



Readers Group Guide



Four Sisters,
All Queens

GALLERY
SHERRY JONES
BOOKS



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INTRODUCTION

Four Sisters, All Queens follows the lives of Beatrice of Savoy's four daughters—all of whom became queens in thirteenth-century Europe. As Marguerite, Queen of France to Louis IX; Eléonore, Queen of England; Sanchia, Queen of Germany; and Beatrice, Queen of Sicily, all work to both expand their husbands' empires and increase the influence of the House of Savoy, they find themselves unable to remain loyal to both. Told from alternating points of view of all four queens, the novel explores family and political dynamics, as allegiances to kin and country are tested.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Beatrice's maxim, which she tries to pass on to her daughters, is "Family comes first." Do you agree with this motto? Which queen best upholds this mantra?
2. In the prologue, Beatrice states, "A woman achieves nothing in this man's world without careful plotting." (p. 1) How does this statement apply to the rest of the novel? As Eléonore wonders later, is it possible for women to decide their own fate in this novel?
3. *Four Sisters, All Queens* is told from the perspective of all four queens. Which sister did you identify with most? Who was your favorite? Who was your least favorite? Did any of the relationships in this novel remind you of any relationships in your own life? If so, why?
4. "[Marguerite] had thought that, as queen, she would have control over her own life as well as the lives of others. Now . . . she thinks the opposite may be true." (p. 53) Does being in a position of leadership allow one to have more power over others? Or does it actually serve to limit control in one's own life? Have you ever been in a leadership position? What did you struggle with? What did you enjoy about?
5. Beatrice of Savoy and Blanche, the White Queen, are both strong matriarchs with great influence over the other characters in the novel. Compare and contrast these two powerful women.
6. Discuss the different marriages and relationships throughout the book. What motivates these unions? Love, money, power,

sex? In your opinion, which relationship functioned the best? Why?

7. Similarly, as Marguerite wonders, “What is the meaning of loyalty?” (p. 279) Is there any merit to remaining faithful in this novel? How do you define loyalty? Who is the most loyal person in your life?
8. Marguerite ponders the true meaning of happiness, and if it is to be found with a man or in spite of a man. (p. 280) Which do you believe? What would you choose?
9. Eléonore wonders, “[Who] cares which kingdom has more power, which kings and queens have more lands? We fight and scheme for our children’s sakes and then we die, and they may lose all that we built up for them. There is nothing we can give to anyone that lasts—except love.” (pp. 400–1) Which characters would agree with her sentiment? Do you agree?
10. What is the source of each character’s power? Where do they derive their confidence and authority? How is power for women different from men?
11. *Four Sisters, All Queens* takes place over a period of forty years. How does each sister evolve throughout the novel?
12. Why does Beatrice force her daughters into their marriages? Did she sacrifice her daughters for her own interests, as Marguerite believes? (p. 354) Or did she truly have their benefit in mind?
13. “In this struggle to navigate a world made by men, for men, are not all women sisters?” (p. 390) Do you agree with this statement? How does it apply to thirteenth century society in contrast to present day?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Beatrice often repeats her mantra of “family first” and “breathe” in tough situations and later her daughters echo these words to others. Do you have a phrase or favorite quote that you remember in stressful situations? If not, create one for yourself and share it with your group!
2. Lineage and family connections are very important to the characters in *Four Sisters, All Queens*. Create a genealogy chart of your own family similar to the charts that appear in the beginning of the novel. To get started, visit www.familysearch.org.
3. When the four sisters are young, they talk about which historical queens they are most like. After reading this novel, do you agree with these parallels? Of the four queens—Marguerite, Eléonore, Sanchia, and Beatrice—whom do you most resemble? Discuss with your book club.

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A CONVERSATION WITH *Sherry Jones*

When writing this novel, how did you strike a balance between historical accuracy and fiction?

Historical accuracy is very important to me, and I know it is to my readers. I research, research, research before and during the writing process, and throughout revision and editing. I keep a timeline of events to which I refer throughout. I keep a cast of characters with information about each, and I pay close attention to details regarding the culture of the era. I discovered fairly late in the process, for example, that cardinals in the Church didn't begin wearing red hats until the fourteenth century, and had to make a change. And yet, because the story takes place some eight hundred years ago, so much is unknown, especially about the women. I've seen conflicting accounts of the sisters' birth years, for example. We don't even have descriptions of their appearances! That's frustrating, yes, but it also means that I have ample room for invention, which is the heart of fiction.

In this novel, you cover a span of almost forty years, and write from the perspectives of four different women. How did you choose which events to include and leave out for the sake of the novel's pacing and length?

Four Sisters, All Queens touches on so many issues: monarchy vs. democracy, corruption in the Church, religious persecution, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, colonialism—especially in the Middle East—Islamophobia, conspiracy theories. It could have filled a thousand pages, and taken me a decade to write. The possibilities

of the book, the number of directions in which it could have gone, felt overwhelming at times. When I told this to a friend, he said, “Why don’t you focus on the emotional lives of your characters?” It was terrific advice. In doing so, I touched on all the themes I’ve mentioned above, but explored in depth those most important to this tale—those of family, in particular marriage and sibling rivalry, as well as women’s power. Every scene in “Four Sisters, All Queens” focuses on the emotional lives of Marguerite, Eléonore, Sanchia, or Beatrice. Any scene that didn’t do so, I eliminated.

How did you research the historical events and characters in *Four Sisters, All Queens*? Did you visit any of the European sites your characters frequented?

Yes, I had visited London and Paris, in particular Westminster, Sainte-Chappelle, and Notre Dame Cathedral, and I went to Egypt to see where King Louis, Charles of Anjou, and Jean de Joinville were held prisoner in Mansoura as well as the beach at Damietta where they landed. Mostly, however I read Nancy Goldstone’s *Four Queens*, biographies of Eléonore, Blanche de Castille, St. Louis, Simon de Montfort, and Richard of Cornwall—even a biography of Marguerite written in French, which I translated very painstakingly into English! I read many books on medieval culture and studied online courses about the Church, medieval philosophy, and the high Middle Ages. I read the letters of the sisters available through the women’s Epistolae project online and books on the Crusades. I listened to medieval music and read about the troubadours. The thirteenth century was such a fascinating time, and one that hasn’t been written as much as, say, the Tudor era. It enchants me.

Your first book, *The Jewel of Medina*, was about life with the Prophet Muhammad, as told by a wife. What did you learn from the experience? How was its sequel, *The Sword of Medina*, received?

I learned never to send a historical novel to a historian for an endorsement, for one thing! A University of Texas professor's overwrought response to *The Jewel of Medina* caused my original publisher, Random House, to "indefinitely postpone" publishing the book and its sequel in 2008 for fear of retaliation from radical Muslims. Her remarks to the *Wall Street Journal* characterizing the novel as pornographic caused an uproar that resulted in the firebombing of my U.K. publisher's home office, scaring him into canceling publication of my books. Ultimately, I found a U.S. publisher as well as publishers around the world.

I also learned that people believe what they want to believe, and I learned that A'isha lives not only in the pages of my books, but also within me. My challenge throughout the controversy—death threats, Islamophobic jeers, accusations, even body guards!—was to not be distracted by all the hype but to remain steadfast in my commitment to telling A'isha's remarkable story. My books have inspired many thousands of readers, especially women and girls (including me), with her example of courage and strength.

The sequel, *The Sword of Medina*, was not controversial. It received much critical acclaim, including a starred review in *Publishers Weekly* and a silver medal in the Independent Publishers' Awards. It tells of A'isha's life when things got really interesting, after Muhammad's death, when she was a political adviser to three caliphs and a military strategist who led troops in the first Islamic civil war. It tells, also, the story of her nemesis Ali, Muhammad's cousin. Writing from alternating points of view—first A'isha's, then Ali's—stretched my limitations as a new author and gave my readers a more complex portrait of both characters, far beyond the A'isha and Ali you see in *Jewel*.

This novel is very different from your first. What drew you to medieval Europe from seventh-century Arabia?

As usual, it was the story. I read about Marguerite, Eléonore, Sanchia, and Beatrice in Nancy Goldstone's biography *Four*

Queens and felt unsatisfied when I reached the end. I wanted to know more about these fascinating sisters. What did they look like? What were their personalities like? I wanted to hear them speak, to eavesdrop on their conversations with their husbands, to feel their feelings and think their thoughts. I'd had the same experience when I'd first read about A'isha, the protagonist of *The Jewel of Medina* and *The Sword of Medina*. I felt inspired, then, to write a novel about them.

You describe yourself as an avid book lover. What are your top five, all-time favorite books?

Hilary Mantel's brilliant *Wolf Hall* is my all-time favorite book, hands down. I adore Iris Murdoch, and love her book *The Sea, The Sea*. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is the first, and only, book ever to make me cry. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. And, of course, *Little Women*, whose four sisters correspond so beautifully, in order, to the sisters in "Four Sisters, All Queens."

Other books and authors I adore include Debra Magpie Earling's haunting, beautifully written *Perma Red*. I also love the books of Eudora Welty—Southern like me, she was an amazing writer, especially her use of metaphor; Salman Rushdie (a genius); Ellen Gilchrist—*The Annunciation* was a huge influence on me in my twenties; Anne Tyler, Isabel Allende, Anne Patchett, Louise Erdrich, and Alice Hoffman, to name a few.

Your path to becoming a novelist was long—you've recalled wanting to write a novel since your early twenties, but didn't begin writing until twenty years later. What inspired you to finally start writing?

Actually, I decided in the second grade that I would become a writer. I had a teacher who praised my poetry and stories and said to me, before the entire class, "If you ever become a published author, make sure to keep your name so that I know it's you."

I have written all my life. In school, as I mentioned, I wrote

poems and short stories. When I was eighteen and still in college, I began reporting and writing for the Kinston, N.C., *Free Press*. I worked as a journalist at newspapers and for magazines for thirty years. All that work delayed my college degree, but I determined to get one. In 2002, I was casting about for a topic for a story or novella to submit to the University of Montana's Davidson Honors College for my honors thesis, and I ran across the interesting fact that the Muslim prophet Muhammad had a harem with twelve wives and concubines in all. This fascinated me, and as I read more I discovered A'isha, his youngest and favorite wife and the most famous and influential woman in Islam. I would have liked to know this feisty, witty, tender-hearted gal. I think we would have been friends. She's long gone, though, so I wrote a novel about her, instead. Actually, I wrote two of them.

Do you have any advice to share with aspiring novelists?

1. The first draft, as Hemingway famously said, is always shit. Don't let writing badly discourage you. Just keep going, finish, and then revise. In revision is where the real writing starts.
2. Read, read, read. Read everything you can, of the highest quality possible.
3. Don't publish too soon. Find, and pay, a good freelance editor to critique your book, then revise again. Don't be in a hurry. Be patient. Musicians study and practice for years before playing Carnegie Hall. Olympic athletes train hard before reaching their level of achievement. Writing novels takes exactly as much hard work and dedication.
4. Don't give up. Be stubborn. Believe in yourself. If you write something truly good, someone will publish it.
5. Get a literary agent. Be prepared for this to take a year or more. Make sure your work is as good as it can be before

you send it out. Expect rejection, and more rejection. Cry if you must, then get back up and query again. If your work is good, someone will represent you. A literary agent is the single most valuable asset to your career. I dedicated *Four Sisters, All Queens* to mine, and with good reason.

Your first career was in journalism and you continue to be a freelance reporter. How does your background in journalism impact your novel writing?

Writing for a living meant I wrote every single day, on deadline. As a result, I'm a prolific writer, and I never suffer from writer's block. Journalism taught me to observe details; it gave me an ear for dialogue; it taught me how to do research and it gave me lots of experience working with editors. Also, reporters are usually the generators of their own story ideas. I'm such an idea person now that I will never run out of books to write.

When the four sisters are young, they talk about which historical queens they are most like. Is there a queen of the past you would compare yourself to? What traits do you share?

I'd be Eléonore, the second sister in *Four Sisters, All Queens*. Bold, outspoken, competitive, ambitious, devoted to her family, fanciful, interested in fashion, a lover of literature and a patron of the arts—these are the traits we share in common (many of which Eléonore also shares with Jo, the second sister in *Little Women*). Unlike Eléonore, however, I'm a peacenik, while she seems not to have hesitated to send troops into battle. Indeed, she may have preferred war to negotiation. "Love is a verb."