

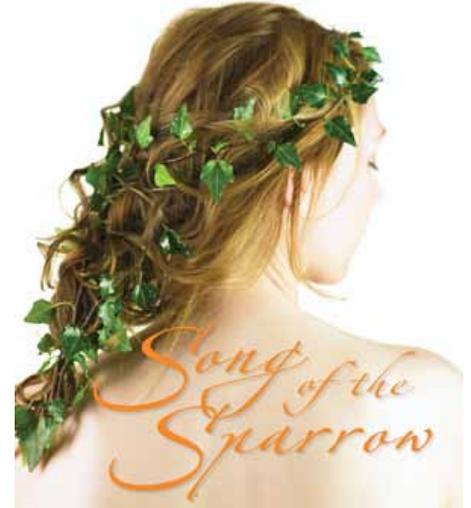
Song of the Sparrow

by Lisa Ann Sandell

● LISA ANN SANDELL ●

About the Book

Feisty and independent Elaine of Ascolat lives with her father and two brothers in the midst of a war camp. Since her mother was murdered when she was a child, Elaine has grown up in the camp, treating all the men there as her brothers, with her only female companion being the mysterious Morgan. Arthur, Elaine's friend, is named leader of the Britons in the battle against marauding foreigners. Longing for a closer bond with Lancelot, who has treated her with affection since she was a child, Elaine is horrified to see that he is hopelessly in love with Gwynivere, the woman chosen for Arthur to marry. When Arthur's army marches to fight the Saxons, Elaine and Gwynivere both follow the men in secret and are captured by the enemy. The cunning and courage of the two women helps turn the tide of the battle, and their shared adventure helps Elaine overcome her jealousy and find her own true destiny at last.



Discussion Questions

Characters

- 1) How would Elaine's life have been different if her mother had lived? How much has her personality been shaped by living in the camp?
- 2) Compare Tirry and Lavain. In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different? Why do they interact with Elaine in different ways?
- 3) Compare Lancelot and Tristan. Do they have qualities that are the same? In what ways are they different?
- 4) Compare Elaine, Morgan, and Gwynivere. In what ways are they the same? What qualities are unique to each of them?
- 5) How does Arthur assert his leadership of the camp? Why do some of the men refuse to follow him? What skills does he have that the others do not?
- 6) Do you think that Lancelot would have returned Elaine's feelings if Gwynivere had not appeared? How does Lancelot feel about Elaine? What has he done to encourage her feelings?
- 7) Why does Gwynivere treat Elaine so badly at first? Why does Gwynivere follow Elaine when she leaves the camp? How do their feelings for each other change in their captivity?

Setting

- 1) In what period in history does the story take place? Research information about the Arthurian legends and reach your own conclusion about when these events might have happened.
- 2) Who are the enemies Arthur and his companions are fighting? Why is it so important that they defeat these enemies?
- 3) What can you learn about the sites of Mount Badon and Caerleon—on—Usk. Can you visit these places today?

Themes

- 1) War: Arthur tells Elaine, I do not understand it. This fighting and killing and urge to conquer . . . But I will fight and kill as I must, to protect our world . . . Discuss this dilemma. Why is it necessary for the armies to fight? Do they have any alternatives? Why does Arthur decide to initiate the battle at Mount Badon? Compare this situation to other periods in history where war seemed necessary. How did those times differ from Arthur's time?
- 2) Love and Friendship: Tristan tells Elaine, Love is a tempestuous mistress, and none of us shall ever master her. Identify the characters that this might apply to in the story. He also tells her, love and friendship will resolve themselves. Who are the most loyal friends in the story? How does "love" differ from "friendship"? Make a list of the qualities of love that are temporary and the qualities that are more lasting. Why is it difficult for some characters to recognize "true" love?
- 3) Loyalty: Why do some of the men remain loyal to Arthur and others leave? Why is loyalty so important? Why do Elaine and Gwynivere follow the army in secret – is it loyalty, jealousy, a desire for adventure, or a combination of reasons?
- 4) Hope: What do the Britons hope for the most? What are they fighting for so fiercely? What does Elaine hope for personally? Does she get her greatest wish?
- 5) Peace: What does it mean for the Britons to win the battle at Mount Badon? How will it change their situation? What does it mean for the lives of Arthur, Gwynivere, Elaine, Lancelot, Tristan?

Symbolism

- 1) What is the importance of the rowan tree, the elm tree, and the birch trees to Elaine? How many ways can you identify that she is in tune with the natural world around her?
- 2) What is the meaning of the Round Table? How does it contribute to Arthur's leadership? Why is the sword Excalibur important as a symbol to the followers of Arthur?
- 3) When Elaine remembers her mother, she speaks of her weaving loom as if it had a life of its own? What do the loom, the tower room, and those memories represent for Elaine?
- 4) Why is Elaine upset when she gets blood on Tirry's cloak while she is mending it? Is she right to be worried about this "omen"?

5) What does Elaine mean by the “sparrow” in her stomach? What does the sparrow symbolize for her? How does the feeling of the sparrow change for her as her life changes? Why has the author chosen to call the story Song of the Sparrow?

Other Books to Compare and Contrast

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon*. Knopf, 1982

A retelling of the legends of King Arthur from the point of view of the powerful women who are prominent in the stories.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *Forest House*. Viking, 1994.

In this prequel to *The Mists of Avalon*, a Druid girl falls in love with the son of a Roman officer, highlighting the clash of cultures between two diverse peoples. *Lady of Avalon* (Viking, 1997) provides the link between this book and *The Mists of Avalon*.

Cabot, Meg. *Avalon High*. HarperCollins, 2005.

Elaine, whose mother has named her after her own research project on “The Lady of Shalott,” finds herself in a new high school where she seems to be reliving parts of the Arthurian story in the present day.

Crossley–Holland, Kevin. *The Seeing Stone*. Scholastic, 2001.

Arthur, a boy coming of age in the Middle Ages obtains a magical stone which gives him glimpses of the adventures of King Arthur and his knights, stories that relate in some ways to his own life. Arthur’s story continues in *At the Crossing Places* and *King of the Middle March*, in which he takes part in the ill–fated Fourth Crusade.

Crossley–Holland, Kevin. *The World of King Arthur and His Court: People, Places, Legend, and Lore*. Illustrated by Peter Malone. Dutton, 2004

In an encyclopedic format, the author compiles informative pieces about life in the Middle Ages and specific characters in the Arthurian legends.

Cushman, Karen. *Catherine, Called Birdy*. Clarion, 1994

A feisty 13–year–old girl living at the end of the 13th century keeps a daily record of her life, most notably her efforts to keep her father from marrying her off, providing insight into medieval life as well as her own lively mind and spirit.

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *The Lady of Shalott*. Illus. by Geneviève Côté. Kids Can Press, 2005.

Tennyson’s 19th century poem is presented with stylized, modernistic illustrations that place the story in an early 20th century urban setting, giving new expression to the old tale.

White, T. H. *The Once and Future King*. Putnam, 1958.

White’s version of the Arthurian stories is a fast–paced novel that concentrates on the psychological underpinnings of the story.

Discussion Guide prepared by Connie Rockman, Children’s Literature Consultant, adjunct professor of children’s and young adult literature, and Editor of the H. W. Wilson Junior Book of Authors and Illustrators series.