

# Booktopia

A Book Buyers' Paradise

## Reading Club Guide

### INTRODUCTION

In *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-1922), Sigrid Undset interweaves political, social, and religious history with the daily aspects of family life to create a colorful, richly detailed tapestry of Norway during the fourteenth-century. The trilogy, however, is more than a journey into the past. Undset's own life—her familiarity with Norse sagas and folklore and with a wide range of medieval literature, her experiences as a daughter, wife, and mother, and her deep religious faith—profoundly influenced her writing. Her grasp of the connections between past and present and of human nature itself, combined with the extraordinary quality of her writing, sets her works far above the genre of "historical novels." This new translation by Tiina Nunnally—the first English version since Charles Archer's translation in the 1920s—captures Undset's strengths as a stylist. Nunnally, an award-winning translator, retains the natural dialog and lyrical flow of the original Norwegian, with its echoes of Old Norse legends, while deftly avoiding the stilted language and false archaisms of Archer's translation. In addition, she restores key passages left out of that edition, including a sexually explicit love scene and several conversations among the characters that offer crucial insights into their feelings and motivation.

In depicting her country's vanished culture, Undset, like others in the Modernist era, rejected the romantic view of the past prevalent in mid-nineteenth century literature, music, and art—from Tennyson's fanciful retelling of the Arthurian legends, *Idylls of the King* to Wagner's musical interpretations of Germanic myths to the dreamy paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite artists. Her realistic, unvarnished approach, as A.H. Winsnes notes in his biography, *Sigrid Undset: A Study in Christian Realism*, has led many scholars to call her "The Zola of Middle Ages." Undset's ability to present a meticulously accurate historical portrait without sacrificing the poetry and narrative drive of masterful storytelling was particularly significant in her homeland. Granted independence in 1905 after five hundred years of foreign domination, Norway was eager to reclaim its national history and culture. *Kristin Lavransdatter* became a touchstone for Undset's contemporaries, and continues to be widely read by Norwegians today. In the more than 75 years since it was first published, it has also become a favorite throughout the world.

When *The Wreath* first appeared in English, the *New York Times* hailed it as "strong and dramatic, founded upon those emotions and impulses which belong not to any especial time or country, but to all humanity." Against the background of a society ruled by centuries-old Norse traditions and the strictures of the Catholic Church (first established in Norway in tenth century), Undset tells the story of a headstrong young woman who defies the expectations of her much-beloved father, the lessons of her priest, and conventions of society when she is captivated by a charming and dangerously impetuous man. The courtship of Kristin Lavransdatter and Erlend Nikulaussøn is a far cry from the idealistic romances found in the historical novels of writers like Sir Walter Scott. Although she is betrothed to

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another man and is living in a convent, Kristin and Erlend manage to escape watchful eyes and give free rein to their love and their sexual impulses. When they are finally allowed to wed, they discover that the repercussions of their rebellious behavior are not easily put to rest.

In *The Wife*, Undset paints a vivid portrait of a marriage buffeted not only by private passions and recriminations, but by the forces of history. Kristin is determined to create a household and a family life that will mitigate the shame she brought upon herself and her parents. As Undset chronicles Kristin's days as the mistress of Erlend's ancestral estate and the mother of seven sons, she renders the details of everyday life with astounding precision—the eating and sleeping arrangements in both manor houses and humble peasant homes; the risks of childbirth and of raising children; and the social and religious activities that punctuate each week. Erlend's involvement in a plot against an unpopular king brings to life the political intrigues percolating in Scandinavia during the period and captures the strong sense of justice and personal freedom that set Norway apart from most other medieval cultures. The inner lives of the characters are illuminated with the same care—from the painful secrets Kristin's parents harbor to the destructive consequences of Kristin's pride and resentment and of Erlend's petulant refusal to accept his responsibilities.

*The Cross* finds Kristin returning with her husband and sons to her childhood home after Erlend's narrow escape from the law. Kristin quickly discovers that the community where she was once loved and respected as her father's daughter is not so willing to accept her and her family. The solicitous attention of her brother-in-law brings Kristin much-needed comfort, but even this relationship is fraught with unspoken tensions. Erlend and their sons, scorned as outsiders who arrogantly refuse to adapt to the customs of the region or its people, are bound to one another with an affection so strong that Kristin herself feels excluded. With the willfulness that is both her strength and her weakness, Kristin devotes herself to maintaining the farm and to instilling in her sons a sense of morality and purpose. *The Cross* unveils the complexities of maternal love, portraying with power and sensitivity the conflicts that arise as Kristin's children forge their own identities. It explores, too, the impact of Christianity on a world still emerging from paganism and, as the Black Plague devastates Europe, the significance of the Church's teachings to people seeking answers to mysteries of life and death, sin and redemption.

### ABOUT SIGRID UNDSET

Sigrid Undset (1882-1949) was born in Denmark, the eldest daughter of a Norwegian father and a Danish mother. Two years after her birth, the family moved to Oslo, where her father, a distinguished archaeologist, taught at the university. Her father's interest in the past had a tremendous influence on Undset. She was particularly entranced by the dramatic Old Norse sagas she read as a child, later declaring that her exposure to them marked "the most important turning point in my life."

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Undset's first published works—the novel *Mrs. Marta Oulie* (1907) and a short-story collection *The Happy Age* (1908)—were set in contemporary times and achieved both critical and popular success. With her reputation as a writer well-established, Undset had the freedom to explore the world that had first fired her imagination, and in *Gunnar's Daughter* (1909) she drew upon her knowledge of Norway's history and legends, including the *Icelandic Sagas*, to recreate medieval life with compelling immediacy. In 1912 Undset married the painter Anders Castus Svarstad and over the next ten years faced the formidable challenge of raising three stepchildren and her own three off-spring with little financial or emotional support from her husband. Eventually, she and her children moved from Oslo to Lillehammer, and her marriage was annulled in 1924, when Undset converted to Catholicism.

Although Undset wrote more modern novels, a collection of essays on feminism, as well as numerous book reviews and newspaper articles, her fascination with the Middle Ages never ebbed, and in 1920 she published *The Wreath*, the first volume of her most famous work, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The next two volumes quickly followed—*The Wife* in 1921, and *The Cross* in 1922. The trilogy earned Undset worldwide acclaim, and her second great medieval epic—the four-volume *The Master of Hestviken* (1925-1927) —confirmed her place as one of the twentieth century's greatest writers. In 1928, at the age of 46, she received the Nobel Prize for Literature, only the third woman to be so honored.

Undset went on to publish more novels—including the autobiographical *The Longest Years*—and several collections of essays during the 1930s. As the Germans advanced through Norway in 1940, Undset, an outspoken critic of Nazism, fled the country and eventually settled in Brooklyn, New York. She returned to her homeland in 1945, and two years later she was awarded Norway's highest honor for her "distinguished literary work and for service to her country." The years of exile, however, had taken a great toll on her, and she died of a stroke on June 10, 1949.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### The Wreath

1. *The Wreath* is set at a time of transition in Norway: Christianity, which had been introduced in the late tenth century, was spreading, but the older pagan forms of worship and belief lingered. How does Undset's description of Kristin's encounter with the elf maiden [p. 19]—and Lavrans' reaction to it—epitomize the collision of the old and new belief systems? What other examples are there of the family's inability to abandon age-old traditions and superstitions despite their devout Christianity? For instance, what is the significance of Fru Aashild's attempt to cure Ulvhild when the prayers of the parish priest fail to work the miracle Rangfrid longs for?

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2. Does Kristin acquiesce too readily to her father's selection of Simon as her future husband? Does she agree to the betrothal because she feels genuine affection for Simon or is she primarily motivated by her love and respect for her father? How does Kristin's relationship with Arne deepen your understanding of the social attitudes and assumptions she lives by? Why does Simon's sympathetic and compassionate reaction when her reputation is questioned increase Kristin's ambivalence toward him?
3. Discuss Undset's use of elements drawn from medieval ballads, chivalric legends, fairy tales, and other traditional stories in her depiction of Kristin and Erlend's meeting and courtship. What particular motifs do you recognize? What themes, events, or characters represent Christian beliefs? How do these "archetypal scripts" enrich the story for readers? In what ways do Undset's narrative style, her depiction of the natural world, and her language create further links to the past and its storytelling traditions?
4. Which one of Kristin's two suitors appeals to you more and why? How do their attitudes about Kristin—and about love and marriage—differ? In what ways are they similar? Are there contradictions between traditional standards of morality and those imposed by the Church? Does Erlend take advantage of Kristin's innocence and inexperience or does she share equal responsibility for initiating their love affair? To what extent does the very secrecy of their relationship strengthen the tie between Kristin and Erlend? Why does Lavrans finally to consent to the marriage? What impact do the pleas—as well as the suggestive comments—of Erlend's noble kinsmen [p. 250] have on his decision? Why does Kristin begin to have doubts after her betrothal to Erlend is announced?
5. Kristin, Aashild, and Eline all sacrifice their reputations and moral integrity when they give into their sexual longings. Were their transgressions justified in the light of subsequent events? Do their lovers suffer to the same extent from the condemnation of society and the pangs of conscience? Does Undset's depiction of the consequences of adultery reflect the moral conventions of the time or does it represent a more universal truth?

### The Wife

1. In talking about her heroine, Sigrid Undset said that Kristin's greatest sin was not indulging in sex before marriage, but the sin of pride, which fueled her defiance of the rules she had learned as a child. Does her marriage temper Kristin's tendency to insist on having her own

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- way? Is Erlend, too, guilty of the sin of pride? What do their reactions to Kristin's out-of-wedlock pregnancy indicate about their individual personalities and the likely course of their marriage?
2. What function does Gunnulf serve in the novel? Compare his relationship with Kristin to the ones she forms with Brother Edvin and with her parish priests, Sira Eirik and Sira Eiliv. Are Gunnulf's criticisms of Erlend based only on his religious beliefs or are they colored by childhood memories and his own inner conflicts? What do Undset's various portraits of the clergy reveal about religion and spirituality during the Middle Ages?
  3. Why does Erlend become involved in the plot to remove King Magnus and secure the throne for Prince Haakon? How does his nostalgia for Viking times, when social mobility was linked to the test of battle, affect his judgment and his actions? What does he hope to gain as an individual? In addition to clarifying the political climate in Scandinavia and the rest of northern Europe, does this fictional conspiracy and the political maneuvering it involves provide insights into other aspects of medieval culture and the ideas that shaped it? What light does it shed on the relations between the Church and the state and on the role of each in the lives of ordinary people? Does Undset's description of Norway during the Middle Ages differ from what you know about the period from other readings or history courses? If so, in what ways?
  4. How do Kristin and Erlend's feelings about one another change in the course of the book? Which partner do you think is more responsible for the deterioration of the marriage and why? What impact does the birth of their children have on each of them and their relationship as husband and wife? Do Kristin's faith—and her search for redemption—help or hinder her as a wife and mother? Is Lavrans' analysis of their marriage [p.236-7] valid or is it colored by his own experiences and beliefs?
  5. Discuss Kristin's self-recriminations [p. 334-6] after Erlend is arrested in light of your impressions of their marriage. Why does Simon come to Erlend's aid? Are his motivations purely unselfish? What do their conversations at the prison [p.381-2] and after Erlend's release [p.402] reveal about each man? Do you think that Erlend has gained a deeper understanding of himself by the end of the novel?

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### The Cross

1. When Kristin and her family move to Jørundgaard, why does she assume all responsibility for running the estate and stand by as Erlend "with chieftainlike calm and dignity lived on her father's manor like a guest?" [p. 26] Does Erlend's acceptance of their misfortune stem from a realistic understanding of the situation (based on the laws and conventions of the time) or is it a reflection of his childish approach to life? How do Kristin's memories of her father and her guilt about the way she treated him influence her feelings about and behavior towards Erlend?
2. The correlation between earthly love and divine love is an important theme in late medieval literature. Sex is viewed as an expression of love in God's name and procreation and maternal nurturing as a sacred obligation for women. Discuss the different ways this theme is woven into the story of Kristin and Erlend's marriage, considering both the positive and negative implications.
3. The first part of *The Cross* is entitled "Honor Among Kin." To what extent does Erlend's extreme sensitivity about his own honor and reputation contribute to his downfall? Is he foolishly naïve about the motivations and loyalty of others, as Simon suggests? [p. 99] Why is Simon devastated when he learns of his brothers' involvement in the plot against King Magnus? Does his jealousy of Erlend lead him to be too harsh on himself when he considers his behavior towards Kristin and her family? Which of the two men is truer to the medieval ideal of honor and nobility as it is presented in the novel? Which one more closely embodies your own definition of honor?
4. When Erlend eventually leaves the family, why does he make his home in Haugen, where one of the darkest incidents in his life occurred? Is Erlend's suggestion that Kristin join him realistic? Is Kristin's refusal motivated only by concern for her children? What other factors, both emotional and practical, influence her? Would it have been possible for Kristin to find spiritual peace with Erlend? What impact does the choices her sons make have on Kristin as she contemplates her own future? Is there a particular moment that marks Kristin's final understanding of the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds and her willingness to accept God's will wholeheartedly? What is the significance of her decision to donate her wedding ring for masses?

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5. *Kristin Lavransdatter* explores many issues that resonate today: women's sexuality; the balance of power between men and women; and the role of religious faith in everyday life. Would you characterize Undset's approach to these subjects as "liberal" or "conservative"? Is Kristin a feminist heroine, striving to balance her career as the hard-working mistress of Husaby and the Jørundgaard and her family obligations? Are the decisions she makes and the values by which she lives her life relevant to contemporary readers?