

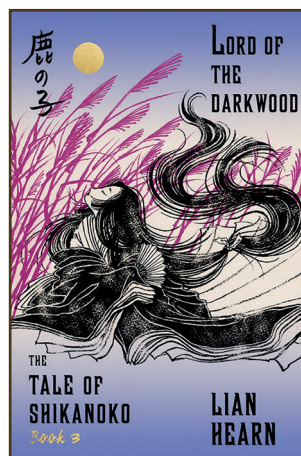
Reading Group Gold



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The Tale of Shikanoko

Book 1: *Emperor of the Eight Islands*

Book 2: *Autumn Princess, Dragon Child*

Book 3: *Lord of the Darkwood*

Book 4: *The Tengu's Game of Go*

by **Lian Hearn**

From the author of the bestselling *Tales of the Otori* series, which has sold more than four million copies worldwide, comes another brilliantly imagined epic set in mythical medieval Japan. In the four books of *The Tale of Shikanoko*, warriors and priests forge allegiances as the Miboshi and Kaki-zuki clans vie for power, while the rightful heir to the Lotus Throne—a boy under the protection of the shrewd Autumn Princess—remains in hiding. At the heart of the story is Kazu, a young lord whose ruthless uncle leaves him for dead on a hunting excursion. But Kazu's life is saved by a majestic stag, and he becomes Shikanoko, “the deer's child.” Fleeing the violent remnants of his family, Shika is raised by the fantastical creatures of the Darkwood, where the landscape is by turns deadly and enchanting. As the four action-packed volumes unfold, sorcerers and seductresses play key roles in the intrigue: Shisoku, who crafts a mask for Shika imbued with the stag's spirit; Lady Fuji, the mistress of the pleasure boats; and Lady Tora, who seeks five fathers for her five children, hatching the Spider Tribe. From battlefields to palace grounds, where an arrogant Prince Abbot refuses to listen to wisdom and mighty lords succumb to bloody betrayals, the saga races to a thrilling climax.

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This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of *The Tale of Shikanoko*. We hope that the following questions will enhance your journey to the Eight Islands and the imaginative realms you encounter there.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

BOOK 1: *EMPEROR OF THE EIGHT ISLANDS*

1. Lian Hearn began writing *The Tale of Shikanoko* after a visit to Iwate, Japan, where she saw young men rehearsing dances for festivals—the *oni* sword dances and the deer dances. “The thing that made the greatest impression on me,” she recalls, “was the resonance of a vanished world, where the lives of people and animals were more closely entwined and where the supernatural was an accepted element of life.” How did Book 1 affect your perception of the natural world? Are the novel’s supernatural creatures morally superior to humanity?
2. How did you react to the scheme proposed by Kiyomasa, requiring Lady Tama to leave Masachika and become Kiyoyori’s wife? Was there a better alternative, or is love a weakness that should be overlooked when war is looming? Are the characters’ situations driven primarily by fate or by choice?
3. What are the advantages and vulnerabilities of being a woman in the society of *Emperor of the Eight Islands*? How does Tama’s strength compare to that of Aki, the Autumn Princess? Would you want to have Lady Tora’s powers of enchantment?
4. Taro offers to take Kiyoyori’s place when they face the Judge of Hell. How are roles defined for the servant class? What spurs their loyalty?
5. Discuss the scene in which Sesshin loses his sight. What does his story illustrate about vision being spiritual as well as physical?
6. If you had been Aki, how would you have responded to Lady Shinmei’in (Yoshi’s mother), who says she and her husband and her son should die together? What do you predict for Yoshi’s future? How do they do that? And why?

BOOK 2: *AUTUMN PRINCESS, DRAGON CHILD*

1. When Kazu became free from his uncle, Sademasa, and was transformed into Shika, what made his mask a source of both healing and sorrow?
2. As you read about the birth of Lady Tora’s sons (Kiku, Mu, Kuro, Ima, and Ku), did you believe

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Sesshin's prediction that they were demons who needed to be killed? As Shika bonds with them, what does he discover about the power and limitations of kinship?

3. What are the common threads between the novel's sorcerers (such as Shisoku) and monks (such as Gessho)? How does the Prince Abbot compare to them? Is he wise or foolish?
4. Is Takaakira benevolent or self-serving (or both) for taking Hina under his wing? Would you have kept her identity a secret, even from her own family?
5. Nyorin and Risu's foal, Tan, is born on the same day as Take. Compared with other animals, what is different about the way horses are intertwined with the human saga in the novel?
6. Do you think Shika will be strengthened or shattered by the tragedies unleashed through Kuro's venomous snake?

BOOK 3: *LORD OF THE DARKWOOD*

1. What do Lady Fuji and the Abbess know about the art of survival? In their world, when is survival dishonorable?
2. When the lutes and weapons are able to recognize their rightful owners, what do they indicate about an "inanimate" object's ability to become a personal extension of the soul? Which of your possessions would you want to bring to life?
3. Take and Hina discuss the fact that Heaven is punishing their people (through drought and other disasters) because the Miboshi arrogantly chose the emperor they wanted. In our contemporary world, does our planet reflect human discord and attempt to guide humanity to the right path?
4. Discuss the mysterious Darkwood as if it were a character. When does it bring comfort? When is it inhospitable? Who are its closest companions?
5. When Arinori takes Yayoi's purity, what does she learn about the price of a man's protection? How has she changed since childhood? What will it take for her to reclaim her true identity?
6. What are Lord Aritomo's weaknesses? What has prevented his defeat so far?

BOOK 4: *THE TENGU'S GAME OF GO*

1. What does Tadashii teach Take about becoming a man and becoming a warrior? What is the role of teachers (tengus or not) throughout the series? How does Tadashii's slow-paced game of Go (in which Take recognizes himself as one of the pieces) reflect the power struggle between the clans?

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2. How does the magical Kudzu Vine Treasure Store reflect your own experience of a particularly powerful book that unlocked special wisdom for you?
3. In chapter 14, Yoshi observes that “all living beings fear death. That’s why we should not inflict it on any of them.” What do the experiences of Masachika and Chika say about destiny and “inflicted” deaths?
4. Ascending to the Lotus Throne, the Emperor decrees that the domain of Maruyama will always be inherited through the female line, unraveling his predecessor’s increasingly harsh oppression of women. How did the suppression of women contribute to the suffering of men and women alike?
5. What does the closing chapter demonstrate about authentic power versus the love of power, and the power of love itself? What does Shika teach his son about the traits of a successful warrior?
6. From the origin stories of the tribe to the formative years of Takeyoshi (who is briefly mentioned in *Heaven’s Net Is Wide*), how does *The Tale of Shikanoko* enrich your enjoyment of other books by Lian Hearn?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lian Hearn is the pseudonym of a writer—born in England, educated at Oxford, currently living in Australia—who has had a lifelong interest in Japan, has lived there, and studies Japanese. She is the author of the bestselling series *Tales of the Otori*.

For an interview with the author, suggestions for further reading, and more, visit www.lianhearn.com.

Guide written by Amy Clements