



The Passion of Dolssa

by Julie Berry

(Young Adult) Set in 13th century Provence, Berry draws from meticulous historical research to offer the portrait of a young matchmaker and a condemned heretic who feels called by God to heal the sick. Love, faith, violence, and power intertwine as the teenage girls struggle to survive against insurmountable odds.

1. As you make your way through this novel, take some time to highlight quotes that speak about the nature of community, God, grace, the church, prayer, and mercy.
2. There is a theme of miracles throughout the novel. Make note of them as you go and discuss what they teach about the nature of God in this story. Do you think what is being communicated about God through these miracles aligns with scripture?
3. Julie Berry takes great care to describe the sea and food throughout the novel. Be on the lookout for these passages and consider what it might suggest about the importance of place and sustenance.
4. Friar Arnaut D'Avinhonet says, "I must write this account, and when I have finished, I will burn it." (Pg. 1) What is the point of writing something only to burn it? What might this teach us about the nature of hard work and storytelling? Does the work matter if no one else sees it?
5. When you first meet Dolssa, what strikes you about her? How does she speak to her mother? How does she speak about Jesus, her beloved? What is her attitude toward Friar Lucien?
6. What do you think of Botille's resourcefulness in her first match making endeavor? Compare this to the passage in Luke 16:1-13. What do you learn from this comparison?
7. After Dolssa's mother is burned and Dolssa fled, the inquisitors and church leaders eat a meal. How does its opulent description compare to the poverty of Botille and her family? How do the actions of the church and the hierarchy make you feel? Can you draw any comparisons from this to the church today?
8. "Oh, no," Bishop Raimon said. "An execution is never wasted." He chuckled. "Attendance at mass soars after a burning." (Pg. 55) Why do you think this is the case?
9. Dolssa has a lapse of the tongue and says to the woman who sheltered her briefly and gave her food, "And what use have I for pity from a sinful woman like you?" (Pg. 74) She says her beloved will not be pleased with her. What role does repentance have in Dolssa's relationship with God? What role does it have in your life?
10. "Help had not come from my beloved, but from the vilest of sinners. Friendless and alone as I was, hunted by the Church I'd once called home, the wicked might now be my only safety." (Pg. 76) Jacotina does in fact save Dolssa by lying in her testimony to Lucien. Was it a sin for her to lie in order to protect Dolssa?

11. The scene when Botille finds Dolssa and shelters her is reminiscent of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. What do you make of this comparison in light of Dolssa's quote in the previous question?
12. How does Dolssa's demeanor change from her first encounter with Lucien and her conversation with her mother at the beginning of the novel? How is her character developing as she is on the run and assisted by those of lower status than herself?
13. Later, while visiting Sant Martins Botille says, "We, her daughters, weren't very holy, heaven knew, but that didn't mean we held no reverence for holiness. We were Christians, like anyone. With a savage like Jobau to care for, and our livings to make, piety was a luxury." Do you believe that piety is a luxury? If not, why? Can you see Botille's perspective based on her circumstances?
14. "What they don't understand, they destroy. And they believe they please our blessed Savior by doing so." (Pg. 147) Dominus Bernard makes this statement about the church powers in Rome when Botille asks him about the inquisitors. Are there ways that we, the church, or we, citizens of this country, do this same thing today? How?
15. "And so, Bajas, all of us, we drifted to the de Prato home. The late September winds blew through our clothes, but we didn't feel them. We wandered in, and we wandered out. We listened to the low songs and prayers Dominus Bernard murmured for Joan de Prato's benefit. We listened, because the hollow-faced widower could not. His thoughts were somewhere else." (Pg. 176) What a beautiful picture of community. Has there been a sorrowful time when your community gathered around you to provide comfort and witness? Has there been a time when you've provided this for someone else?
16. "There it was – the gleam of ordinary humanity, the window through which I could pity her." (Pg. 186) Think about a time when you have seen a glimmer of someone's humanity that you didn't see before. How did that glimmer move you?
17. Reflect on the scene when Dolssa performs a miracle. (Pg. 192-196) What does it teach you of grief and desperation? What does it say about the nature of God?
18. After the miracle Botille reflects and wonders why, "I, who peddled in ale, and wine, and brides – how could – why would – such holiness cross paths with me?" (Pg. 197) What would be your response to Botille if she asked this question to you?
19. Consider the comparison of Dolssa to a bird. Why do you think the author uses this extended metaphor throughout the novel?
20. On page 253 we get to hear Dolssa's perspective on the miracle at the home of Garcia and young Garcia. Can you relate to her journey in her relationship with God?
21. The night Lucien comes to Bajas we learn that Dolssa, "looked into my beloved's eyes and saw his tears. Tears for me. Tears for Mama. Tears – how could I bear it? – for Lucien de Saint-Honore." (Pg. 279) How does it make you feel that Jesus wept for Lucien? Could you weep for him? Keep this question and that feeling in mind as you continue reading.
22. "A serving wench, and a comely one at that, appear with a tray of cups of wine." (Pg. 357) Did it jar you to see Botille described in this way? What did you think of Bishop Raimon's blessing on the sisters after he learned that they saved Lucien?
23. At the climax of the novel – beside the pyre – many side characters step forward and play key roles in moving the action forward. Botille recaps their roles on page 401. Discuss what it means to be a part of community, where everyone may choose to speak and act however they wish.
24. Just as it did the night Botille rescued and sheltered Dolssa a small, internal voice leads Botille throughout her life. Sometimes she attributes it to Dolssa, sometimes to Dieu (God). Another name we might give the voice is that of the Holy Spirit. Have you ever had an experience where the Holy Spirit led you in this way? If not, how have you experienced the work of the Holy Spirit?
25. In Botille's new life she says she has "become" the people she lost. How have people in your life become part of who you are – for better or worse?
26. Reflect on the whole of the novel. What are the different ways love is lived throughout the story?
27. What do you think of the opening quotes from Julian of Norwich and T.S. Elliot in light of the rest of the novel?

28. Did you know much about the inquisition or crusades prior to reading this book? As the church today, how do you think we should wrestle with this part of our history?

29. On page 460 in the author's historical note Julie Berry makes the statement, "Humans have the greatest capacity for evil not when they act alone but in committees, bureaucracies, and boardrooms, carrying out agendas they can justify as their painful duty for the greater good." Do you agree with this assessment? Consider the structures within which the powerful operate today, how might Berry's comment apply in your own context?

30. Berry goes on to say on page 462 that, "The best way to squash an inconvenient idea is not to combat it but to quietly burn its records, discredit and suppress its voices, and deny their existence. Where denial is impossible, fabricating a new story about them and their origins will work just as well." History is written by the victors, the powerful. Berry takes the time to immerse herself in the stories that some wished to silence. Are there ways that you could incorporate a similar practice of discovery of a diversity of stories into your life?

For more opportunities to discuss this work please see the "Questions for Discussion" section at the back of the book.

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NEXT MONTH



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by Laura Schroff

This feel-good story chronicles the lifelong friendship between a busy sales executive and a disadvantaged young boy, and how both of their lives were changed by what began as one small gesture of kindness.