The acclaimed fantasy quartet The Books of Pellinor has been steadily growing in popularity worldwide since the first volume was released in Australia in 2002. This discussion guide is created to extend the conversation for its enthusiastic readers and to pique the interest of new readers.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Maerad’s life is worse than anything you can imagine. She is a slave in Gilman’s Cot, an isolated mountain settlement where she has no friends or family. The other slaves think she is a witch, and the lord is a brutal tyrant who beats his wife. Maerad has repressed memories of her origins and has survived by using her wits and witchlike threats, all the while clinging to the fantasy of freedom.

Then Cadvan appears in the barn while Maerad is milking the cows. Should she risk leaving Gilman’s Cot with this mysterious stranger, only to be recaptured by Gilman’s hounds and violent soldiers? No one has ever escaped. Maerad is terrified.

As Maerad and Cadvan journey together, they face dangerous wers and other forces of the dark. Maerad’s eventual escape becomes a journey of awareness as she learns who she is, what her wild and untamed gifts are, and how to trust others. The author constructs a complex world in which evil seeks to absorb and destroy Light, but she does so in a fresh and invigorating way. Alison Croggon redefines the possibilities for both females and males in this liberated fantasy.


**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Describe the boundaries of Maerad’s world in Gilman’s Cot. Why do the other women fear and mistrust her? The author describes the men of Gilman’s Cot as sexual predators, and there seem to be few, if any, decent men in Maerad’s world. Why do you think the author set up a world in which the men are so debased and rape is the norm? How does Maerad discourage sexual confrontations?

2. Alison Croggon’s images of freedom are breathtaking because they capture the hopelessness of Maerad’s life. The author writes, “Freedom was a fantasy she gnawed obsessively in her few moments of leisure, like an old bone with just a trace of meat, and like all illusions, it left her hungrier than before, only more keenly aware of how her soul starved within her, its wings wasting with the despair of disuse” (page 2). Find other powerful images that describe both Maerad’s bleak and hopeless existence and her faint hope of freedom.

3. After Cadvan’s invitation to leave Gilman’s Cot, Maerad “had thought hope was dead inside her, but now she realized that it merely slumbered, like ash-gray embers that held yet a glowing heart, which the merest breath might fan into flame” (page 13). Yet Maerad is afraid to leave. Why? Wouldn’t death be better than living in Gilman’s Cot? Who is this mysterious man who comes offering both escape and danger? What would you have done if you were Maerad?

4. Maerad’s escape to Innail is fraught with great danger. What is chasing Cadvan? Describe how Maerad first finds her gift. What is Cadvan’s reaction to Maerad’s wild and untamed powers, and why is he willing to rely on them? Describe your reaction to the mountain lion and his role as a guide.

5. Maerad doesn’t know what a bath is, but she learns to love baths more than anything else in this new world. What other luxuries does Maerad discover in Innail? Describe her relationship with Silvia. How does it fill the emotional holes that both of them have? Why does Maerad leave Innail, knowing that it is the one place she wants to be?

6. Maerad has a deep fear of all men. But it is clear that Dernhil is developing feelings for her. What is her reaction when Dernhil tries to kiss her? What are her feelings toward Dernhil, and why does she feel guilty about him long after she leaves Innail?

7. How are the Elemental Spirits different from humans? What does Maerad discover about her lineage? How does this change her? Is Maerad afraid of herself? Her powers? Her destiny? Are there things about yourself that scare you?

8. How has the Lady of Rachida managed to keep her kingdom hidden? What are the rules governing this society? Describe Lady Ardina’s affinity toward Maerad. Lady Ardina talks about chance in contrast to the workings of a deeper pattern. What is the tension between free will and fate for Maerad? How does this apply to your own life?
9. Why is Maerad so certain that she and Cadvan must go deeper into the Valverras Waste? What is her premonition, and why does Cadvan fight her? What clues does the author provide about Hem’s identity? What is a Hull? How have the Hulls almost destroyed Hem’s life?

10. Cadvan’s life has been shaped by choices he made as a young Bard. These choices have haunted him and have shaped his relationships with all other Bards, some of whom will never trust him. Yet Cadvan is a Truth-teller, which is considered a rare and perilous gift. True tongues, true hearts, and true deeds are valued highly by Bards. How can Cadvan be a Truth-teller given his past? Why are so many Bards still suspicious of Cadvan? How can one choice made in youth haunt one’s reputation for the rest of one’s life? Are there choices you have made that you wish you could take back?

11. What is it about Maerad that Nelac doesn’t trust? Why does he doubt her? What does he warn her about herself?

12. When Maerad walks into the hall to meet with the First Circle of Norloch, she has a flashback to when she was seven years old and the towers of Pellinor were burning. How did this vision of Milana change Maerad’s view of her mother? How did Maerad respond to the First Circle and Enkir?

13. The First Bard of Norloch, Enkir, is a stern and rigid man who serves the Light, yet his edicts are insidious and his nature malignant. He has forbidden women to be trained as Bards in Norloch. Not all Bards agree with his edicts, yet they obey him. How can honest Bards support laws that are socially unjust? How does something similar happen in countries today? Provide examples in which governments enforce unjust laws.

14. What does it mean to be a Bard in Annar? What are the ways of Knowing? How do the schools for Bards represent social justice and balance? Describe the roles of women.

15. Maerad’s decision to leave Gilman’s Cot was a life-changing event. Maerad had little time to debate her choice. Yet prophecies long ago foretold that One would emerge in the time of greatest need. How does Maerad’s choice contradict the prophecy that she eventually fulfills?

16. What is your reaction to the author’s introductory notes, describing the book as a translation from the Naraudh Lar-Chanë (Riddle of the Treesong) on the lost civilization of Edil-Amarandh? In the appendices there are additional notes, including a detailed bibliography of books the author allegedly used to study the history and complete the translation. How does this introduction shape your reading of the book? What do the appendices add to the power of the book?
THE RIDDLE
THE SECOND BOOK OF PELLINOR

ABOUT THE BOOK

Maerad is a girl with a tragic and bitter past, but her powers grow stronger by the day. Now she and her mentor, Cadvan, hunted by both the Light and the Dark, must unravel the Riddle of the Treesong before their fractured kingdom erupts in chaos.

The quest leads Maerad over terrifying seas and vast stretches of glacial wilderness, ever closer to the seductive Winterking—allies of her most powerful enemy, the Nameless One. Trapped in the Winterking’s icy realm, Maerad must confront what she has suspected all along: that she is the greatest riddle of all.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has Maerad changed from the slave girl who lived in Gilman’s Cot to the Bard who battles sea serpents and is on a search to find the Treesong?

2. What happened in Norloch? Where are Hem and Maerad going? What is the nature of their individual journeys? Why are Cadvan and Maerad suddenly considered outlaws? What have you learned about Enkir’s plans for the Bardic schools?

3. Describe daily life and customs in Thorold. Given Maerad’s isolation in Gilman’s Cot, how does she adapt to this convivial culture? How does her education continue? How realistic is it that an uneducated slave girl learns as fast as Maerad does? What is she learning? How does she use this knowledge?

4. Now that Maerad is deep into her journey to find the Tree of Life, what attachments has she made, and how are they important to her? She has had much help along the way. How have the advice and guidance of others affected Maerad’s quest?
5. Why does Maerad turn away from Cadvan when he shows tenderness toward her? What is she afraid of?

6. In the Annaran landscape, the author has established a complicated geography and a complex system of interconnected yet distinct cultures. How are they different from one another? Which cultures do you find appealing and why?

7. What event is the catalyst for the schism between Cadvan and Maerad? How does each of them respond to the event that causes the rupture between them? How does that single event shape their future journey?

8. The attack of the Winterking leaves Maerad groping for direction, knowing only that she must keep going north. How does the author shape Maerad’s journey through the people she meets? Is it believable that Maerad keeps finding threads that connect her to the quest she has undertaken? How do the maps help you as you journey with Maerad?

9. The northern landscape is severe. How have the Pilanel adapted to this harsh terrain? Despite the fact that Maerad’s father was Pilanel, Maerad is uncomfortable with these people. Why is that so? Why does she feel that her brother, Hem, would fit in much better than she does?

10. Describe Maerad’s relationship with her aunt. Why does her aunt send Dharin to the Laborek Isles knowing that there will be a great cost?

11. Describe Maerad’s close relationship with her cousin. What does she learn from Dharin?

12. Nim is Maerad’s captor, yet she protects him. How does that happen? Why is Maerad unwilling to place Nim at risk? Learn all you can about Stockholm syndrome and discuss whether Maerad is a victim of this syndrome.

13. Maerad has a tangle of feelings for Arkan. Explore her attraction to and repulsion for him. She lives in splendor but is able to see through the illusion. Describe the illusion in contrast to reality. What is Arkan’s attraction to Maerad? Why does he want her to stay with him?

14. Triple tongue has great meaning for Maerad and is her ultimate escape. What does this third identity of Maerad’s mean? How is she able to elude Arkan, and why does an Elemental Spirit help her?

15. Describe how you felt when the wolf rushed into the Pellinor ruins. Did you expect this ending? Explain.
ABOUT THE BOOK

Hem is a weary orphan whose struggle for survival ends when he is reunited with his lost sister, Maerad. But Maerad has a destiny to fulfill, and Hem is sent to the golden city of Turbansk, where he learns the ways of the Bards and befriends a mysterious white crow. When the forces of the Dark threaten, Hem flees with his protector, Saliman, and an orphan girl named Zelika to join the Light’s resistance. It is there that Hem has a vision and learns that he, too, has a part to play in Maerad’s quest to solve the Riddle of the Treesong.

This world of astounding beauty is overshadowed by a terrifying darkness, a world where Maerad and Hem must prepare to wage their final battle for the Light.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare Hem’s old life with his new life. Why is Hem so angry? He is no longer alone and is living in luxury. He is safe from the Hulls. Yet he attacks other Bards, breaks rules, and causes Saliman endless grief. Why does he do that? Why isn’t he happy with his newfound life? Describe Saliman’s deep attachment to Hem.

2. Maerad is four years older than Hem, and as a result their experiences are very different. How is Hem unlike his sister? What are his concerns? How does he cope with his fears? How are his abilities different? Why is his relationship with Maerad so important to him even though they barely know each other? Describe the connection they seem to share across the vast distance that separates them.
3. What is Irc like as a character, and how does the author keep his “birdness” authentic? Explain why Irc is incredibly important to Hem. How do they communicate? Describe how their relationship deepens as the story continues.

4. Zelika wants revenge. She desperately wants to destroy those who killed her family. How does that shape her character? She comes from a noble background and is reduced to being an urchin. Describe her relationship with Hem. Can a child like Zelika ever be whole?

5. Why does Saliman allow Hem and Zelika to remain in Turbansk? What is Hem’s new mission in the besieged city? What does Hem fear? Would you have chosen to remain in the city?

6. The author goes into great detail about the horrors of war. Why do you think she does that? What are your reactions to the descriptions of violence? How does Hem cope with his own fears? How do Hem and Zelika escape the attack? What are the dogsoldiers?

7. Why does Hem dislike and distrust Hared? How long does Hem stay in the underground city, and what effect does it have on him? Why does Hared change his mind about Hem and Zelika? What is their mission? What are your feelings toward Hared?

8. Why is Hem willing to risk his own life trying to find Zelika? What are his feelings toward her? Would you have risked your life as Hem did?

9. Describe the child armies and the training camp. What do you know about the child armies in certain African countries, such as Sierra Leone, Burundi, Algeria, Sudan, or Liberia? According to one rebel commander in the Democratic Republic of Congo, “[Children] make good fighters because they’re young and want to show off. They think it’s all a game, so they’re fearless. [www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/chisold.htm]. Learn more about child armies in existence today. How is the book’s description similar to real camps where children are kidnapped and forced to become sex slaves or soldiers? If children are drugged and physically abused, can they be held responsible for the violent acts that they commit? Do you think a child can ever recover from such an experience?

10. Hem is surrounded by evil. He was kidnapped as a baby and has known violence. How do you think he can be such a good person? How can he remain a child of the Light? Is he a realistic character? Explain your answer.

11. What does Hem learn in Dén Raven? How does he escape? How is his reunion with Saliman bittersweet? What happened to Zelika?

12. Describe the fight between Sharma and Iman. Why are they fighting? What does Irc find, and how does he escape?

13. What are Hem’s gifts? What does Hem discover about himself by the end of the book? What do you think is important about the object Irc steals?

14. The Crow is a very dark and disturbing book in which the author takes a harsh look at the fate of children in the hands of evil beings. Why do you think Alison Croggon wrote a book showing the horrors of war in such detail?
THE SINGING
The Fourth Book of Pellinor

ABOUT THE BOOK
In a battle-ravaged land, Maerad, Cadvan, and Hem desperately search for one another as they make their separate journeys. The Black Army is advancing, and all of the Seven Kingdoms are threatened with devastating defeat. Yet in Maerad and Hem lives the secret to the mysterious Singing, and legend holds that if they release the music of Elidhu together, they have the power to defeat the Nameless One. Can brother and sister find each other in time—and are they strong enough, even reunited—to defeat the supreme enemy before all is lost?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Cadvan is sometimes afraid of Maerad? What has she done that makes him afraid? Why is Maerad also afraid of Cadvan at times? What is that all about? How has their relationship changed since they first met? Do you think that Maerad and Cadvan are in love? If so, why do they fear those strong emotions, and why do they hide them?

2. What is Maerad’s quest? What is she seeking, and what does she hope to do? Explore the three distinct parts of her heritage and how they shape her character. How does that knowledge change her? How is her lyre important in her quest? What is the Treesong, and how was it captured?

3. After Maerad protects herself from a confrontation with a Bard from Lirigon, Cadvan says that justice will have to be served. What does he mean by that? Was Maerad justified in her actions? Have your feelings toward Maerad changed?

4. Describe the chaos of what happens in Annar once Enkir is in control.

5. Maerad almost loses herself to the wolf form. There is freedom in being a wolf that humans don’t experience. Imagine what that freedom might involve and why Maerad is increasingly reluctant to leave her wolf form. Describe what it would be like to run like a wolf.
6. Cadvan says, “It’s never a question of what others think. . . . The hard thing is always to forgive oneself” (page 51). Maerad replies that Cadvan is being selfish and vain, at which point he laughs and says that he will keep her as his conscience. Later Cadvan says, “It’s a question of the Balance. As always. I wish it were not the case that our faults are so often the other side of our virtues” (page 51). Explain the importance of this conversation.

7. When Maerad arrives in Innail, Malgorn is initially hostile and suspicious. Why does this wound Maerad so deeply? In contrast, describe her reunion with Silvia. Why is Silvia so accepting of Maerad? What is the basis of their deep and enduring bond?

8. Why do you think the Winterking calls out to Maerad during the attack of the Landrost? Why does he laugh at her? Describe the brooding sense of the Landrost. How is it possible that Elednor beats the Landrost? When Maerad becomes as tiny as a pebble, the Landrost has no power to crush her. How can smallness make her stronger?

9. When Cadvan admits that he thought he had lost Maerad, her heart does a little leap. Why is she confused by hearing his words? Do you think Cadvan is jealous of the Winterking?

10. Compare the Hutmoors as they are now to the way they once were. Why have they vanished so completely? What was Afinil like before the Nameless One destroyed it? Why is it essential that Maerad and Hem meet in the Hutmoors?

11. Why does Arkan say: “I think all the same, my Fire Lily, that you have much to be afraid of. . . . You have many enemies, of course. The Nameless One is not unlike what you have become; perhaps you ought to think about that. But it seems to me that, most of all, you should be terrified of yourself” (page 165)?

12. What does Hem find so attractive about the players? Why do you think he is such an inept player? Describe Hekibel’s growing attraction to Saliman. Why is Hem suspicious of Karim?

13. There is power in a name. Why do you think Arundulan is Saliman’s Truename? How does Hem finally find his Truename? What does it mean? Hem and Saliman have a unique relationship. Each is willing to give his life to save the other. Describe their deepening relationship. When Saliman contracts the white sickness, Hem makes a great sacrifice for his friend. Is there any circumstance in which you would risk your life for someone you love?

14. The pull between Hem and Maerad is intense. Describe what happens between them as they both move toward the Hutmoors and meet for the first time in more than a year. What did you anticipate would happen once they gave back the Treesong?

15. After Hekibel talks to Maerad about Cadvan, why do you think Maerad becomes paralyzed with shyness?

16. What role does Irc play in the story? What heroic deeds has he done to earn his many titles for valor? Why is Irc such an important device in the story? Why does the author insert humor into such an intense story of death and destruction?

17. Maerad has never seen an army before, and the advancing Black Army shocks her and fills her with dread. How does Maerad begin to change? What worries Cadvan, and why does he continue to trust her so completely?
18. What happens when the Hulls advance on the camp? How do the others respond to Maerad’s power?

19. The dead of Afinil play a powerful role as this story comes to its conclusion. Why are they so important, and how does the author reveal their suffering? What is it they seek?

20. Describe the final confrontation between Maerad and Sharma. What does the Nameless One offer Maerad, and how does she respond? How do thoughts of her parents and her brother shape her response? How does Maerad use her extraordinary gifts to save the world from the Dark? Does she have control over her powers? What finally succeeds in breaking evil? How does Maerad almost lose herself?

21. What is the Singing? Describe how the Elidhu claim their song.

22. The author believes in strong relationships between people. You could almost say that the Books of Pellinor are about the way strong connections between people reshape the world and destroy the disconnection represented by the Nameless One. In the epilogue and appendices, Alison Croggon writes intensively personal narratives about how characters connect with one another as friends, mentors, family, and lovers. She provides details about the reunion and future lives of the characters. What happens to Hem? Saliman? Hekibel? Irc? Maerad? Cadvan? Silvia? Nelac?

ABOUT ALISON CROGGON

When Alison Croggon was ten years old, she was so inspired by Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* that it became her great ambition to write a fantasy novel. But by the time she was an adult, she felt that that sort of writing was childish and became a journalist instead. After working for years at the *Melbourne Herald*, Croggon decided that what she *really* wanted to do was write poetry, so she resigned from the newspaper and did just that.

It was not until her oldest son began to read *The Lord of the Rings* that the author remembered her earlier passion. After rereading the book, she says, “Something started stirring in a forgotten part of me.” First the character Maerad appeared to her. Then Maerad met Cadvan. The author says that she had to write a book to find out what happened to these characters. “It’s very dangerous to write a sentence,” she says. “You never know where it will lead you.”

A well-known poet, Croggon has written works for theater and also edits *Masthead Ezine*, a literary arts publication. In 2009 she won the Pascall Prize for Critical Writing. All her talents combine in the lyrical quality of her writing in the Books of Pellinor. These books, she says, “are about things that I think matter—what it means to grow up and find out who you are, what it means to be part of a society, to love, to hate, to encounter difference. Most of all, I think they’re about the struggle to be humane in a world that is too often inhumane. And I hope that if those things matters to me, they might matter to others too.”

Though Croggon’s fans may wish otherwise, the author says that for now her world of Pellinor is complete. “I’m so glad that I can get on with the rest of my life without feeling haunted by these voices that have been living in the back of my head for seven years,” she says. “Until the next time it happens, of course.”

Alison Croggon lives in Australia.