

Book Clubs / Reading Groups

Introduction

*This supplemental guide for **Lancelot's Disciple** includes an introductory synopsis, discussion questions for your book club, and a Q&A with the author. We hope that these materials will enrich your book club or reading group and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introductory Synopsis

Lancelot's Grail told the story of Alura and Frith, two siblings raised in an abbey, who discovered Sir Lancelot living as a hermit, uncovered his knowledge of the Holy Grail, and became his students. Using physical examples, mental visualizations and Socratic questions, Lancelot taught them to perceive a separation of the observer from the observed. Eventually he initiated them as disciples using his *energia*, or life force.

Lancelot's Disciple, set two years later, continues their story. Alura has been transformed by Lancelot's spiritual mantle and Frith is left wondering why the same enlightenment did not come to him. But charged by Lancelot to watch over his sister, he is resigned to remain at the abbey. That is until Jacob, a Jewish merchant is sent by their father to take Frith on a journey along the ancient Silk Road.

Frith who had long chafed at the confines of abbey life and dreamed of adventures with knights, is suddenly reluctant to leave. He uses Lancelot's injunction to protect Alura as an excuse, but she urges him to leave with Jacob.

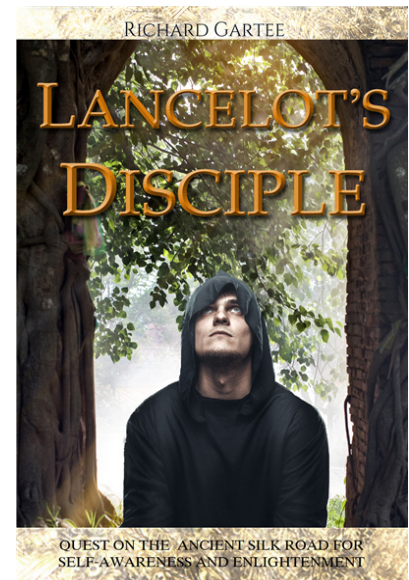
Soon, Frith finds himself on a ship bound for Italy, Egypt, and then the Mediterranean city of Tyre. After selling their goods in Tyre, Jacob organizes a camel caravan to cross the desert to Merv, where he hopes to purchase silk at lower prices.

With four knights and four Bedouins for protection, Jacob's caravan travels through lands that today are the countries of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Dissatisfied with the price of silk in Merv, Jacob takes the caravan onto Samarkand, the Central Asian capital of the silk trade. There they meet the Sultan, a wealthy collector of Oriental holy men.

Frith is invited to study at the Sultan's newly formed mystery school, where he is tutored by a Taoist, a Buddhist, and a Hindu Swami. Overwhelmed by metaphysical experiences he receives from them, Frith becomes nearly catatonic during the journey home, causing Jacob to consider revealing hidden Jewish mysticism to set Frith right.

Once back in Britain, Frith must sort out his confusion, attain the Holy Grail, and reconnect with his saintly sister waiting at the abbey.



Maps depicting Frith's journey with Jacob and his men



Note: on the return portion of the caravan trip Jacob takes a more southerly route to avoid a war that has broken out between the Romans and the Sassanians in Northern Syria.

Historical background behind both novels

The period we call the Dark Ages began in darkness, literally.

A volcanic eruption in 538 CE caused the sun to dim world wide. In Britain crops failed and superstitions arose. In the dark years Camelot fell, King Arthur died and the Knights of the Roundtable dispersed.

Virtually everything written about the times of King Arthur has been derived by more recent writers from *Le Morte de Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. Several significant events named in *Le Morte de Arthur* are factors in Lancelot's Grail.

After the fall of Camelot, Guinevere enters a nunnery at Almsbury. When visited by Lancelot, she commands him to leave, and become a hermit-monk. From Malory's description of spiritual phenomena manifested by Lancelot during this period and a mystical vision of Lancelot's death witnessed by the Bishop it can be inferred that during his hermitage Lancelot found his Holy Grail and through its experience attained a saintly state.

Malory also tells us that many people blamed the fall of Camelot on Lancelot's affair with Guinevere. Abandoned by his once adoring public, the hermit Lancelot is feared by the young and the superstitious as a harbinger of misfortune.

Sir Bedivere, one of the original Knights of the Round Table, and the knight King Arthur entrusted to return his sword to the Lady of the Lake after his death, also figures in both novels. Malory states that upon Lancelot's death, Bedivere decides to follow Lancelot's example and take up a monks life. Also, that Bedivere later became Bishop.

A Conversation with the Author

1. Please tell us how you came to write *Lancelot's Grail*?

I was watching a PBS show about climate change that described a volcanic eruption in 538 CE so massive that it blotted out the sun worldwide for two years and precipitated the collapse of empires and kingdoms across five continents. King Arthur's Camelot was one of the examples the show used.

Later that same week-end, I came across another item: that after Camelot fell Sir Lancelot had left the knighthood to become a holy man / hermit. Although Lancelot's fate was well documented in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte de Arthur*, I had not been aware of it.

In a flash of inspiration the two ideas coalesced. Here was a man, who in his time was as famous as any pro-athlete of today, caught in a scandal that collapsed a government. And here was the very beginning of the Dark Ages, literally. An agrarian culture, steeped in superstition, suffering the fearful loss of the sun and crops would surely seek blame. Whatever advances in civilization Arthur's utopian Camelot had brought to Britain were gone and it was not difficult to imagine that the two losses would be seen as a curse.

The entire story unfolded in my mind in one sitting – at least the bare bones of it. I knew Lancelot would be an enlightened being living in isolation, uncertain of his obligation to share what he had found. Frith, desperate to change his situation, would seek him out. Alura, panicked at being an old maid, would complicate Lancelot's life by pursuing him. Other plot details were there as well, but I won't reveal them here so as not to spoil the ending.

2. What did you do then?

I began researching Lancelot to see why I had been ignorant about his life after Camelot and what else there was to know about his story. I quickly learned two things. Earlier works, particularly Malory, had a strong spiritual quest that has been downplayed for the last two hundred years. Why was I ignorant of what became of Lancelot? Because I had never read *Le Morte de Arthur*.

Second, to find Lancelot you have to follow Arthur. After all, Arthurian lore is, well, Arthurian. I started as far back as I could, which was with the *History of British Kings* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the poems of Chrétien de Troyes, and the aforementioned *Le Morte de Arthur*. In addition to following Arthur, I also followed Percival, for the stories of Lancelot and Percival are very intertwined.

I found that modern writers, even as far back as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* were essentially reshaping the stories of Malory. In the end I relied principally on Malory as my predecessors had, but unlike them, I retained his characters' quest for spiritual achievement.

3. What do you mean by spiritual?

To me this was really the driving force in the knights' lives once the Grail appeared at Arthur's court.

Movies and modern interpretations of the story have focused on love and war, leaving us ignorant of Malory's major theme.

I think the last 50 years have brought about a “new age” of interest in Eastern and Western spiritual philosophy. Accessibility to mystical knowledge of other cultures helps us see today things others may have passed by.

4. Can you give some examples?

The case of the Catholic Sister Therese Neumann (1898-1962) who from 1922 until her death in 1962 ate only a daily communion Host is a direct correspondence to Percival's Fisher King who also abstained from food except the communion Host. According to Malory, Lancelot also lived without eating the last months of his life.

Another example, I noticed how closely descriptions of the Holy Grail paralleled the observations of new age sojourners experiencing the higher chakras: "In a ray of light appeared the Grail, hovering. It was veiled, but every knight, damsel, king and queen in the room felt its wonder. Without even touching it, each person was elevated by its presence, according to their own nature." Anyone who has read theosophical or yogic descriptions of being in the presence of someone centered in the spiritual eye recognizes that the Holy Grail described here is not the jewel encrusted object sought by Indiana Jones.

Finally, to those who wonder if Lancelot really attained the spiritual state I attribute to him in my novel, I will say the Bishop's vision in Chapter 49 is a faithful interpretation of what Malory recorded over 500 years ago.

5. Tell us about your research process.

In addition to the books I mentioned earlier, I took several audio and video courses on the period and the subject matter. Then I began writing. I tried to be as accurate as possible in the details of everyday life. But you can only go so far reading things on the internet. After I had written several drafts I booked a trip to England and spent several weeks there.

6. What was that like?

It was extremely valuable. For example, I visited the ruins of a monastery founded in 678 which although about 130 years later than my story, was still it was close enough to my period. There I saw a reconstruction of the Abbot's kitchen (shown below left). I learned how its



architectural design supplied draft to the fireplaces and that women were employed even in all male monasteries. This formed the basis for my description of Alura's workplace. Even though things have changed in the 1500 years since Arthur, just visiting sites of Arthurian legend and walking the land creates subtle impressions in the mind that come through later in the writing.

The photo on the right is the stone base of an ancient cider press. I set the scene for Chapter 43 at such a press.

7. What challenges did you face in writing?

I think the biggest challenge was the period. There is not a lot actually written during the Dark Ages in Britain. The Arthurian stories we are familiar with were all created 500 – 1000 years after the fact. Our concepts of knighthood and the Roundtable are colored by the views of knights of the Middle Ages.

Similarly, the buildings are gone. I visited every ruin that was associated with Arthur, but even in cases where there exists a ruined structure, it is actually something that was rebuilt over the original site a thousand years ago, or an archeological dig, or a newer recreation of an original building such as the Abbot's kitchen shown above.

Another factor was lifespans. In the Dark Ages the average life span was 29. Boys might be sent out of the home to work in an apprenticeship at age 6 or 7 and be a journeyman and married by age 14. Girls would be married at 12 and grandmothers by the time they were 26. None of this matches our reality so I had to age my characters inaccurately to make them plausible to the modern reader.

8. Lancelot's spiritual teachings seem to constitute the core of his dialogue, where does that come from?

I think we are witness to this flowering of new age spirituality that has brought Christian mystics, Buddhist Lamas, Kabbalistic Rabbis, Swamis and Gurus into the mainstream. I attend lectures, seminars and retreats lead by many of these. I've had the good fortune to experience firsthand several individuals that I consider fully enlightened beings.

The novel postulates that the Holy Grail is not an object, but a portal to higher consciousness within us. Based on my interactions with beings who were in an enlightened state, I tried to imagine what Lancelot would want to say to bring Frith and Alura along, and how he would react to their successes or failures.

9. So onto Lancelot's Disciple...

Yes, one of the real challenges in writing Lancelot's Grail was yogic terms that explain higher states of consciousness which have become part of the modern vernacular and are well understood by many readers wouldn't have been known or used by Lancelot and other characters in 550 AD Britain. To explore these topics further, I needed to move the story outside the confines of Britain to somewhere people did use such terms.

10. And that was Samarkand?

Not necessarily, but the Silk Road conveyed much more than Silk, and Samarkand was the capital of the Central Asian portion of the route. The caravans and merchants spread new ideas and religions as they went. In fact it is how Buddhism spread from India to China and many other philosophies throughout the Mideast.

The fact that a Sultan in the center of the trade route is hosting accomplished men from several schools of enlightenment, provides a center for the characters to meet. But even today, you will see a documentary or news clip in which the Dali Lama is meeting with yogis and Christians.

11. In Lancelot's Disciple you portray Alura as very saintly.

Well, that, I hope is the natural outcome of spiritual evolution. As Buddhism clearly emphasizes in the later chapters, the real purpose of attaining enlightenment, is to lift up others. Since, the first book ended with Alura being consecrated by Lancelot's spiritual mantle, it seemed fitting to show her having settled into the Seat of Self. In her case, it manifests with gentleness and humility.

I don't pretend to be in that state or to know why those who are enlightened manifest spirituality as they do. I do know that there are people whose spiritual energy can be tangibly felt, and some that I have met can cause it to flow in you just by their proximity.

12. One final question I'm sure everyone wants to know. Was King Arthur real?

I think so. Perhaps not the King Arthur we imagine, but I think there is a credible case that there was a historical chieftain who convinced leaders of other clans to unite to defeat invading forces.

Recognize that early Britain is not merry old England, but rather more akin to hundreds of little fiefdoms, each with their own king or prince. Someone charismatic enough to bring these diverse men together might also have seen the wisdom of a round table where no one king could be said to be sitting at its head.

The Arthurian legends though are just that, legend not actual history. They were probably formed from an amalgam of oral histories and fireside tales from Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland.

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