

Books by the Stack



The Guineveres by Sarah Domet

Left by their parents to be raised by nuns, four girls with the same name are bound by their pain and secrets until the assistance they provide to four comatose soldiers tests their bond and their perceptions of home in unexpected ways.

Why you'll like it: *Coming-of-age story. Atmospheric. Disturbing. Compelling.*

About the Author: Sarah Domet's debut novel, *The Guineveres*, was released from Flatiron Books in October 2016. She's also the author of *90 Days to Your Novel*. She holds a Ph.D. in literature and creative writing from the University of Cincinnati where she once served as the associate editor of *The Cincinnati Review*. Originally from Ohio and still a Midwesterner at heart, she now lives in Savannah, Georgia.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the tension in the novel between the individual and the group, dramatized by Vere's frequent use of first-person plural narration, as she speaks for "The Guineveres." How do the girls develop a sense of self in the convent?
2. Sister Fran tells The Guineveres: "It's an altar server, not an altar girl. There's no such thing as an altar girl." Win repeats this sentiment years later, at a dinner party, and then starts crying. What does the term "altar girls" mean to the Guineveres? How are gender norms enforced and disrupted in the novel?
3. What do you make of the saints' revival stories, in which the young women frequently deny themselves physically, inflict harm on themselves, and mutilate their bodies? How do the saints' stories complicate The Guineveres' views on their own physicality?
4. Vere is completely embarrassed by her boy when he has an erection. She is clearly the least knowledgeable of The Guineveres about sex, and she seems mortified after she explores masturbation. Do you think this ultimately plays a role in her decision to stay at the Convent?
5. The war and the war effort are frequently invoked in this novel, but the actual war was never named. What do you make of the author's decision to leave the historical context ambiguous? Did you form your own opinion of when the novel is set?
6. The War as a background context has different effects on all of the characters. What do you think of how the war weighs differently on the male versus female characters in the story?
7. Vere says that wonder and pain are difficult to tell apart. Do you agree? How does that sentiment resonate throughout the novel?
8. The idea of home is a major theme throughout the novel. What does home mean to The Guineveres?

- 9.** When the Sisters' shoes get too old to wear, they repurpose them as flowerpots. Vere observes: "Even out of doors, these shoes reminded us, we could not escape the omnipresence of the Sisters in our loves." What role do the Sisters play in the novel? Are they depicted sympathetically? Did your view of Sister Fran change over the course of the novel?
- 10.** Father James reveals that he joined the priesthood to dodge the draft. Vere wonders: "Did this make him a coward or a con man? A man of morals who let nothing stand between himself and what he believed? Better or worse than a young soldier who carried around with him a human ear? Or men who killed?" Did your opinion of Father James change throughout the novel? Do you believe the author is sympathetic toward him or not?
- 11.** Sister Fran claims that "faith and duty are one and the same." Vere responds: "I wondered what happened when someone performed her duty but didn't believe in the reasons behind it. Did that still count as faith?" What do you think?
- 12.** Vere wonders "if the removal of choice is not a sort of gift, one allowing for supreme focus. In this way, I've come to understand the asceticism of the Sisters, in only obliquely." Does this justification of asceticism resonate with you? How is free will depicted in the novel?
- 13.** In Vere's revival story, her mother says: "If you love someone you have two choices: hold onto them or let them go. But clinging doesn't mean you love them more, and letting go doesn't mean you love them less." Do you agree?
- 14.** Vere describes nostalgia as "a willingness to embrace the pain of the past." Do you agree? Are The Guineveres nostalgic?
- 15.** Vere, we learn, is telling the story of The Guineveres for young Guinevere, as the girl's revival story. Vere explains, "Because that's what we all go on seeking in life – the whys. It's the one question for which we may never have the answer, and we turn to faith: so we can keep on asking without seeming redundant." Has Vere lost her faith by the novel's end? Or has she remained faithful, like one of the saints?

(Questions provided by the publisher)



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