

INTRODUCTION

A tenth book is a landmark for any author, and Guy Gavriel Kay has marked this achievement with a complex and compelling blend of contemporary fantasy and magical realism set in Provence.

An acknowledged master of epic fantasy, Guy Gavriel Kay is known for taking memorable historical periods and cultures and recasting them as fantasy settings. In *Ysabel*, he shifts that focus to create a powerful story in which the past and present of our real world mingle to create a captivating, magical tale encompassing both. As a photographer frames his shot, Kay offers a fascinating new perspective on the landscape immortalized by Cezanne and Van Gogh through a multilayered story that stretches from roots in Celtic legend, through Greek and Roman conquests, to a modern family's struggle to come to terms with its own history.

Ned Marriner is spending six weeks with his father in France, where the celebrated photographer is shooting Saint-Sauveur Cathedral in Aix-en-Provence as part of a book project. Both father and son fear Ned's mother—a physician with Doctors Without Borders, currently assigned to the civil war-torn country of Sudan. This is not the first time she's placed herself in harm's way to help alleviate suffering, and Ned has inherited her courage—he'll need it.

While exploring the cathedral, Ned meets Kate Wenger, an American exchange student with a deep knowledge of the area's history. But even Kate is at a loss when she and Ned surprise a knife-wielding, scar-faced stranger. "I think you ought to go now," he tells them. "You have blundered into a corner of a very old story..."

In this ancient place, where the borders between the living and the long-dead are thin, Ned and his family are about to be drawn into a haunted tale, as mythic figures from conflicts of long ago erupt into the present, changing—and claiming—lives.

ABOUT GUY GAVRIEL KAY

Guy Gavriel Kay's bestselling work has been translated into more than twenty languages and earned accolades ranging from the prestigious International Goliardos Award for contributions to the literature of the fantastic and two Aurora Awards for English language work of speculative fiction, to three World Fantasy Award nominations. He is the author of nine previous novels, including *The Fionavar Tapestry* and his most recent novel, *The Last Light of the Sun*, and a volume of poetry, *Beyond This Dark House*. Guy Gavriel Kay lives in Toronto. He has appeared on bestseller lists around the world, spending five weeks at #1 in Canada with *Ysabel*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In many cultures, authors use the "fantastic" in a variety of ways to make important points—for instance, political works from Iron Curtain countries, and 'magical realism'

from Latin America. In *Ysabel*, do you sense that the author is drawing upon elements of myth and history to make observations about the present and past? What do you think these points might be?

2. The book is about abrupt changes, filled with observations like Ned's, early in the book, that "an hour ago the world had been a different place." Is it the world that's changing, or is Ned's perspective changing? How does that compare to the way photography works—capturing what an abrupt flash of light reveals? What about slow changes, as well—changes that can't be reversed over time, or changes in the men Ned encounters?

3. Provence itself is a study in contrasts—fertile valleys, lush countryside, stark mountains, modern cities and ancient ruins all existing side by side. It has also domesticated agriculture (olives, grapes, almonds), art, music and literature, and has been the site of some of the bloodiest battles of recorded history. How do you think each of these varied elements adds to the emotional and dramatic impact of the story in *Ysabel*?

4. Contrasts between the modern and ancient are also common—ancient mosaics versus Cezanne paintings, or Ned's dad's photography versus Ned's vivid visions of the past at various historical sites. What are some other good examples that add texture and emotional resonance to this book? Do you think these contrasts help make the fantastic elements of the story more believable, or less so? Why?

5. In the opening chapter, Ned describes Saint-Sauveur Cathedral as a mess, "built in a dozen stages over too many centuries by too many people who didn't care what had been done before they arrived." Do you agree that it's a mess, or do you see it as an example of each generation striving to find its own way to glorify God? Why do you think monuments for the dead and monuments to God are those that are most often built to stand through time? Do you see art as another kind of monument?

6. Ned visits many historic sites in the course of the book—sites of pivotal historical events from different periods. In what ways does his growing understanding of the many layers of history that shaped this region help him to understand his own role in the events that are unfolding now as he hunts for Ysabel?

7. When Ned meets the bald man at the café, it becomes apparent to both of them that Ned has a role in the story he's beginning to glimpse—and that his role could be dangerous. The man comments on the fact that "we invite our fate." Which characters invite their fate? Which are swept along by events? How much of what happens to us in our own lives is determined by fate, and how much is (or can be) influenced by our own choices in the face of what we encounter? For example, when Melanie came to help Ned at Entremont, was that chance, or evidence of some cosmic plan?

8. Ned's dad is a photographer. He sees the world differently—seeks unique angles and light to reveal things others don't see. As Ned becomes aware of his inner senses, he

also begins to see things others don't see. In what ways do you think that this similarity between Ned and his Dad helps to bring them closer together?

9. A photographer often uses the camera as a buffer between himself/herself and reality—to become an observer rather than a participant. How does that compare with Ned's new awareness of layers of reality he'd never suspected were there before? Does realizing he sees things differently increase his feeling of isolation? Do your own talents or interests encourage you to participate in events, or to be a spectator?

10. In many cultures, darkness equals mystery or death and light equals knowledge or life. What do you think is the significance of the darkness coming hours too soon at Entremont? Can you think of other scenes where the coming of darkness or dawn is used to illustrate times overlapping, and the way people from different cultures influence each other?

11. In the course of the story, several of the major characters remark on their own and each other's awareness of a pattern of events that most people aren't conscious of. In what ways do you think the characters' awareness of events carries with it responsibility to try to influence events? Do you think this sort of story encourages ordinary people in everyday life to take a more active role in the events that surround them?

12. What do you think of Cadell's statement about the consequences of Ysabel's actions that set everything in motion so long ago? He said, "She broke the world, that first time, giving him the cup." Do you agree that a single person's decision can break the world?

13. Though times and customs change, some things stay the same. Visiting the various historic sites in the area constantly illustrates clashes of cultures and places where one culture is overlaid on others, as Ysabel's personality overlays Melanie's. Are there some things that can't be changed or reclaimed, like the Celtic culture the druid is trying to recapture? What are some other examples of things that cannot (or can) be changed? Why do you think that it's always spring when Ysabel returns?

14. Sacrifice is a central theme in many cultures, and in many of Kay's previous books. What are some of the sacrifices that most influence this book? Would you identify Ned's mom's medical work in the Sudan, and her return from that work in order to help Ned, as sacrifices? Which do you see as the more important sacrifice at Entremont, the slaying of the bull, or the sacrifice the two men are making of their lives in the pursuit of Ysabel? What do you see as the difference between sacrificing a person or thing, and killing/destroying it?

15. Why do you think it's important that Melanie, not Kate, becomes the host for Ysabel? How does this affect the story? And how does it affect Ned and his motivations for involvement?

16. Throughout the story we see the concerns different characters have for each other. Melanie works hard to assure Ned and his Dad's comfort and satisfaction, and lay the groundwork for their successes. Ned and his dad worry about Meghan's safety in the war zone. Kim and her husband both abandon established patterns to help Ned through this crisis. Ned feels responsible for the danger his companions, particularly Kim and Melanie, face because he's become involved in the search for Ysabel. What do you see as the biggest difference between romantic love, and love for (and loyalty to) a friend or a family member?

17. As Ned becomes aware of his unusual perceptions he also becomes aware of elements from his own family history that had been hidden from him. Ned's Aunt Kim and Uncle Dave have powers and awareness of powers like his own. How do the long-hidden relationships in Ned's family affect him most? How do you think sharing dangers strengthens family bonds? Do you think the fact that Kim faced danger alone is a part of the reason for the breach between her and her sister that has lasted 25 years? Do you see any comparisons between the way danger to Ned brings Ned's mother and her sister together again after 25 years, and the way Ned himself is changed by the new responsibilities he assumes in the course of the story? How about the way in which characters (and the reader) simultaneously discover aspects of the long history *and* the family history?

18. The past is very close to the surface in Provence, from rowan leaves left over the windows and doors on Beltaine, to the archeological and historic relics that are such a part of the landscape. How do ancient religions—the powers of the druids, celebrations such as Beltaine, and the worship of ancient gods—influence the plot of this story?

19. Names have great significance in the story. In many cultures names are believed to have great power. Phelan and Cadell have each had other names in their earlier meetings through the ages, as has Ysabel. Prior to the summoning at Entremont, the two men are known only by descriptions such as “the man in the grey leather jacket” or the “golden one from the tower.” How much of the power of names is linked to knowledge—knowing who and what someone really is? Ned and his dad are both named Edward. Why do you think they choose to be known by different versions of the name they share?

20. As part of the ritual that sets the rules by which the men will compete for Ysabel this time, Ysabel gives them each a name. Phelan is the wolf, and Cadell the warrior. Ysabel gives them names and sets the rules of their contest, yet the two men eternally summon her through time as the prize they strive to win. Which do you think has the most power, and why?

21. Though their names change, Phelan and Cadell both claim they are the same men they've always been, though their actions in previous encounters have affected them. Ysabel alters more because each time she's summoned into another's body. Until Kate is almost drawn into this fight, and Melanie is overshadowed by Ysabel, Ned is simply an observer. How does his active involvement shift the balance of power between

Phelan and Cadell and Ysabel? Melanie is insignificant to Phelan and Cadell except as a vessel for Ysabel. Do you think Phelan and Cadell realize that while they are fighting for Ysabel, Ned is fighting for Melanie? Ned says that Melanie isn't his love, and that you don't have to be in love with someone to fight for them. Do you think you have to love someone in some way to be willing to fight for them?

22. It appears that in many earlier meetings, Phelan and Cadell have fought to the death to claim Ysabel. This time she forbids them from killing each other until after they find her, and sets them a test of love to see who is more worthy of her. Do you think Melanie had any influence upon Ysabel in this? Do you believe this opens the door for Ned, who couldn't hope to compete with these two great warriors in a test of strength, but could in a test of love?

23. Is it significant that none of the major characters are "on their own ground"? The villa Ned and his father are staying in is called Sans Souci, which translates as No Worries. When Ned arrives, he sees this trip as a release from mundane worries about schoolwork, but not from his concern for his mother. How does the fact that he's far from home most affect his emotional response to what's happening to him? Does it make him more prepared for change, or more inclined to cling to the familiar? Do you find travel freeing, or unsettling, or both?

24. Different people in this book see the supernatural differently, and for some their perspective changes in the course of the story. Whether you're talking about pagan rituals, shape-changing, souls traveling through time, or other supernatural abilities, did the story of Ysabel make you more inclined to believe in such powers, or more inclined to dismiss them as a pleasant fiction? Or do you see them as a tool of the author to make us think about the lingering presence of past events? Why?

25. Kim and Dave's history, which is the source of the breach between Kim and her sister Meg in *Ysabel*, is described as a journey to a fantasy world in *The Fionavar Tapestry*, another Guy Gavriel Kay epic. Do you like books that allude to events in other books? What do you think this element added to the story of *Ysabel*? Is there a parallel between the 'mystery' here in the story and the mystery of the romantic triangle?