

Discussion Questions

***Sistersong* by Lucy Holland**

1. One of the greatest themes of this novel is the intersection between colonialism and patriarchy. Lucy Holland contrasts the problems the siblings face with the culture of the Scythians, a group of tribes with a liberal approach to gender. Do you think the patriarchal structure of the Dumnonii tribe is entirely due to the influence of Roman Christianity, and Gildas?

2. *Sistersong* is a very modern retelling of an ancient folk ballad, *The Twa Sisters*. Do you see this as a feminist retelling? Holland says she thought the historical setting would give the magical elements of the ballad greater impact. What do you think?

3. *Sistersong* is set in Ancient Britain, and focuses on the Dumnonii tribe. How much of the historical detail in this novel do you as being made-up?

4. *Sistersong* is a retelling/reimagining of the traditional murder ballad *The Twa Sisters*. Has anyone ever heard of or read Loreena McKennitt's *Bonny Swans* before reading the novel?

5. *Sistersong* is led by three wonderful siblings with distinct personalities, but Keyne's story is deeply significant. As a figure not usually within the original ballad and who later in the book is revealed to be based upon another Ancient British figure, Constantine. Holland claims she also needed a third perspective to lend a little objectivity, as she didn't trust either sister to give an honest account. Why is this? Was Keyne able to give us an objective account?

6. Holland saw Keyne in the margins of the original ballad and wanted to give him a voice. She also thought he had something very important to say about the gender stereotypes inherent in many traditional ballads; the stereotypes that lock his sisters into the same prescribed roles women have been forced to play for thousands of years. What was it that Keyne was able to say that they other couldn't and why?

7. Names are very symbolic. Holland says that Keyne and Riva's names have Cornish origins, although she can't back that up about the name Riva. Sinne was the only name she invented outright and I has no idea where it came from. What do you think is the significance of the names in your opinion? What do they mean?

8. As a historical fantasy novel, *Sistersong* is steeped with ancient lore. It includes stories like The Five Rivers of Lir and The Herlathing. What role do stories of the oral tradition play in the novel? What role do stories we tell play in our own lives?

9. *Sistersong* engages strongly with themes related to family, religion and lore. There is a struggle between the old beliefs and the new, which is often something that comes up in historical fantasy novels. Tension between the pagan traditions of tribal Britain and incoming Christianity was very real and lasted centuries. Holland felt a Pagan-inspired magic system would be the strongest way of channelling this conflict. The old magic needed a champion; so just as Christianity has Gildas, the Land has Myrdhin. Is new always bad? Is it always better to stick to the old ways?

10. Another significant figure in the novel is Tristan, who is an enigmatic and deeply alluring figure who fascinates two of the sisters. He is also based on a figure from history, Cynric. Holland says she wanted someone who could exude menace and charm in equal measure, someone who presented different faces to different people. How do you see this and what was the purpose? What changes Tristan or does he really change?