



DAMSEL

by Elana K. Arnold

BOOKTALK

Ama can't remember anything from her past, from the time before Prince Emory rescued her from a dragon and brought her back to his kingdom. She's told that every queen of Harding arrives the same way she did—as a helpless damsel, alone in the world except for the prince who slays a dragon to become king and make her his queen—but no one will tell her anything else, like how the tradition of the dragons and the damsels began, or why the prince insists on controlling her every move. Isolated and uncertain of her place in this new kingdom, Ama begins to realize that she's surrounded by threats more sinister than any dragon, but she also might not be as helpless as she seems.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

RESCUE. After Emory repeatedly saves Ama—from the dragon, from drowning, from the mother lynx, and from the men at the wall—she realizes, “This how he likes me best...when I am in need of rescue” (p. 217). Why does Ama believe this, and how does she respond? What does it reveal about both Emory's character and her own? What do you think are Emory's reasons for rescuing Ama, and do they justify his actions? Can you think of a time in your own life when someone tried to help you or save you, whether or not you needed it?

ACCEPTANCE. The queen mother gives Ama advice, telling her, “Acceptance, Ama. That is a woman's greatest strength, you know. The power to accept that which must fill her” (p. 177). What is the significance behind the queen mother's words, and why does she give Ama this advice? Do you think there is power in acceptance, as the queen mother says? What does it reveal about the role of women in the kingdom, and do you see any parallels to your own world? What quality would you say is a woman's greatest strength?

TAMING. Pawlin tells Ama that the key to taming any creature is to “strike the right balance of trust and fear... The best-trained beasts are those who are broken before they have tasted their own power” (p. 222). What does Pawlin's speech reveal about Emory's treatment of Ama?

Why does Emory put Sorrow's leash on Ama, and what does the incident reveal about their relationship? In what other ways does Emory exert control over Ama? What parallels do you see between Ama's position and her attempts to train Sorrow? When Ama leaves in search of her lynx, why does Pawlin call after her, “Fly, bird” (p. 191)?

EYES. Ama reflects on the Eyes crafted by the glassblower: “Eyes that watched and Eyes that judged, Eyes that perhaps granted wishes, if one dared to ask” (p. 137). How do Eyes function as a symbol throughout the novel? Do you believe the Eyes hold power to grant wishes to those bold enough to take them, like Ama and Allys? How did you respond to Pawlin sewing their eyes closed, and what do his actions symbolize? What does it mean when Ama's own eyes begin to change color?

WEAPONS. Emory tells Ama, “It takes three weapons to conquer a dragon and free a damsel. My brain. My steel. And my yard” (p. 305). What does each of Emory's three weapons represent? In what ways does Emory use his weapons to conquer throughout the novel? What might Emory's actions and attitudes reflect about the real world? What do you think are the three weapons that Ama wields at the end of the novel?