

Discussion Guide

GRACELING

by Kristin Cashore



About the Book:

Katsa has been able to kill a man with her bare hands since she was eight—she’s a Graceling, one of the rare people in her land born with an extreme skill. As niece of the king, she should be able to live a life of privilege, but Graced as she is with killing, she is forced to work as the king’s thug.

When she first meets Prince Po, Graced with combat skills, Katsa has no hint of how her life is about to change. She never expects to become Po’s friend. She never expects to learn a new truth about her own Grace—or about a terrible secret that lies hidden far away . . . a secret that could destroy all seven kingdoms with words alone.

About the Author:

Kristin Cashore wrote the *New York Times* bestsellers *Graceling*, *Fire*, and most recently, *Bitterblue*, all of which have been named ALA Best Books for Young Adults. *Graceling* is the winner of the 2009 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children’s Literature and *Fire* is the winner of the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award. Visit her online at kristincashore.blogspot.com.

Discussion Questions

- How does Katsa describe her “nature” at the start of the novel? Does she believe she can alter this “nature”? Do you think her “nature” changes by the end of the novel?
- The concept of a Grace plays an important role in the development of characters in *Graceling*. What is your definition of a Grace? If you could have a special Grace, what would it be? How would you use it in your current life?
- Which type of Grace do you think is more powerful—one that is an enhancement of physical strengths or one that is an enhancement of mental strengths?
- What are the things Katsa fears the most? How do these fears affect her thoughts, actions, and behavior?
- Gracelings are described as outsiders and not normal. If the skills of a Graceling are not helpful to the king then they are ostracized from their community. Why do the townspeople treat the Gracelings in this way?
- How does Katsa’s understanding of friendship change throughout the story?
- The Council is very important to Katsa. Why? What is the purpose and mission of the Council?
- Prince Po’s grandfather, Prince Tealiff, tells Katsa that Po “sees the strength in beautiful things.” He explains that this is what makes Po different from his six brothers. How does Po’s appreciation of beauty influence his connection to people, animals, and nature? Is his perception of beauty changed in any way by the end of the novel?
- Katsa is fiercely independent yet she is able to care deeply and love Po. Po is equally self-sufficient yet falls deeply in love with Katsa. How does the tension between being independent and being in love affect their relationship?

- Katsa ponders the traditions of marriage and begins to imagine a more unconventional, yet long-lasting, relationship for herself and Po. Do you have any thoughts about the institution of marriage? Do you think alternatives to marriage exist for people in love?
- In what ways do the contours of the landscape both help and hinder Katsa and Po in their attempt to save Bitterblue from King Leck?
- Katsa learns that power throughout the Seven Kingdoms can be gained from a variety of sources. What are some of these sources? What opinions does Katsa have about people in positions of authority? Is she interested in having power or authority over others?
- Katsa spends much of her daily life involved in combat and fighting. Describe how she feels about combat at the start of the novel. Do her opinions about being a skilled fighter change by the end of the story? How and why?

In Conversation with Kristin Cashore:

Have you always wanted to be a writer?

I always wanted to be a reader and a daydreamer. Then, in college, I discovered that I also loved to write. I think it would be fair to say that I always suspected I wanted to be a writer, but didn't know it for sure until I was about nineteen or twenty. And then, of course, it took a few more years for me to get serious about actually doing it!

How did the character of Katsa come to you?

Unsurprisingly, she came to me fighting—quarreling, to be more specific—inside my head with another character who grew into Po. In other words, *Graceling* began as conversations in my head between two characters who were furious with each other. My job was to listen to them argue, and figure out what they were so upset about, and what was going on in their world, and what that world was like. Katsa and Po kind of formed themselves for me—at the beginning, I was more of an observer than a creator.

How did the ideas for the landscapes in your book take shape?

In some cases, I had particular landscapes in mind from the beginning. For example, always knew Po came from a place that was somehow “other”; therefore, Lienid is an island, separate from the other kingdoms. In other cases, my landscapes developed for kind of silly reasons. For example, “Uh-oh, I need

it to take longer than this for Po and Katsa to get from point A to point B. Better grow an impenetrable forest and throw up a few uncrossable mountains!” *Graceling* taught me to appreciate all the things a writer can do with landscapes, actually. When I was developing the companion book to *Graceling*, the landscapes were among the first things I felt and saw, and were as important to my writing process as the characters. I expect I learned to think that way from writing *Graceling*.

How did the concept of a Grace—and the way it is manifested in different characters—come to you?

I'm not really sure. It was with me from the beginning—from the very start, Katsa had an unusual power that alienated her terribly from others. As I fine-tuned the concept of Graces, it seemed right to me that every Grace should be an extreme version of skills that people in our world actually do have. So, for example, there are people in our world who can run really, really fast; the corresponding Grace would be the ability to run even faster—inhumanly fast. There are people in our world who rarely get sick, so why not a *Graceling* who's incapable of getting sick? There are unusually perceptive people in our world; the corresponding Grace might be some form of mind reading. And so on. I tried to avoid Graces that had too much of a sci-fi feel—for example, I don't think teleportation would be a believable Grace in the world of *Graceling*. Maybe I'm wrong; basically, I try to avoid inconsistencies, and hope for the best!

If you could have a special Grace, what would it be?

If only I hadn't just nixed the idea of a teleporting Grace! Every time I travel, my blog readers get to hear me complain about how I wish I could teleport. But I think I'd like a language Grace; I've never had an easy time learning foreign languages, and I envy people who do. Or maybe a health Grace, something to make me impervious to diseases. I wish I could pass that Grace out to my family and friends, actually!

*Did you have teen readers in mind when you wrote *Graceling*?*

I didn't have any readers in mind when I wrote *Graceling*. I wrote it for me. However, since I love young adult fantasy madly, I'm not surprised that what I wrote took on that form. And now I am thrilled—beyond thrilled—to be sharing it with teen readers, and adult readers, and all kinds of readers. It's a dream come true.

Another book is in the works. What can you tell us?

I'm glad you asked this question, because the way the new book relates to *Graceling* is a little confusing.

The new book is sort of a companion book and sort of a prequel to *Graceling*. It takes place across the mountains east of the seven kingdoms, thirty or forty years before the story of *Graceling*, in a rocky, war-torn kingdom called the Dells. There are no known Gracelings in the Dells, but there are beautiful creatures called monsters. Monsters have the shape of normal animals: mountain lions, horses, fish. But the hair or scales or feathers of monsters are gorgeously colored—fuchsia, turquoise, sparkly bronze, iridescent green—and their minds have the power to control the minds of humans. Fire, seventeen years old, is the last remaining human-shaped monster in the Dells. Gorgeously monstrous in body and mind but with a human appreciation of right and wrong, she is hated and mistrusted by just about everyone. The book is her story, and if you're wondering what connects it to *Graceling*, the answer is that (*Graceling* spoiler alert!) one of the minor characters in the new book is a creepy little boy with mismatched eyes who seems to have some peculiar verbal abilities. The new book is by no means Leck's story, but it does reveal where he came from (and what happened to his eye!)

I did not write *Graceling* with the intention of writing a prequel. But while I was writing *Graceling*, some things Po said about Leck's origins began to rattle in my mind—and Fire's story grew from that. Unfortunately, it makes for slightly confusing marketing, but I hope people will understand how the books work together, and read them in the right order, *Graceling* first! (According to my readers so far, they don't need to be read that way, but I think it's a good idea.)

What do you read? Do you read across genres?

I love this question. You might want to store up some emergency provisions before I answer. I absolutely read across genres, and in fact, I read very little YA fantasy while writing YA fantasy. It feels too much like work to read stuff in my current genre, and it also freaks me out sometimes. I see similarities and begin to worry that my ideas aren't fresh; I compare myself and feel inadequate; it's a big mess. I can't wait, actually, to finish *Bitterblue*, because I intend to take a break from fantasy after that, and will finally be able to read the books of Megan Whalen Turner and Alison Croggon and some Robin McKinley books I haven't read yet. I miss YA fantasy. I also feel kind of out of it—there are books I'm supposed to have read, but haven't. Anyway, so much for the books I'm not reading. As for what I am reading—I'm always looking for reading that differs from my own writing, so that it can be a break from work and refresh my

mind. In the past few weeks, here are some things I've read:

China Court: The Hours of a Country House by Rumer Godden; *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume One: The Pox Party* by M. T. Anderson; *Murder Must Advertise* by Dorothy L. Sayers; *Ramona Quinby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary; and *Moominsummer Madness* by Tove Jansson.

Here are some things I've bought: *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset, translated by Tiina Nunnally (this happens to be one of my favorite books ever); *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard (one of my favorite plays); *The Frog and Toad Treasury*, written and illustrated by Arnold Lobel; *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* by E. Lockhart; *Dubliners* by James Joyce; and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, illustrated by Lisbeth Zwerger, who is a genius.

And here are some things I've taken out of the library to read soon: *Kabir: Ecstatic Poems*, versions by Robert Bly; *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow; and two Brother Cadfael mysteries by Ellis Peters. I've also been working my way through the audio versions of James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*, which are fabulous, and fabulously read by Christopher Timothy.

What music do you listen to?

Oh boy, oh boy! I hope you still have some emergency provisions left over. I grew up in a household where classical music was always being played, along with some stupendous classic stuff like the Beatles's *Abbey Road* and Simon & Garfunkel's *Bookends*. I remember being obsessed with Aaron Copland. I'm surprised my parents can even listen to certain music anymore. They must have gotten awfully sick of hearing it over and over. It's hard to say what I listen to now, actually, because I love so many different kinds of music, and mentioning a few, I feel the weight of everything else I'm leaving out.

But here are some folks I will always love: Bruce Springsteen, Ani DiFranco, Jane Monheit, Coldplay, Peter Gabriel, Sinéad O'Connor, a line of bagpipers could probably convince me to do anything, and nothing fills me with greater glee than a live performance by a good brass quintet. I love any song sung by a Muppet (especially Kermit). Oh, and Yo-Yo Ma was the speaker at my college graduation, and when he brought his cello up on stage and played Mark O'Connor's "Appalachia Waltz" and the first movement of Bach's first cello suite, I nearly swooned.