

DAUGHTER OF BLACK LAKE

READING
GUIDE

a novel

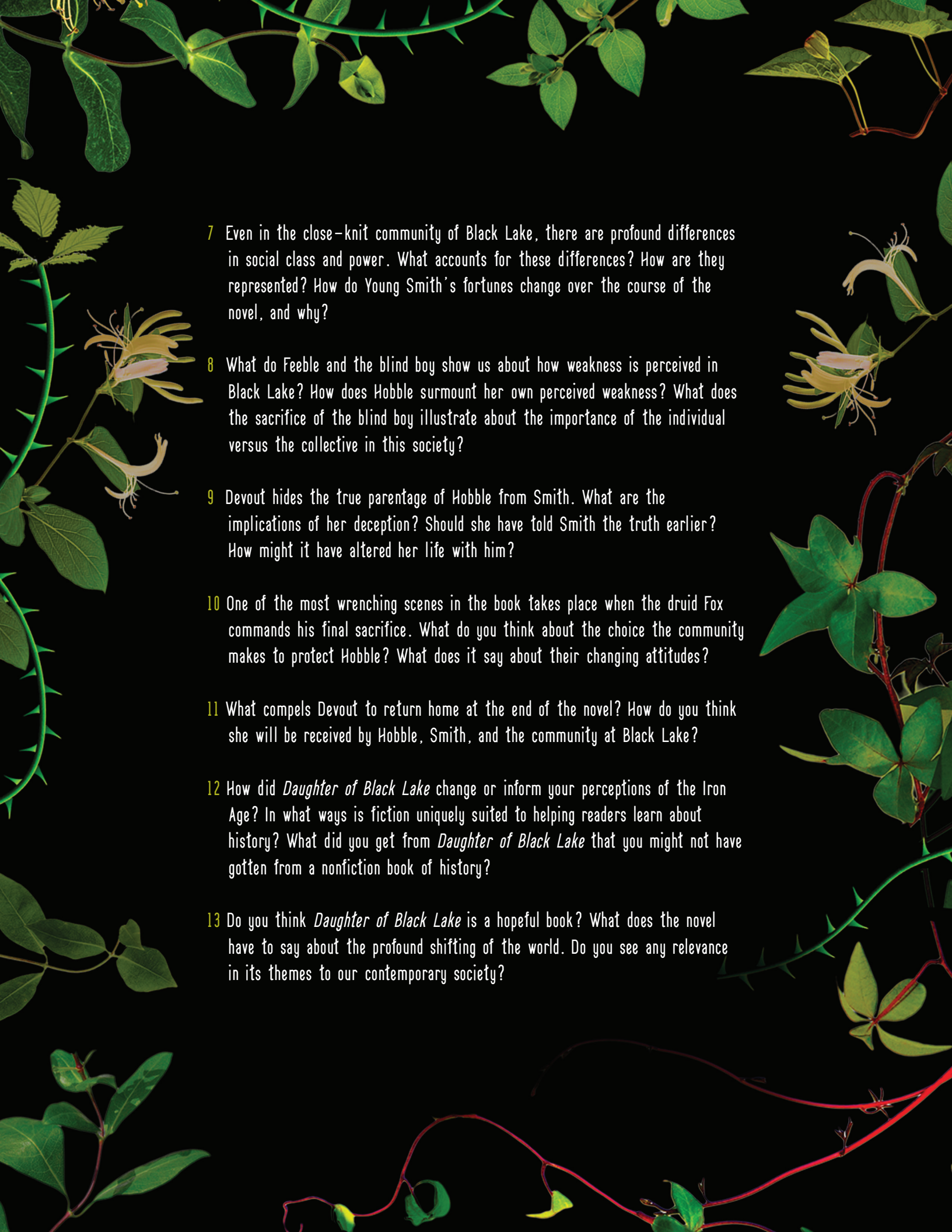
CATHY MARIE BUCHANAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE PAINTED GIRLS



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 *Daughter of Black Lake* is about a society that finds itself on the brink of change—caught between time-honored traditions and the forces of modernization. Which characters are trying to protect the old ways and which are interested in the Romans? What accounts for these differences in opinion? Is there a correct opinion, in your view?
- 2 The novel begins with an epigraph from Plutarch: “Hatred is blind as well as love.” How does this apply to *Daughter of Black Lake*?
- 3 The narrative shifts back and forth among the perspectives of the strong-willed Hobble and her mother, Devout, the healer at Black Lake. How has the settlement changed in the seventeen years between Devout’s youth and Hobble’s coming of age? What does Devout reveal to Hobble about the time before, and what does she withhold? How are traditions, stories, and knowledge passed down from Devout to Hobble?
- 4 Discuss the love triangle between Devout, Young Smith, and Arc. Young Smith is a dedicated, kind ironworker from a powerful clan, while Arc is a humble orphan, with nothing to offer but his own devotion. What factors complicate Devout’s choice between them? What do you think about the choices she makes? What choices would you have made in her position?
- 5 At one point, Devout flings open her arms and exclaims, “Imagine a world without magic.” What is the role of magic in the world of Black Lake?
- 6 Discuss the daily and seasonal rituals that continually remind the bog dwellers of their dependence on the earth’s benevolence. In modern times, most people would agree we’ve diminished our connection to the natural world. In doing so, what have we lost?

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- 7 Even in the close-knit community of Black Lake, there are profound differences in social class and power. What accounts for these differences? How are they represented? How do Young Smith's fortunes change over the course of the novel, and why?
- 8 What do Feeble and the blind boy show us about how weakness is perceived in Black Lake? How does Hobble surmount her own perceived weakness? What does the sacrifice of the blind boy illustrate about the importance of the individual versus the collective in this society?
- 9 Devout hides the true parentage of Hobble from Smith. What are the implications of her deception? Should she have told Smith the truth earlier? How might it have altered her life with him?
- 10 One of the most wrenching scenes in the book takes place when the druid Fox commands his final sacrifice. What do you think about the choice the community makes to protect Hobble? What does it say about their changing attitudes?
- 11 What compels Devout to return home at the end of the novel? How do you think she will be received by Hobble, Smith, and the community at Black Lake?
- 12 How did *Daughter of Black Lake* change or inform your perceptions of the Iron Age? In what ways is fiction uniquely suited to helping readers learn about history? What did you get from *Daughter of Black Lake* that you might not have gotten from a nonfiction book of history?
- 13 Do you think *Daughter of Black Lake* is a hopeful book? What does the novel have to say about the profound shifting of the world. Do you see any relevance in its themes to our contemporary society?

BEHIND *DAUGHTER OF BLACK LAKE*

A Conversation with Cathy Marie Buchanan

What compelled you to write a novel about family and community in first-century Britannia?

In 2002, I opened the newspaper to see a photograph of an unnervingly well-preserved 2,000-year-old human body. I could not lift my gaze from the gentle face—the finely creased skin, the matted hair, the beard stubble that appeared as freshly grown as that of any living man. The rope noose that had caused his death was still looped around his neck. The chemical nature of the peat bog, from which the body was unearthed, had enabled the flesh and skin to survive across millennia, providing clues to the world in which the man lived and died.

I read about dozens of other, similarly unspoiled bodies recovered from the boglands of Northern Europe, particularly Lindow Man, a 2,000-year-old bog body that was discovered in 1984 near Wilmslow, Cheshire, in a peat bog formed by the once much larger Black Lake. Before the body was deposited in the ancient lake, the head had been bashed, the neck garroted, and the throat slit. The findings were in keeping with a sort of ritualistic overkilling that archaeologists surmised was undertaken as an offering to earn the favor of multiple gods.

As I read, I wondered about a society in which humans were sacrificed, possibly with their consent, to guarantee the next year's crops or to ensure success on the battlefield. What would it be like to believe—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that the gods could be angered and then bribed to end the deluge of rain that would rot the wheat? I pondered, too, the beauty and simplicity of community ordered by ritual and tied to the land in the most exceptional way. With the inferences about Lindow Man's life and death as bedrock, I would write a story that explored living in Iron Age Britannia—the close ties to the natural world, the pagan traditions and superstitions, the gods who dealt mercy or vengeance, the druid emissaries who interpreted divine will.

What was rewarding about your research you conducted during the writing of *Daughter of Black Lake*, and what challenges did you face?

Before I put pen to paper on a work of historical fiction, I spend a good six months researching, reading historical texts and documents, as well as the literature of the day. During the research period for each of my first two novels, I developed a clear idea of the time and place I meant to capture. Not so for Iron Age Britannia. The Britons did not have the written word



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2,000 years ago, and while the Romans did, they were adversaries and subjugators of the Britons, we must take their commentary with a grain of salt. There is the archaeological record, but in many cases, the experts are not in agreement. More so than for my other novels, informed speculation and imagination would be necessary to conjure a plausible world for the book I intended to write.

To create the Iron Age world at Black Lake, I delved into the British Isles' mythology, and its pagan and medieval traditions and superstitions, convinced that much of what I discovered would be rooted in the reality of Iron Age Britannia. Some of my most joyful moments came when I saw millennia-old traditions reflected in our modern practices. For instance, the ancient tradition of earning a god's favor by pitching a prized possession into a watery place is surely connected to our present-day penchant for tossing coins into fountains to draw good luck. And doesn't it make sense that today's jack-o-lantern evolved from the enemy skulls the ancient Britons displayed to ward off menace? Oddly, much of what I was learning about a distant time and place felt familiar. I now wonder if some of us might carry more of our pagan roots in our bones than I ever would have guessed before writing *Daughter of Black Lake*.

Your novel is full of sensory details that bring the daily routines of Iron Age Britannia vividly to life. What informed your world building?

More than any other site, Butser Ancient Farm—a pioneer village-like complex meant to educate about the British Iron Age—was fundamental to shaping *Daughter of Black Lake*. As I stepped past the wattle fence circling the farm's six reconstructed roundhouses, I felt as though I were wading into another time. My gaze flitted from thatched roof to sheep pen to herb garden to handcart to larder to storage pit. The *clang clang clang* of a blacksmith at work echoed through the air. I could smell warm wool, woodsmoke, thatch in the sun. I had a single day to drink it all in. I went into a roundhouse, and impatiently waited for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. A loom. A clay floor. Wool dyed using native plants. Quern stones for milling wheat. Woven baskets. A shelf lined with pottery. An iron cauldron suspended above a central fire pit. A low table and bench. A bed covered in furs. An assortment of tools and weaponry. Walls painted with Celtic motifs.

Daughter of Black Lake tells the story of Devout, a healer adept at drawing strong magic from Mother Earth's roots, leaves, and blooms. "This charmed place," I thought to myself. "I could stay."



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Can you talk about the role of rituals and magic in the book?

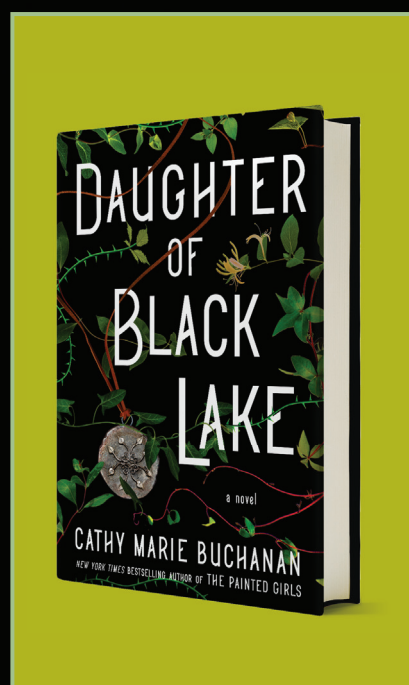
The bog dwellers in *Daughter of Black Lake* live and breathe their daily and seasonal rituals. They mark the advent of each season with a festival and incessantly pay tribute to four gods: Protector, who keeps them from harm; War Master, who guides them in battle; Begetter, who created them; and above all, Mother Earth, who provides. They set aside a one-third portion of all they reap to return to Mother Earth, payment for taking what belongs to her. In doing so, they continually remind themselves of their utter dependence on the earth's benevolence. The Black Lake community is deeply bound to the natural world by the rituals and practices that habitually reinforce that profound connection.

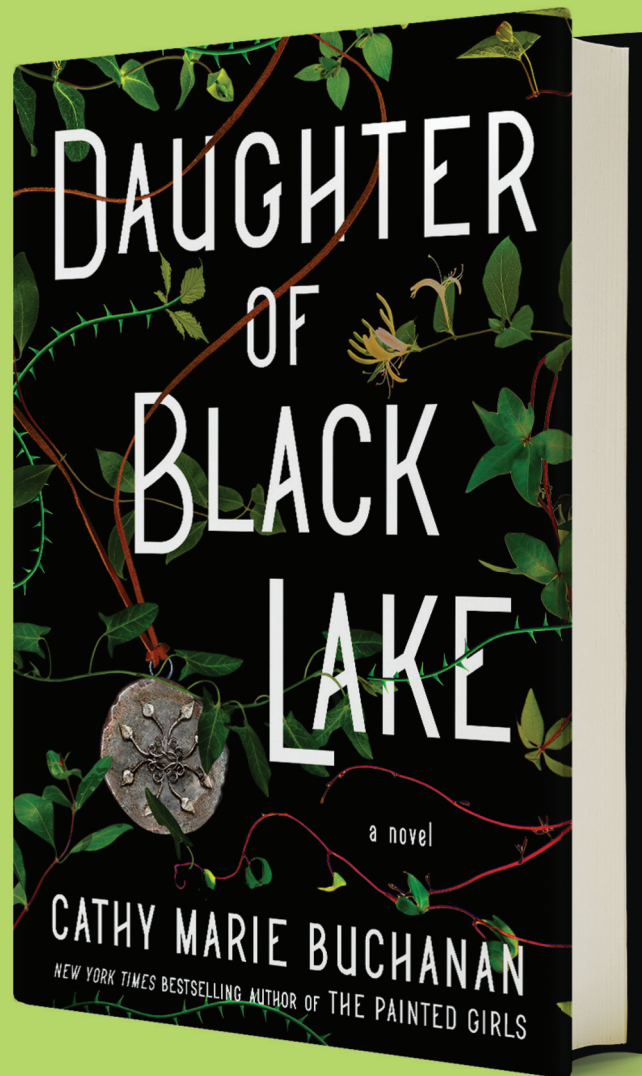
In modern times, we rely on science to explain the world around us, but the novel takes place in a century long before science explained the seasons and the origins of humankind. I incorporated magic into *Daughter of Black Lake* because magic would have been integral to the bog dwellers, understanding of their lives. They would have embraced mystery and magic, and would have been open to the astonishing.

What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

At one point in the novel, Devout, the community's healer, says, "Imagine a world without magic." She throws open her arms, baffled by the impossibility.

It seems to me that in modern times we've let slip our connection to the natural world, and that in doing so we've lost much; in particular, the sense of awe that can so easily overtake us when we watch a heron take flight, or when we gaze at the nighttime sky. I would love for readers to embrace the mystery and magic threaded through *Daughter of Black Lake*. It fills me with pleasure to think the novel might pry open a tiny window to the astonishing in our daily lives.





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