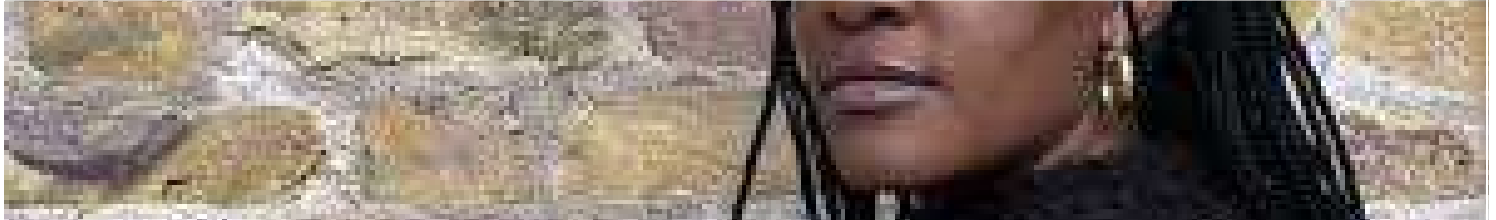
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It's Lush. A Guest Blog by Rochelle Dowden-Lord

MAY 8, 2025



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LUSH follows a group of four wine experts who are invited to a vineyard in France to drink one of the oldest bottles of wine in the world. Avery, a Black influencer and sommelier, isn't as well respected as she should be. Cosmo is a young Master Sommelier whose secret struggle spills over during the trip. Sonny is the sweet, but clueless, owner of a successful (and derided) wine brand, and Maëlys, who is a food & wine writer there to document the trip. They're hosted by the Master, a world renowned Master Sommelier, and his painter husband, Tao. Bottles are opened and emptied, secrets and hopes are revealed, and the group come to quickly adore and at times, despise each other, in the easy way of a drunken holiday.

I was inspired at first by a documentary called SOMM, about sommeliers practising for their Master Sommelier exams (a notoriously difficult exam to pass) and was surprised at their behaviour. I expected class and got it, but it was class that quickly fell into crudeness; their intelligence in languages and palate and maps sullied by their short tempers. One tasting began with an atmosphere of gently competitive camaraderie, and fell quickly into violent screaming, about Star Wars if I can recall. On the table shaking gently was the bucket of spit they used for tastings, there to stop them from getting too drunk, too quickly.

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and then to run apart, to feel lonely, and so, that I mean to feel disgusting and impressive and strange.

When I started writing LUSH during the pandemic, I also felt disgusting and impressive and strange. Doing little more than sitting on my bed in my childhood room and carrying boxed wine home from the big supermarket with a newfound fear and hyper awareness of the outside world. The quality of the wine was nothing to me, unlike the characters in the novel. I wanted quantity and numbness, I wanted to not run out quickly and to know when the world outside would finally relax. I suppose that writing LUSH was a way of romanticising this new world, the paused life. To remember that I, like everybody, am exceptional and fallible, and to remind us how quickly even comfort can sour into something that makes us look strangely at ourselves.

The writing process itself is difficult to explain. They were during those stolen years, between 2020 and 2023/4. I wasn't writing in the hope of getting published, though that must have been on my mind as someone who worked in the publishing industry and did hope to be published one day. I wrote because it felt like the most important thing I could do with my days. All I did was read or write. I let the characters tell me who they were, what they wanted and what they were willing to do with it. Writing my novel was all the conversation I had. I would write consistently, perhaps for eight or ten hours, breaking only to eat or sleep. I wrote how I read, desperate to know what happened yet.

Perhaps that's why LUSH feels so personal to me, in a way that I don't think any novel that I write in the future could. It comforted me and gave me purpose during a strange few years, and let me explore topics that I felt confused about in my own life. Despite this, the question I find difficult to answer about the novel is 'what do you want people to take away from LUSH'. I have too much to say, or I end up being so vague as to say nothing. I think I'll answer differently every time I'm asked, but right now I hope people read LUSH and feel some sort of comfort, comfort that most things can be righted, and sometimes it's time that will do it and for some people it can be a drink, or not having a drink when you want one. Or even just reading the book in the sun, on holiday as I know many people will, something like a few days in the south of France.

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