

THE PLAGUE CHARMER

KAREN MAITLAND

Reading Group Guide

-  Each chapter is framed by a piece of medieval superstition or folklore. To what extent do the villagers allow themselves to believe in the supernatural? Can we, with our modern mind-sets, draw any parallels with such beliefs in our own lives?
-  *'The sea is a woman and her name is Fate'*. Can we blame Luke for Janiveer's arrival in Porlock Weir, despite his mother's warnings?
-  Discuss what drives the villagers to deal with the discovery of the two washed-up children in such a practical, yet largely dispassionate way. How does fear influence the way people relate to each other?
-  *'I should toss him into the sea... Instead I find myself tearing my only spare shirt into strips to make swaddling bands'*. To what extent do you agree that morality is important to Will? Does the way he was 'created' sway your perception of him?
-  In a novel of superstition and fearmongering, Sara's voice rises as one of the few that we can trust. Do you believe she's entirely selfless in offering her life for the sake of the village?
-  For such a devout woman, Matilda is a morally complex character whose actions impact dramatically on those around her. Can she be compared to the likes of Brother Praeco, who arguably uses the cloak of religion to justify darker objectives?
-  Discuss the role of grief in the novel, and how it motivates human behaviour. What role does isolation play here?
-  *'They had held her down while her mother stitched the third eye into her belly with a bone needle'*. As we learn how Janiveer became powerful, can we sympathise with her? Is she cruel and self-interested – or almost revolutionary?
-  Karen Maitland is often praised for recreating the Middle Ages in her books with keen historical accuracy. Discuss what feels more 'real' to you in the world of *The Plague Charmer* – the vivid setting or the depth of the characters.

