



**"A must for historical
fiction fans."**

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, Starred Review
for *The Moon in the Palace*

THE
Empress
OF
Bright Moon

A NOVEL of EMPRESS WU



WEINA DAI RANDEL

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Before Emperor Taizong's death, he gave an order to the Duke to exile all his women who had not borne him a child, about nine hundred of the women in the palace, to Buddhist monasteries, where they would pray for his soul for the rest of their lives. This is a convention that was followed by all palace women in China for almost two thousand years. What do you think about that practice? What would you do if you were a concubine and forced to leave your home?
2. Consider this decree and also the Regent's comments: "You must not give women too much freedom. They know not right from wrong. They are like dogs. They must be trained and chained. If you let them loose, they go wild." Can you get a glimpse of women's lives in ancient China? How do you think women in ancient China were treated? How were European women any different?
3. Discuss the character of the Duke (later the Regent), one of the major villains in the novel. What kind of a man is he?
4. Discuss the theme of power in the novel. How important is it? How do Mei, Pheasant, the Regent, and Empress Wang struggle to keep it in their hands?

5. Discuss how her experience as an exiled woman changes Mei's perceptions of love, power, and self.
6. Discuss the character Princess Gaoyang, her friendship with Mei, and how it changes Mei.
7. Discuss Empress Wang's character. Do you think she is evil? Do you pity her? Do you understand her motivations for her actions throughout the novel?
8. Talk about Mei and her pet, Hope. What impact does Hope have on Mei? How does Hope's death affect Mei? How do you think people in ancient China treated animals? Do you think people view and treat animals differently today?
9. Motherhood is a major theme in the book. How important is motherhood for Empress Wang, Mei, and the other female characters in the palace? How does it define their positions in the palace? How do they perceive motherhood? Do you think motherhood is an essential part of a woman's life?
10. Buddhism came to China from India, and its followers were mostly women at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty. How does Mei see the religion at the beginning of the novel? How does her perception change? What importance do you think religion has in the novel?
11. Princess Gaoyang said, "Fear is a roof.. You cannot live in a pavilion built with fear, Luminous Lady. It gets smaller and smaller, hotter and hotter inside, until you cannot breathe." What do you think of this observation?
12. Compare Mei and Empress Wang. Discuss how their relationship worsens. At what point in the novel does Mei have power over Empress Wang? At what point in the novel is Mei lost?

13. Discuss the images of nature, birds, and animals in the story. Where do you see them in the novel? What are their significances? Why do you think Mei names her daughter Oriole?
14. Death is an important theme in the novel. Discuss each case of death. What devastating effects do they have on Mei and on Pheasant, and how does each death change them and their relationship?
15. After Mei hears the rumor that she has killed her own child, she reflects: "...for rumor had no grave and only bore seeds. It germinated in the air, thrived in the sun, and ripened in the shadows. It would not die in the rain and fly only higher in the wind." What do you think of this perception? How will you relate this perception to your own experience in the modern world dominated by social media and the Internet?
16. In the first book of the Empress Wu duology, *The Moon in the Palace*, Mei is unable to control her own destiny and is often manipulated. In the second book, however, Mei has learned how to subtly control other people and their ideas and use them for her own purposes. Where do you see those instances of her exerting her control over others in the novel?
17. In the first book, *The Moon in the Palace*, Mei is a young girl of exceptional intelligence, courage, and loyalty, but she still has many weaknesses and is also subject to temptations and court intrigues. In the second book, Mei has grown to be a mature woman. Compare the young Mei to the adult Mei. What are the qualities you see in the adult Mei? What are her weaknesses as an adult?