

Book Club Kit

BRYN GREENWOOD

New York Times bestselling author of
ALL THE UGLY AND WONDERFUL THINGS

a novel THE
RECKLESS
OATH
WE MADE

Many things can bind two people:
love, a common enemy, a dangerous promise.

PUTNAM
— EST. 1838 —



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

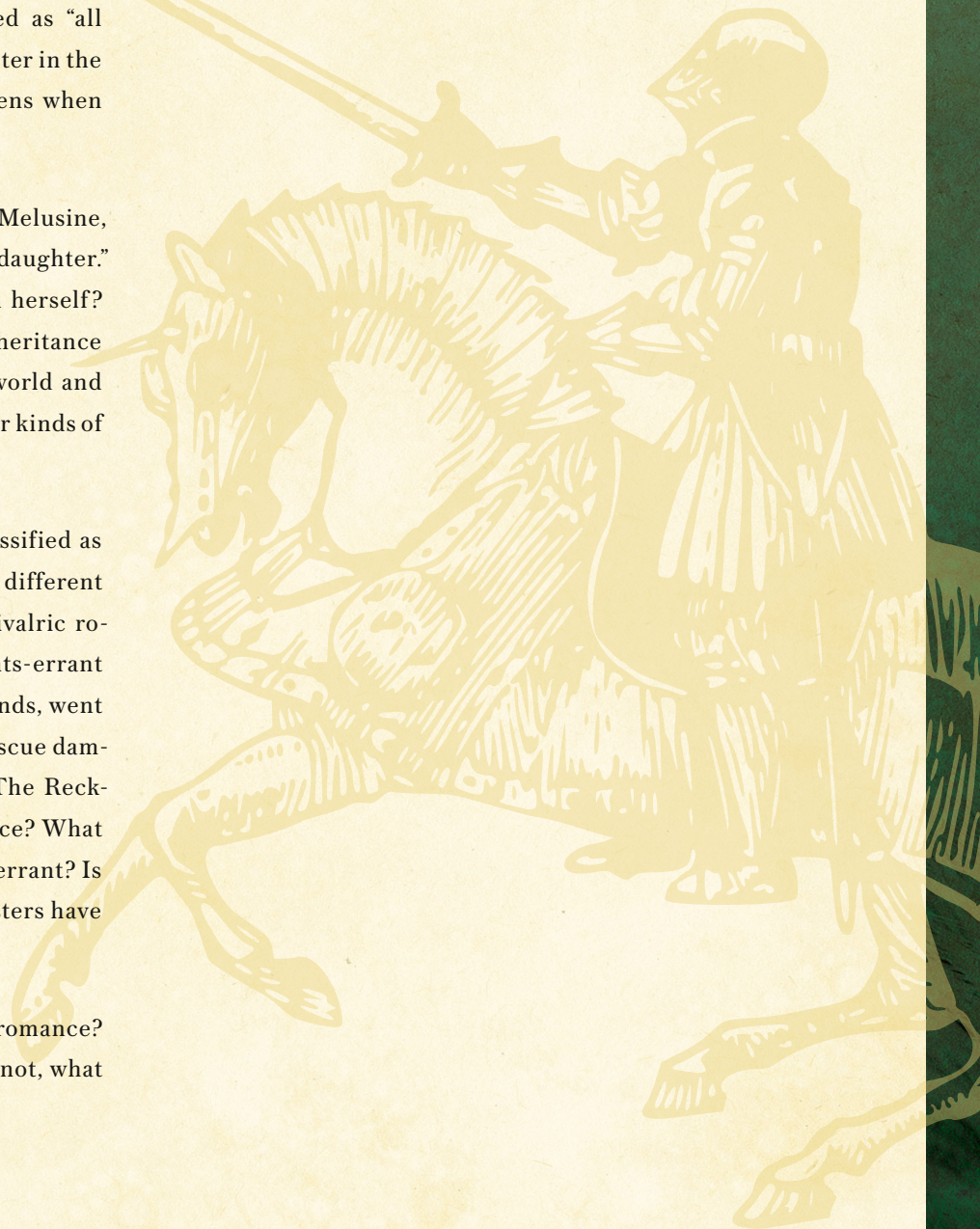
1. The title references a single reckless oath, but how many different oaths—explicit and implicit—are made in the course of the story? Which oath do you think is most reckless? What's the most reckless oath you've ever made?
2. When Zee and Gentry are reunited toward the end of the book, they both talk about needing forgiveness. What other relationships in the book hinge on forgiveness? Whose forgiveness seems to be the most hard won? Who would you have the hardest time forgiving?
3. In the midst of bad people doing bad things, and good people doing bad things for the right reasons, which character do you think is the moral compass of the book?
4. Zee refers to herself as homeless, even when she ostensibly has a place to live with LaReigne. Do you agree with her definition of homeless? What makes a place home, as opposed to a place where we sleep? What about Gentry? Where is his home? What does it mean for him to build a tower with/for Zee?
5. How does Gentry's autism shape the way Zee sees him when they first meet? How does her understanding change as she gets to know Gentry? Did you relate to him differently after you became more comfortable reading his Middle English? Were you surprised by how Zee and Gentry's relationship deepens? Why or why not? Why does Zee decide to trust Gentry with her sister's life?
6. So often in television and movies, sex is presented as an act that just happens. A couple of kisses and, with little or no communication seen on screen, the characters have sex. Because of Gentry's autism-associated sensory issues, he and Zee develop a simple system to communicate when he needs to wait and when they can go forward. Can you imagine a world in which it was commonplace to discuss consent on such a detailed level? What would that look like in entertainment? In your life?
7. Zee's mother has nearly entombed herself in a house full of stuff. What does this tell us about Dottie? What does Zee own? How do you interpret her limited personal belongings? What about Gentry and what Zee describes as his "armory"? Do we value objects differently based on whether they are practical, sentimental, or symbolic? What objects in the book seem most valuable to you and why?
8. Within our families, we often expect a great deal of one another. What do you think we owe our families? Does Gentry owe his mother obedience at the cost of his independence? What,

if anything, does Zee owe her mother or her sister? What about the debts we owe people who rescue us?

9. There is a lot of talk about whether LaReigne is innocent, but what does innocent even mean? Is being innocent the same as being blameless? Or is it merely the opposite of guilty? How do we distinguish between the moral concept of innocence and the legal concept of not guilty?
10. Loyalty plays a big role in the story. What does it mean to be loyal? In traditions of chivalric or courtly love, black is often the color of faithfulness. Gentry's armor is described as "all black," but is he the most loyal character in the book? If not him, who? What happens when loyalty is betrayed?
11. When Gentry tells Zee the story of Melusine, Zee remarks, "Like mother, like daughter." How much of Dottie does she see in herself? How does that sense of heritage/inheritance affect how Zee moves through the world and interacts with people? Are there other kinds of inheritance in the story?
12. Yvain, ou le Chevalier au Lion is classified as a romance, which had a distinctly different meaning in the twelfth century. Chivalric romances typically told stories of knights-errant who came from mysterious backgrounds, went on quests, and fought monsters to rescue damsels in distress. To what degree is *The Reckless Oath We Made* a chivalric romance? What is the quest? Is Gentry a true knight-errant? Is Zee a damsel in distress? What monsters have to be fought?
13. What about the idea of modern romance? Does Zee fall in love with Gentry? If not, what

are her feelings toward him? When she agrees to "build a tower" with him, what is she agreeing to? Do you think Gentry's feelings toward Zee are romantic in the beginning? Do either of them undergo a change in feeling? What kind of change? Have you ever fallen in love with someone you didn't understand at first? How do Zee and Gentry find common ground with each other?

14. Were you surprised by the novel's ending? Why or why not?





A Conversation with
**BRYN
GREENWOOD**

Like your previous novel, the *New York Times* bestseller *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things*, *The Reckless Oath We Made* is an offbeat love story between two unlikely people. But it has its own story to tell. What is this new novel about?

To me, it's a story about loyalty. Not just the way we gain another person's loyalty, but also the ways we lose it. It's about a woman who discovers she's wasted her loyalty on people who weren't worthy, and a man whose loyalty is unshakeable and based on an ancient code of honor.

The main character, Zee, seems to share some characteristics and experiences with you—at least on the surface. Did you draw on your own life in creating her?

In writing Zee, I gave myself permission to write a redhead for the first time, but that's just a surface similarity.

**Their
relationship
works
because they
are patient
with each
other's
differences
and
difficulties.
They choose
a hard-won
loyalty over
simpler
forms of
infatuation.**

On a more personal level, I drew on some of my experiences to understand Zee. Like her, I suffer from chronic pain from an injury, and I have done some pretty desperate things to keep the bills paid when I was poor, including sex work.

Gentry is a totally endearing character who seems to truly believe he's a knight. Where does a character like Gentry come from?

As with so many of my characters, Gentry walked into my head wholly formed. Character development is apparently part of my writing process that runs in the background while I'm not paying attention. Gentry showed up in Zee's hour of need just as he was, and it took a lot of writing before I was able to figure out who he was. Rather than consciously create him, I had to get him talking, and once I did, his character unfolded.

What inspired you to write about knights and chivalry? How did you go about researching these concepts? Did you always write his character in Middle English? Was writing whole chapters in Middle English a challenge?

That was entirely about Gentry, because those were things he was very passionate about. He joined the Society for Creative Anachronism, so that he could be connected to people who shared his interests and values. While I did quite a bit of reading about chivalry and other matters, I also drew on my experiences participating in the SCA in college. As far as Gentry's voice goes, he spoke in Middle English from the first moment I met him. I enjoyed the process of writing him, but then I loved studying Middle English. The challenge was figuring out how to make Gentry's narrative accessible to readers who haven't studied Middle English. That involved modernizing the spelling and selecting grammar and syntax that

would be easy to read but would still retain the feel of the older language.

Medieval literature, art, and culture all play strong roles in the novel. What is your connection to this history? Why did you decide to incorporate it into Zee and Gentry's story?

Medieval literature has been one of my obsessions since I was a teenager, and I studied it for many years in college. As I was writing, Gentry kept returning me to those stories, because they helped him navigate his life and interpret his interactions with other people, which can be difficult for people with autism. It was no surprise to me that Gentry connected strongly with Yvain, the knight with the lion, which is one of my favorite medieval tales. Like Gentry, Yvain is an honorable knight but one who is still trying to find his place in the world.

Despite their very different natures, Zee and Gentry seem oddly suited to one another—why do you believe their relationship works? How do Gentry's rules of chivalric love challenge our modern expectations of a relationship?

Whether chivalry can survive in our modern society depends a great deal on a person's level of commitment, and Gentry is deeply committed to chivalric ideals. In that sense, his autism has a profound impact on his relationship with Zee, because his feelings for her are more than simple attraction. As her champion, he is devoted to her on both a practical and a spiritual level. As for Zee, she is another thing entirely. While she doesn't have a romantic bone in her body, she is capable of real compassion and enduring loyalty. In fact that loyalty may be the only thing Gentry and Zee have in common. Ultimately

their relationship works, because they are patient with each other's differences and difficulties. They choose a hard-won loyalty over simpler forms of infatuation.

Zee and her family's reality is hardscrabble, and seems to reflect one side of the economic divide that has led to such a political and geographical rift in our country. Do you intend the novel to have a political message?

I believe that all stories are political, because every political issue is an abstraction of the real, concrete problems that people face. Currently in America, there is an ever-growing wealth gap, and for people on the wrong side of that gap, life is profoundly difficult. I couldn't write about Zee's chronic pain without writing about health care in America and the realities of medical debt. I couldn't write about characters in prison without writing about the failures of the criminal justice system. The experiences of these characters are inextricable from the issues.

**I believe that
all stories
are political,
because every
political issue
is an abstraction
of the real,
concrete problems
that people face.**

Zee's mother is a hoarder who has trouble functioning without the help of Zee or her sister. How do her afflictions contribute to the larger story you are trying to tell?

I come from a family with a long history of hoarding, and to my way of thinking it's a subject that encompasses a lot of human suffering. In so many instances, and certainly in my family, hoarding is directly related to poverty, loss, grief, and mental illness. In that way, it ties back to the very same political issues of the wealth gap and access to health care. Poverty is not a random thing that just happens to people. Like wealth, poverty is generational, and so Zee's story is bound up in her mother's story.

Like Zee's, your own father spent time in federal prison. What were the circumstances and how did they affect your family?

I sometimes refer to my father as a "Midwest methamphetamine Al Capone," because while he was a drug dealer, he ultimately went to prison for tax evasion. His arrest and conviction were incredibly difficult for my family, and especially my grandparents. I grew up in a small town and that whole situation was front-page news for months. People whispered behind our backs, social interactions were often painful and embarrassing. That connection was cemented in people's minds, which was pretty horrifying when I was fourteen. Even now, a surprising number of people act like having a felon for a father is a character flaw, but I'm old enough that I don't care what those people think.

You've said you come from a long line of scoundrels, hoarders, and storytellers. How would you say you fit into this family legacy?

I am certainly a storyteller, but I'm trying not to be too much of a scoundrel. As someone who was fi-

nally diagnosed with OCD as an adult, I find myself thinking a lot about the possible connections between OCD and hoarding. I'm learning to recognize the way my compulsions align with or oppose the urge to hoard. It takes a lot of effort to keep chaos and accumulation at bay.

How has the success of *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things* affected your life—both on a day-to-day basis and on a grander scale?

The biggest change in my life from the success of *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things* is that I was able to quit the secretarial job I had for the last twelve years. On a mundane level, that means I'm no longer a sleep-deprived night owl going to work at 8:00 AM after a night of writing. I get to focus my energies on my writing (and my dogs.) On a grander scale, it's both exciting and a little terrifying to know that so many people are reading my stories. I have the opportunity to open a dialogue with readers about things that matter to me.

What other writers have shaped you as a storyteller?

As a child, the two writers I most wanted to emulate were Ursula K. LeGuin and Mary Renault. As I grew older, I feel like I learned so much by reading Toni Morrison, Anthony Trollope, Louise Erdrich, and Iris Murdoch.

Are you at work on a new novel? What is it about?

I'm working on a variety of projects, including one about a small town witch and a grain elevator accident, and another one about con artists, mermaids, triplets, and the desperate desire to be loved best.

Zee & Gentry spend a lot of time by the fire in this novel.

ENJOY THESE FIRESIDE RECIPES WHILE READING!

Campfire Cookie S'mores

INGREDIENTS

- ¾ cup chocolate hazelnut spread
- 12 peanut butter cookies
- 6 jumbo marshmallows

DIRECTIONS

Spread 1 tablespoon chocolate hazelnut spread onto the bottom of each peanut butter cookie.

Skewer a marshmallow and turn slowly over a campfire or grill until roasted on the outside and soft and melted in the center, 2 to 3 minutes.

Place roasted marshmallow on top of 1 cookie, chocolate-hazelnut spread-side up; cover with another cookie, chocolate-hazelnut spread-side down.

Press together to grasp the marshmallow and pull out the skewer. *Serves 6.*

Campfire Mule

INGREDIENTS

- 2 oz Brulee Liqueur
- .5 oz freshly squeezed lime juice
- .5 oz vodka
- 5 oz ginger beer
- Ice
- Marshmallows

DIRECTIONS

Combine Brulee liqueur, lime juice, vodka and ginger beer with ice in a copper mug.

Toast marshmallows to your liking (lightly toasted or burned!)

Stick marshmallows on to garnish pick.