

## READING GROUP GUIDE FOR *THE CHALICE* BY NANCY BILYEAU

### Introduction

In 1538, as England is torn apart by violent power struggles between crown and cross, Joanna Stafford, a young novice whose monastic life has been dismantled, finds herself unwittingly drawn into a dark plot targeting King Henry VIII. With great reluctance, Joanna assumes her role in a prophecy foretold by three different seers, each providing another vital piece of this strange, otherworldly puzzle. Ultimately, she is swept up into an international intrigue against her King and country. Joanna realizes the life of Henry VIII, as well as the future of Christendom are in her hands, hands that must someday hold the chalice that lays at the center of these deadly foretellings.

### Topics & Questions for Discussion

- 1) What role does prophecy play in *The Chalice*? How does this idea of prophecy drive much of the book? What are your beliefs regarding seers and prophecies?
- 2) Why do you think Bilyeau uses a young novice like Joanna Stafford to carry out such important historic weight as to save Henry VIII or destroy him?
- 3) “Why must this burden fall upon me?” Joanna asks Edmund when they are in Blackfriars, and he answers, “It’s *you*. You are a woman unlike any other, Sister Joanna. I’ve tried to define this quality that sets you apart. I’ve never quite been able to.” Can you define it? How does Joanna’s character shape and affect the unfolding of the story? In what ways does Joanna’s character change over the course of the novel? In the end, how have the events of the novel changed her forever?
- 4) Who directs Gertrude Courtenay to find Joanna? Were you surprised by this revelation? How are Joanna and Gertrude’s lives bound up, beyond the fact of their relatedness by marriage? How do their fates become so entwined? And how does it tie back to Katherine of Aragon? Discuss, as well, how Gertrude and Joanna’s lives are directly impacted by the Boleyn family.
- 5) Joanna resists meeting the seers and hearing the prophecies, and yet Bilyeau writes, “We’d all been forced to abandon our dream. Yet now, because of what I’d revealed, a restoration was possible. Why didn’t I surge forward, snatching at my place in the prophecy, eager to bring back our way of life? But I couldn’t.” Why do you think she isn’t able to? What are the myriad ways in which Joanna resists her

fate and why? Discuss the idea of free will versus fate, and fate versus destiny.

6) Geoffrey Scovill appears in several places to warn Joanna or to help her or to persuade her to be with him. He claims he wants only her happiness, and yet when it is time for Joanna to marry Edmund, he prevents it. What was your reaction to his behavior at that moment? Sometimes Joanna wants Geoffrey near her, yet at other times she pushes him away. What is your impression of their relationship? When they meet again in the cemetery, Scovill regrets that he didn't appreciate his wife, Beatrice, more before her death. What do you think Scovill has learned about love and life? What do you think the future holds for Geoffrey and Joanna's relationship?

7) When Joanna is alone in Blackfriars with Edmund Sommerville, Bilyeau writes, "I waited, with eyes shut. After I don't know how long, his lips pressed against mine, but so gently I almost doubted it was happening. I had never felt a touch this tender. I ached for more from him." How does Bilyeau handle the delicate issue of desire in a work about celibate religious men and women? How does Joanna deal with her own desire?

8) Just as Gardiner once used Joanna's father to get her to look for the Athelstan crown, now when Jacquard Rolin threatens Edmund's life to force Joanna to complete the prophecy. When she complies, what does this say about Joanna's character? Her sense of loyalty? How might you respond in a similar situation?

9) When Joanna meets Ambassador Chapuys in Antwerp, she says, "I know that you and others look to me to put a stop to evil. But in so doing, I am creating evil...The man who spied for Gardiner in Hertfordshire and now Master Adams? God would not have it so – I know in my heart it's not right." What do you think about what Joanna says? How do you think Chapuys feels after she's said this? Have you ever been confronted with such a dilemma in your life?

10) "Was I indeed a fool not to see that this was the plan from the beginning – for me to kill the king of England?" Bilyeau writes. "I'd hoped, and perhaps it was grossly unrealistic, that in the end I would commit some act, such as the abortive attempt to rescue the body of Thomas Becket, that would turn the tide of history...But how wrong I was, how tragically wrong. This, then, was the prophecy that I'd been intertwined with since I was seventeen. To be a murderess." Were you surprised by this revelation as well? Were you hoping for a different sort of prophecy as Joanna was? What might it have been?

11) When Bishop Gardiner takes Joanna to see Gertrude in the Tower of London

and Joanna asks her if she regrets she entered into conspiracy, given how much she has lost – her husband, her son, her homes and fortune – Gertrude hisses, “*Never.*” How do you feel about this? Do you find it hard to believe? What sort of a person is Gertrude? How would you feel in her situation?

12) Joanna asks Bishop Gardiner if he has written the article that forbids religious people from marrying with her in mind, and he says, “Did you really think that religious policy for the entire kingdom was written just to strike out at *you*? Revenge, perhaps, revenge on my part for your failure to secure the Athelstan crown or perhaps for your recent flouting of my will?” Joanna says nothing, and then he finishes by saying, “You have never been a consideration of that import. Not everyone is meant to play a significant part in the affairs of the world, Joanna.” Do you believe him? Does Joanna? What do you think is the truth?

13) In the beginning of *The Chalice?*, John is a madman, running around Dartford spouting scripture about doom. In the end, he turns up at Joanna’s house in Dartford sane, well-dressed, and working as a wood collector. Do you think he is a symbol and/or metaphor for something in the novel? If so, discuss what it might be.

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1) Read Nancy Bilyeau’s debut novel *The Crown*, which also features Joanna Stafford.

2) If you are in New York City and interested in tapestries, you can visit The Cloisters; they showcase two sets of breathtaking tapestries known as the Unicorn tapestries and the Nine Heroes tapestries. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is also a wonderful place to see medieval artifacts, paintings, tapestries, and clothing.

3) If it is more historical information about this period you are after, there are two wonderful books by Alison Weir: *Henry VIII: The King and His Court* and *Six Wives of Henry VIII*.

4) Enjoy these films about this period in history: *Henry VIII: Mind of a Tyrant*, is a wonderful 2009 TV documentary by historian David Starkey which follows Henry from his childhood to the end of his life. But if you’re in the mood for fiction films, try *Anne of a Thousand Days* and *A Man for All Seasons* and/or the Cate Blanchett Elizabeth films.