



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

The Guineveres

Reading Group Guide

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. Female sexuality is clearly a tinderbox in the revival stories, both of the saints and The Guineveres themselves. Contrast this to the sisters who have subjected their sexuality to a supposed higher purpose, through marriage to Christ. What commentary, if any, do you think the author is trying to make?
5. 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?
6. The war and the war effort are frequently invoked in this novel, but the actual war is never named. What do you make of the author's decision to leave the historical context ambiguous? Did you form your own opinion about when the novel is set?
7. 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?
8. Vere says that wonder and pain are difficult to tell apart. Do you agree? How does that sentiment resonate throughout the novel?

9. Discuss this passage from the story of Saints Irmina and Adela, the royal sisters—one a virgin and one a widow—who founded monasteries: “That’s what faith teaches us: From hopelessness springs hope. From longing, desire.” Do you agree? How does that view shape *The Guineveres*’ stories?
10. The idea of home is a major theme throughout the novel. What does home mean to *The Guineveres*?
11. 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 lives.” 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?
12. 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?
13. 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?
14. Vere describes the significance of the convent: “We lost ourselves within those gray walls. Or maybe we gave ourselves over. Later in their lives, long after they left, both Win and Ginny would admit to me that they didn’t resent Father James or Sister Fran or the other nuns. They resented the convent itself, as though it were a living, breathing thing capable of such blame.” How does the convent itself become a character in the novel? What do *The Guineveres* blame it for?
15. Discuss this line: “Memories are like that, like mustard seeds, tiny at first, but eventually the largest tree in all of the garden.” What is the importance of memory in this novel?
16. 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, if only obliquely.” Does this justification of asceticism resonate with you? How is free will depicted in the novel?

17. 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?
18. Confession plays an important role in the novel. Vere explains: "When I feel things, I confess them—and, like that, the weight lifts away from me. That's the beautiful power of absolution. It's not so much about the ritual as it is about the need to unburden our stories onto someone who will carry the weight for us." How do confession and storytelling relate and diverge in this novel?
19. Vere describes nostalgia as "a willingness to embrace the pain of the past." Do you agree? Are *The Guineveres* nostalgic?
20. The Guineveres learn about "Ordinary Time," which Sister Fran explains: "it's far from Ordinary, Girls. It's a season of miracles, of mystery." How do the ordinary and the miraculous intertwine in this novel?
21. Vere says that "people like Gwen don't wind up on prayer cards. [...] Yet I wish I could hold that vision of Gwen in my mind: Gwen with fluttering lids, so innocent, so fervent in her prayer, so hurt, so alone, so beautiful because of this." What does she mean? How is Gwen similar and different from the saints in the novel?
22. 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?