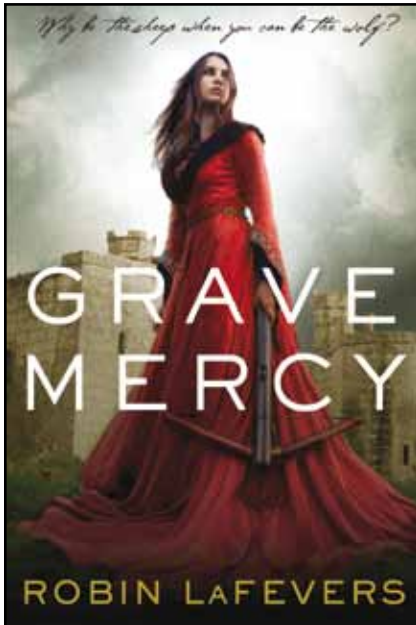


A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO
GRAVE MERCY *by* ROBIN LAFEVERS



Book Description

Escaping from the brutality of an arranged marriage, seventeen-year-old Ismae finds sanctuary at the convent of St. Mortain, where the sisters still serve the gods of old. Here she learns that the god of Death Himself has blessed her with dangerous gifts—and a violent destiny. If she chooses to stay at the convent, she will be trained as an assassin and serve as a handmaiden to Death. To claim her new life, she must be willing to take the lives of others.

Ismae's most important assignment takes her straight into the high court of Brittany, where she must pose as mistress to the darkly mysterious Gavriel Duval, who has fallen under a cloud of suspicion. Once there, she finds herself woefully underprepared—not only for the deadly games of love and intrigue, but for the impossible choices she must make. For how can she deliver Death's vengeance upon a target who, against her will, has stolen her heart?

Author Bio

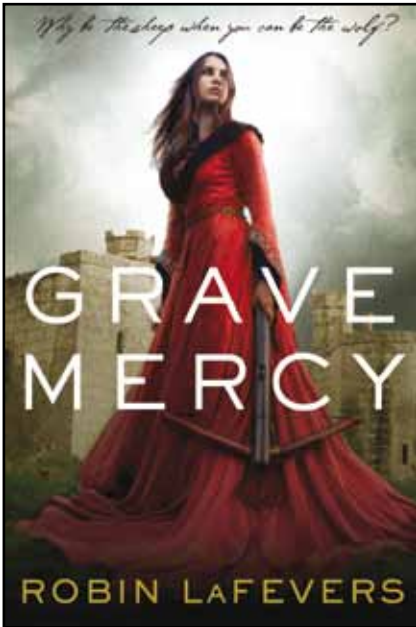
Robin LaFevers was raised on fairy tales, Bulfinch's mythology, and nineteenth-century poetry. It is not surprising that she grew up to be a hopeless romantic. She was lucky enough to find her one true love, and is living happily ever after with him in California.

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Discussion Questions

1. Is Ismae correct in feeling beholden to the convent for raising her up from the cellar floor? What does she truly owe the convent?
2. Duchess Anne, Madam Hivern, and Ismae all come from very different backgrounds and stations in life, yet all have similar constrictions placed on them by virtue of being female. How many more choices, if any, did Anne or Hivern's privilege afford them?
3. In what ways did the fathers in this book betray their children's well-being? In what ways did they support them?
4. In what way did Ismae's early life prepare her for what was to come? In what ways did it leave her more vulnerable?
5. What choices of Ismae's do you agree with? What would you have done differently?
6. In what way would Ismae's life have been different if she had chosen not to work for the convent? Do you think she made the correct choice? Would you have chosen differently?
7. In what way did the nuns' lives differ from those of the other women in the story? Did they have more freedom or less?
8. As Ismae sets out on her first assignment, she feels the training she received at the convent has given her power over her life. Is this true?
9. Do you think the convent is motivated solely by its desire to serve Mortain? What other factors might be at play?

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10. Does the reverend mother seem corrupt or merely single-minded in pursuing her goals?
11. Consider the relationships between men and women in the book, what avenues of power were open to men of that time? To women?
12. Did being a bastard make Duval any more sympathetic or understanding toward Ismae? In what ways?
13. The relationship between Ismae and Duval starts out uneasily. What were some of the preconceptions they had about each other, and what events in the novel either confirmed or disproved those preconceptions?
14. Ismae talks about the village girls falling in love at first sight, but that did not happen between her and Duval. Can you identify key moments in their relationship that moved them toward the love they eventually felt?
15. The herbwife tells Ismae that Mortain is a dark god, but not without mercy. In what ways can death be merciful?
16. Ismae kills a number of people in the course of this book. Since her hand was directed by her god, were these morally acceptable acts? What if she only *thought* her hand was directed by her god? What are the moral implications then?
17. Chancellor Crunard, Ismae, the abbess, and Madam Hivern all make some bad choices. If you truly believe you are doing something for the right reason but it turns out to be ultimately wrong, do your original good intentions matter?
18. There is a disagreement between the convent and Ismae over what the marquis of Mortain truly mean. Who do you think is right?
19. Why do you think the abbess grew so angry in the final scene between Ismae and the abbess?
20. Duval says that the time of kingdoms is drawing to a close; the world powers such as France are eating up countries “like a beggar at a banquet.” Are there any parallels to this in our own social or political environment?
21. The convent of St. Mortain is perfectly willing to use girls’ sexuality in order to achieve its goals. Are there parallels to this in today’s society? In either the religious sphere or in the broader societal sphere?
22. The book explores the concept of self-determination—that we have the ability to choose our own lives and paths—and contrasts that with the concept of predetermination—adhering to what we perceive has been chosen for us. Which do you believe? Can you think of any ways in which our lives might be predetermined?