

# Book Clubs / Reading Groups

## Introduction

*This supplemental guide for **Lancelot's Grail** includes an introductory synopsis, discussion questions for your book club, and a Q&A with the author. We hope that these materials will enrich your book club or reading group and increase your enjoyment of the book.*



## Introductory Synopsis

*Lancelot's Grail* tells the story of two siblings' journey to enlightenment when they discover Sir Lancelot living as a hermit after the fall of Camelot and uncover his knowledge of the Holy Grail. Alura and Frith, a sister and brother, were sent to work at the Abbey of St. Benignus when a climate crisis caused their family fortune to fail.

A volcanic eruption in 538 CE caused the sun to dim world wide. In Britain crops failed and superstitions arose. In the years that followed Camelot fell, King Arthur died and the Knights of the Roundtable dispersed.

Even when the sun burned bright again and the crops returned, the people's fears did not much diminish. Something had caused their world to collapse and Sir Lancelot was an easy scapegoat. Many people already blamed his affair with Guinevere for the fall of Camelot. He became a hermit, feared by the young and the superstitious.

Unfortunately, for Alura and Frith ten years have passed and their family has still not taken them back. Now young adults, they feel abandoned and are desperate to get on with their lives.

The arrival of Sir Bedivere, one of the original Knights of the Round Table, causes much excitement at the abbey. Frith has never met a knight, but he aspires to be one. Alura is desperate to marry, but her opportunities for a husband are nil. She hopes this knight will be a candidate.

When the Abbot orders a reluctant Frith to guide Bedivere to the dwelling of a scary old hermit Frith learns the hermit is actually Sir Lancelot, now a holy man who claims to have found enlightenment while living out in the woods. Bedivere, desolate over the knights' abandonment of the Round Table after the fall of Camelot has come with a plan to use Lancelot as a figurehead to resurrect the Round Table. Lancelot rejects the idea and sends the two men away.

While walking back to the abbey Frith tries to induce Bedivere to train him as a knight, but Bedivere says he is leaving and cannot to take on an apprentice. Frith makes up his mind to persuade Lancelot to train him and Alura convinces Frith to let her accompany him to Lancelot's.

Lancelot is resistant to having visitors, but eventually agrees to their visits which become a regular thing. Although there is a wide age difference between them, Alura becomes smitten with Lancelot and obsesses on how to make him marry her. This sparks sibling rivalry and jealousy in Frith.

Lancelot, abandoned by his once adoring public, finds himself enjoying their company. Lancelot proposes to take Frith and Alura into a deeper state that will allow them to see the Grail, but warns them that they must not tell others what he is teaching them or they may be excommunicated. He begins to teach them in earnest, through a series of physical examples, mental visualizations and Socratic questions, to perceive a separation of the observer from the observed. He says that the soul is consciousness hidden in a web of thoughts, emotions, and senses.

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## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the factors that figure into Alura's desperation to find a husband. A woman without a husband has no standing in her society. Marriages must be arranged by one's family; no family, no husband. In her time a woman is an old maid by age 19. Due to famine and war there are no single men. Alura is living in a monastery full of chaste monks.
2. Frith and Alura each believe the others' lot is easier. But is it? Can you imagine living in a time when your career and spouse are selected for you?
3. Discuss the Abbot's character, his grandfatherly attitude toward Frith, his frugal nature, his need to keep donations coming in to support the abbey, the various ways he skirts controversy.
4. Discuss how the principal characters, Alura, Frith, Lancelot and Bedivere each experience a sense of abandonment.
5. Lancelot tells Sir Bedivere that thought manifest as a voice inside his head verbalizing what he is thinking. How do we know what our thoughts are? How are they manifest in each of us?
6. Lancelot teaches Frith and Alura to observe their thoughts. Are you able to notice the thinking process as separate from your real nature?
7. Lancelot asks Frith and Alura to close their eyes and visualize an object. Select a common object and have the group simultaneously try to visualize it.
8. After everyone has read Chapter 17 discuss what happened to Lancelot and why.
9. After everyone has read Chapter 42 discuss why Alura is holding on to her attitude.
10. After everyone has read Chapter 47, is Lancelot mistaken in his conclusion about what he has done?

## A Conversation with the Author

### 1. Please tell us how you came to write *Lancelot's Grail*?

I was watching a PBS show about climate change that described a volcanic eruption in 538 CE so massive that it blotted out the sun worldwide for two years and precipitated the collapse of empires and kingdoms across five continents. King Arthur's Camelot was one of the examples the show used.

Later that same week-end, I came across another item: that after Camelot fell Sir Lancelot had left the knighthood to become a holy man / hermit. Although Lancelot's fate was well documented in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte de Arthur*, I had not been aware of it.

In a flash of inspiration the two ideas coalesced. Here was a man, who in his time was as famous as any pro-athlete of today, caught in a scandal that collapsed a government. And here was the very beginning of the Dark Ages, literally. An agrarian culture, steeped in superstition, suffering the fearful loss of the sun and crops would surely seek blame. Whatever advances in civilization Arthur's utopian Camelot had brought to Britain were gone and it was not difficult to imagine that the two losses would be seen as a curse.

The entire story unfolded in my mind in one sitting – at least the bare bones of it. I knew Lancelot would be an enlightened being living in isolation, uncertain of his obligation to share what he had found. Frith, desperate to change his situation, would seek him out. Alura, panicked at being an old maid, would complicate Lancelot's life by pursuing him. Other plot details were there as well, but I won't reveal them here so as not to spoil the ending.

### 2. What did you do then?

I began researching Lancelot to see why I had been ignorant about his life after Camelot and what else there was to know about his story. I quickly learned two things. Earlier works, particularly Malory, had a strong spiritual quest that has been downplayed for the last two hundred years. Why was I ignorant of what became of Lancelot? Because I had never read *Le Morte de Arthur*.

Second, to find Lancelot you have to follow Arthur. After all, Arthurian lore is, well, Arthurian. I started as far back as I could, which was with the *History of British Kings* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the poems of Chrétien de Troyes, and the aforementioned *Le Morte de Arthur*. In addition to following Arthur, I also followed Percival, for the stories of Lancelot and Percival are very intertwined.

I found that modern writers, even as far back as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* were essentially reshaping the stories of Malory. In the end I relied principally on Malory as my predecessors had, but unlike them, I retained his characters' quest for spiritual achievement.

### 3. What do you mean by spiritual?

To me this was really the driving force in the knights' lives once the Grail appeared at Arthur's court.

Movies and modern interpretations of the story have focused on love and war, leaving us ignorant of Malory's major theme.

I think the last 50 years have brought about a “new age” of interest in Eastern and Western spiritual philosophy. Accessibility to mystical knowledge of other cultures helps us see today things others may have passed by.

#### **4. Can you give some examples?**

The case of the Catholic Sister Therese Neumann (1898-1962) who from 1922 until her death in 1962 ate only a daily communion Host is a direct correspondence to Percival's Fisher King who also abstained from food except the communion Host. According to Malory, Lancelot also lived without eating the last months of his life.

Another example, I noticed how closely descriptions of the Holy Grail paralleled the observations of new age sojourners experiencing the higher chakras: "In a ray of light appeared the Grail, hovering. It was veiled, but every knight, damsel, king and queen in the room felt its wonder. Without even touching it, each person was elevated by its presence, according to their own nature." Anyone who has read theosophical or yogic descriptions of being in the presence of someone centered in the spiritual eye recognizes that the Holy Grail described here is not the jewel encrusted object sought by Indiana Jones.

Finally, to those who wonder if Lancelot really attained the spiritual state I attribute to him in my novel, I will say the Bishop's vision in Chapter 49 is a faithful interpretation of what Malory recorded over 500 years ago.

#### **5. Tell us about your research process.**

In addition to the books I mentioned earlier, I took several audio and video courses on the period and the subject matter. Then I began writing. I tried to be as accurate as possible in the details of everyday life. But you can only go so far reading things on the internet. After I had written several drafts I booked a trip to England and spent several weeks there.

#### **6. What was that like?**

It was extremely valuable. For example, I visited the ruins of a monastery founded in 678 which although about 130 years later than my story, was still it was close enough to my period. There I saw a reconstruction of the Abbot's kitchen (shown in the two photos below). I learned how its



architectural design supplied draft to the fireplaces and that women were employed even in all

male monasteries. This formed the basis for my description of Alura's workplace. Even though things have changed in the 1500 years since Arthur, just visiting sites of Arthurian legend and walking the land creates subtle impressions in the mind that come through later in the writing.

### **7. What challenges did you face in writing?**

I think the biggest challenge was the period. There is not a lot actually written during the Dark Ages in Britain. The Arthurian stories we are familiar with were all created 500 – 1000 years after the fact. Our concepts of knighthood and the Roundtable are colored by the views of knights of the Middle Ages.

Similarly, the buildings are gone. I visited every ruin that was associated with Arthur, but even in cases where there exists a ruined structure, it is actually something that was rebuilt over the original site a thousand years ago, or an archeological dig, or a newer recreation of an original building such as the Abbot's kitchen shown above.

Another factor was lifespans. In the Dark Ages the average life span was 29. Boys might be sent out of the home to work in an apprenticeship at age 6 or 7 and be a journeyman and married by age 14. Girls would be married at 12 and grandmothers by the time they were 26. None of this matches our reality so I had to age my characters inaccurately to make them plausible to the modern reader.

### **8. Lancelot's spiritual teachings seem to constitute the core of his dialogue, where does that come from?**

I think we are witness to this flowering of new age spirituality that has brought Christian mystics, Buddhist Lamas, Kabbalistic Rabbis, Swamis and Gurus into the mainstream. I attend lectures, seminars and retreats lead by many of these. I've had the good fortune to experience firsthand several individuals that I consider fully enlightened beings.

The novel postulates that the Holy Grail is not an object, but a portal to higher consciousness within us. Based on my interactions with beings who were in an enlightened state, I tried to imagine what Lancelot would want to say to bring Frith and Alura along, and how he would react to their successes or failures.

### **9. You seem to paint Lancelot as a saint. Was he?**

That's certainly the way my protagonists see him. I will say that the miracles I attribute to Lancelot can all be found in Malory. If we have not previously seen him that way it is because writers over the last 500 years have taken to omitting the spiritual aspects of Malory from their stories.

I think we also have to ask ourselves what we mean by saint. There have been enlightened beings who selflessly served the poor and enlightened beings who threw rocks as people to keep them away. I don't pretend to be in that state or to know why those who are enlightened manifest spirituality as they do. I do know that there are people whose spiritual energy can be tangibly felt, and some that I have met can cause it to flow in you just by their proximity.

According to Malory, Lancelot was a great knight who spent the later part of his career pursuing the Holy Grail and had at least three significant encounters with it. Is it plausible to believe that after losing everything and taking up a life of meditation and solitude, that he found it? I think so. The question for me was not did he attain spiritual powers, the question was what should he do with them?

Lancelot is not perfect. He has never taught this before. He is making it up as he goes and constantly questions whether his is being effective or too indulgent.

**10. One final question I'm sure everyone wants to know. Was King Arthur real?**

I think so. Perhaps not the King Arthur we imagine, but I think there is a credible case that there was a historical chieftain who convinced leaders of other clans to unite to defeat invading forces.

Recognize that early Britain is not merry old England, but rather more akin to hundreds of little fiefdoms, each with their own king or prince. Someone charismatic enough to bring these diverse men together might also have seen the wisdom of a round table where no one king could be said to be sitting at its head.

The Arthurian legends though are just that, legend not actual history. They were probably formed from an amalgam of oral histories and fireside tales from Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland.