

Reading Group Guide
***Nightshade*, by Susan Wittig Albert**

1. All of the China Bayles books include a “signature” herb that has something to do with the story’s events or themes. In this book, the signature herb is nightshade, one of the plants in the *Solanaceae* family. Were you familiar with this plant family before you began reading? What new facts did you learn about it? How is it used to tell the story?
2. The narrative opens with a dream. How does this help to set the tone of the narrative? How does it contrast with the events that open Chapter One?
3. What does the death of China’s father (some sixteen years before the time of this book) have to do with the death of China’s brother? How are the two events related? How does solving one of these mysteries help to solve the other?
4. All of the previous books in the series have been told through China’s first-person point of view. In *Nightshade*, however, Mike McQuaid, China’s husband, is a key character, and part of the story is told from his point of view. Why was this necessary? How is McQuaid’s voice different from China’s? What do you learn about China from McQuaid that you could not learn from her? What do you learn about McQuaid that you could not learn through China? What did you like about the way his story was handled? What didn’t you like?
5. China has changed throughout the series, and *Nightshade* offers her several more challenges for change and growth. In what ways does she change in this book? What new challenges do you think might lie ahead for her?
6. The China Bayles mysteries are usually built around multiple plots. In *Nightshade*, one of the subplots involves Ruby, who is grieving over the recent death of the man she loved. She inherits some money, wrapping up an extended story that has bridged several books. How does this work? What do you think Ruby adds to the China Bayles series? Why is she such an important character?
7. In the “Note to the Reader” at the beginning of the book, the author discusses her development of a trilogy within the series, and the demands this strategy places upon readers. Do you like the idea of “linked plots” that bridge several books? Why or why not?