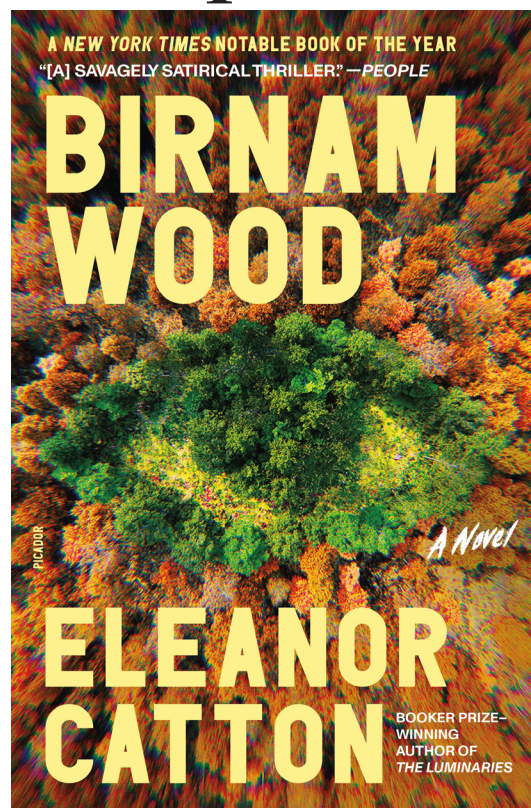


# Reading Group Gold

## *Birnam Wood*

by Eleanor Catton



ISBN: 9781250321718 / 432 pages

This reading group guide for *Birnam Wood* includes discussion questions for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

### Introduction

A gripping psychological thriller from the Booker Prize-winning author of *The Luminaries*, Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood* is Shakespearean in its drama, Austenian in its wit, and, like both influences, fascinated by what makes us who we are. A brilliantly constructed study of intentions, actions, and consequences, it is a mesmerizing, unflinching consideration of the human impulse to ensure our own survival.

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When we first meet Shelley Noakes, she wants out of Birnam Wood and out of her role as Mira Bunting's "sensible, dependable, predictable sidekick" (16 – 17). Discuss the complicated relationship that she and Mira share. What are its strengths, its sources of tension, its imbalances of power? Does their dynamic ever change? If so, is it a change for the better or the worse?
2. Robert Lemoine is captivated by Mira after their surprise encounter at the farm in Thorndike. In his eyes, she's ambitious, determined, and lies with a kind of defiant panache that suggests a "genuine enjoyment of the practice of deception" (78). Consider Lemoine's attraction to Mira and his interest in Birnam Wood. What do you think draws him to her? In what ways do he and Mira share common ground? In what ways are they very different people?
3. "There comes a point," Mira says to Tony Gallo during their tense exchange over whether Birnam Wood should join forces with Lemoine, "where refusing to compromise basically means choosing to be ineffectual" (120). Do you agree with Mira? Delve into this pivotal decision for the activist collective, keeping in mind Birnam Wood's "three Principles of Unity" (113) and the details about the offer that Mira chooses to share with the group. What does Lemoine's proposal look like from Mira's perspective, from Shelley's, from Tony's, from your own? If you were at the hui that night, how would you have voted? Do you think those present would have voted differently if Tony had not been in attendance?
4. The day after Birnam Wood's crucial vote, Tony is determined to write a scathing article about the super-rich that will finally expose the "hypocrites and cynics . . . tax-dodging economic parasites . . . [and] crypto-fascist dirty tricksters" (141) like Lemoine. Discuss Tony's pursuit of his writing project and all that it reveals about his character,

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both admirable and ignoble. What do you make of his motivations for writing the article and the lengths he's willing to go to get what he wants?

5. Lady Jill Darvish is proud of her marriage to Sir Owen. And yet, she also perceives an “ever-widening space between them” (209). Discuss the connection that she and Owen share. What do you make of the couple and the state of their marriage? Does their relationship change over the course of *Birnam Wood*? How do class symbols of wealth, status, and success influence their relationship? Do you think the Dervishes were right to sell their property to Lemoine? Do you consider them in any way culpable for how he planned to use the property? Do you think they were right to sign the non-disclosure agreement?
6. Deceptions occur throughout *Birnam Wood*, from Mira's phony cover stories to Lemoine deliberately “dialling up the billionaire psychology” and “acting spoiled and bloody-minded” (221) to get what he wants. Even Jill admits that Owen's passion for conservation is an act to bolster his Korowai local bona fides. Discuss the impostures and duplicities you see in *Birnam Wood*, taking note of who carries out the deception and who's meant to be deceived. Where do these performances work out in the character's favor? Where do they backfire terribly?
7. Lemoine is a flagrant self-mythologizer who loves to present himself to the world as an enigma. What were your first impressions of him? Near the end of Part II, we're let in on a “clue” from his childhood “that [explains] everything about him” (224). Discuss this sequence in *Birnam Wood*. Do the revelations about Lemoine's upbringing explain everything? Do they alter your opinion of the adult Lemoine becomes? Why or why not?

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8. “The real choices that you make in your life,” Shelley says to Mira, “are never between what’s right and what’s easy. They’re between what’s wrong and what’s hard” (243). Do you agree with her outlook? Why or why not? Apply Shelley’s philosophy to the fateful choices each of the characters makes in *Birnam Wood*. Where do you see instances of a character making a hard choice? Where do you see a character making the wrong choice?
9. A flash of violence at the Darvish farm upturns everything in *Birnam Wood*—and in the bloody aftermath of the incident, Lemoine is certain that “the truth [will] have to change” (289). Share your thoughts on this startling and cataclysmic event. How does it happen? Why does it happen? What do you make of each character’s choices in the wake of the incident? Are they hard choices? Wrong choices? What would you do in the circumstance?
10. It takes the incident at the farm for Lemoine to realize that he “had been entirely wrong about Shelley Noakes” (319). Perhaps we were as well. Trace your impressions of Shelley over the course of *Birnam Wood*. What do you make of her character at the beginning of the novel, after the incident in Thorndike, after her fiery confrontation with Mira at the safe house? In what ways does Shelley confirm your assumptions about her? In what ways does she subvert those assumptions?
11. Tony makes a discovery that he is certain presents evidence of “conspiracy and corruption at the highest level” (332). It’s a breakthrough that leaves him full of “fury and despair” over “the sheer inexorability of late-capitalist degradation” (332) and brimming with delight over how famous he’s about to become. Use this moment as a springboard to discuss the political and environmental themes of *Birnam Wood*. What does the novel have to say about the power of activism, both individual and collective, and the responsibilities of a government to protect the environment and its people? How is the private sector portrayed in *Birnam Wood*? When is it a force of protection, of destruction?

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12. As Birnam Wood moves closer to incorporating and enters its final phase with Lemoine, Mira surprises everyone by nominating Shelley as the group's future Executive Director. Mira frames it as an act of contrition and says "it's just obvious that it's the right thing to do" (366); Shelley sees it as being handed "a poisoned chalice" (369). What do you make of Mira's surprise announcement and Shelley's response to it?
13. The novel leaves us with a shocking finale and a glimmer of hope that someone might finally come to put out the fire at Thorndike. Share your thoughts on this big finish. Is it an ending of retribution, reconciliation, justice, cruelty? Imagine all that unfolds in the days after the book's conclusion. Who do you think ends up controlling the narrative about what happened at the farm?
14. Early on in *Birnam Wood*, Tony mentions that whenever he brings up the activist collective to his family, his father, Dr. Gallo, teasingly asks: "So who's Macbeth?" (35). Now that you've finished the novel, revisit Dr. Gallo's question, drawing on what you know of Shakespeare's play. What makes a Macbeth? What core components of a Shakespearean tragedy—for example, ambition, revenge, and a fatal character flaw—also drive Catton's novel? Is there a Macbeth in Birnam Wood? If so, who is it?
15. Perspective shifts throughout *Birnam Wood*, moving from one character to another and offering dramatic new views of key personalities and events. Discuss the novel's revolving point of view and its impact on your reading experience. When did a shift in perspective change your perception of a particular character or moment? When did it verify your worst suspicions?



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## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* haunts the peripheries of *Birnam Wood*. The novel begins with a quote from the play and the narrative’s activist collective draws its name from the foreboding forest near Dunsinane Hill. For your next book club gathering, consider reading *Macbeth*. You might also wish to host a viewing party of one of the many (many!) film adaptations of the dramatic work. Afterward, share the parallels and connections you see between Catton’s novel and Shakespeare’s play of doomed ambition and the ruthless pursuit of power.
2. The novel is both a timeless study of human nature and a scathing critique of our perilous present. For your next book club gathering, discuss Catton’s novel through the lens of current events. What real-life public figures, social movements, and political struggles resonate with *Birnam Wood*? When is the book a work of fiction? When does it all too harshly mirror reality?
3. Catton cites thriller author Lee Child as a primary inspiration for *Birnam Wood*. Throughout the novel, one can also see the influence of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Rachel Carson, Ruth Rendell, and William Shakespeare. For your next book club gathering, explore *Birnam Wood*’s diverse styles and genres. When is the book a psychological thriller? A dramatic tragedy? A social satire? A morality play about the climate crisis and outrageous wealth disparity? How does Catton weave these different influences into her narrative, and why is it important that she does so? For further insight, consider matching each member of your book club with a work by Child, Austen, Eliot, Carson, or Rendell. Afterward, discuss your reading experiences as a group. What similarities and differences do you see between each book pairing and *Birnam Wood*?

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4. An array of political ideals guide Birnam Wood's guerrilla activism. At the collective's core, however, is a radical appreciation of the quiet act of gardening. For your next book club gathering, find a way to give back to nature and your community by getting your hands dirty. This could involve volunteering with a community garden or helping out at a public park. You might even try to find a way to combine your group volunteer efforts with a bit of overnight camping—though, please, no trespassing! Afterward, share your impressions and experiences. In what ways does your day of volunteering harmonize with the spirit of Birnam Wood, in particular, the collective's commitment to comradeship, sustainability, and community-building?