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Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Wales, 1109. Three years ago, a warband raided Elen's home. Her baby sister could not escape the flames. Her older sister fought back and almost killed the warband's leader, Owain ap Cadwgan, before being killed herself. Despite Elen's own sexual assault at the hands of the raiders, she saw a chance to live and took it. She healed Owain's wound and spun a lie: *Owain ap Cadwgan, son of the king of Powys, cannot be killed, not by blade nor blow nor poison. Owain ap Cadwgan has the protection of Saint Elen, as long as he keeps her namesake safe from harm and near him always.*

For three years, Elen has had plenty of food, clothes to wear, and a bed to sleep in that she shares with the man who brought that warband to her door. Then Owain abducts Nest, the wife of a Norman lord, and her three children, triggering full-out war. As war rages, and her careful lies threaten to unravel, Elen begins to look to Nest and see a different life—if she can decide, once and for all, where her loyalties lie.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Anderson Coats is the author of books and short stories for children and young adults. Her first novel, the critically acclaimed *The Wicked and the Just*, is also a story of medieval Wales. She lives and works as a librarian near Seattle, Washington.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At the beginning of *Spindle and Dagger*, Elen is heavily invested in creating a place for herself in Owain's family. How is she successful, and how does she fail? What makes her decide that this is not what she wants anymore?
2. If Elen lived today, we might say she has PTSD. How has trauma shaped her personality and her decisions, and how has she coped with its aftermath?
3. Why do you think Owain believes so firmly that Saint Elen will protect him? How did he adopt this belief, and how does he benefit? What other factors may influence his belief? What can this tell us about the role of saints in the lives of medieval people?
4. How would you describe Owain's relationship with his father? In what ways does it feel familiar, and in what ways is it unusual? How does this intersect with Cadwgan's opinion of Elen?
5. How is the abduction of Nest different from the warband's previous acts? How does this event impact Elen?
6. How does Nest come to be married to Gerald of Windsor? Did this surprise you? What can this tell us about the lives of girls and women in early medieval Wales? What can it tell us about an understanding of "life in the Middle Ages" as universal across time and place?
7. Why is Nest initially suspicious of Elen? What makes her change her mind? What are some things that Elen and Nest have in common, and why does this matter? How does their growing friendship affect Elen's changing perspective on her life with Owain?
8. How would you characterize Elen's relationship with Rhys? Who or what does he remind her of? What makes him different from the other members of the warband?
9. Why is Elen's time in Ireland important? What happens there that helps her understand her situation in a new way?
10. How do you think Owain feels about Elen before he learns the truth about Saint Elen? Do you get the sense that he cares about her, or does he care only about what she represents? How do you think Elen feels about him—as a person, as a protector, as a leader? What factors contribute to her opinion over the course of the book?



11. Elen is constantly in search of ordinary. What does “ordinary” represent for her? Why do you think she’s so fixated on the idea? Do you think she finds it?
12. Women in the Middle Ages are often described as having no power. Do you think this is true of Elen? In what ways does Elen have power, and how does she use it? In what ways is she powerless? What can this tell us about women’s lives in the Middle Ages?
13. Elen is well aware that she is lying to Owain about Saint Elen’s protection. Consider the ethics of this. Do you think she is justified in this course of action?
14. Novelist L. P. Hartley once wrote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Were there actions, events, or characters in *Spindle and Dagger* that surprised you? What about these instances were unusual?

