

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

### Introduction

Former Dominican novice Joanna Stafford occupies a precarious position—one that is all the more dangerous because, unbeknownst to Henry VIII, she has twice been implicated in plots to overthrow him. So when she is called to Whitehall Palace to oversee Henry's valuable collection of tapestries, she is understandably wary. But even in her new position of favor, Joanna has much to worry about, and her worst suspicions are realized when an assassin makes an attempt on her life minutes after she sets foot in Whitehall. Meanwhile, her naive and beautiful friend Catherine Howard is being courted by the king, despite his still being married to Anne of Cleves.

When Joanna discovers that some of her closest allies have hatched a sinister plot with occult underpinnings, she is thrust into another high-stakes game of life and death that will take her from the highest offices in the Holy Roman Empire to the executioner's scaffold on Tower Hill in an attempt to discover, once and for all, the life she is meant to lead.

### Questions and Topics For Discussion

- 1) Upon her arrival at Whitehall, Thomas Culpepper tells Joanna that Henry VIII "desired a court built on chivalry." Would you describe Hans Holbein as chivalrous? What about Culpepper? Cromwell? The king himself?
- 2) Though she is certainly a "woman of surprises," as King Henry calls her, Joanna finds ways to use men's assumptions about a woman's role to her advantage. How does being a woman give Joanna advantages in court? Compare what Joanna does to the ways Catherine Howard uses her femininity as a tool for advancement.
- 3) Catherine Howard poses for a tapestry of *The Sorrow of Niobe*. In Greek myth, Niobe claimed that, because she had fourteen children, rather than just two, she should be worshipped instead of Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis. Apollo and Artemis punished Niobe's hubris by killing her children. Why do you think Henry chose this subject? Can you draw parallels to any themes in the novel?
- 4) Holbein says that Joanna is "someone who sees the world in black and white," and she can be quite single-minded in her ideas about the court. How does Joanna's view change over the course of the novel? Give examples of some issues that become more complex for her.
- 5) Holbein tells Joanna, "There is no one law in the German lands. Each kingdom, each dukedom, each principality has its own laws. It's easy to make mistakes, but those mistakes can be hard to recover from." How is this similar to Joanna's life at court? How does she have to juggle shifting sets of values and codes in order to survive in England?
- 6) What do you think of Joanna's decision to involve herself in the dark magic necessary to undo the spell she believes has been cast on Culpepper? What does it tell you about her character? Were you surprised by her belief in Orobas's power?

7) Joanna struggles with whether to tell Geoffrey about the prophecy that shapes her life. Do you think that she does this more for her own protection or for his? Why?

8) Transformation is a major theme of this novel, and Joanna is witness to many personalities who are changed by love (or lack thereof). Compare Catherine Howard, Thomas Culpepper, and Geoffrey's transformations in the novel. How does love change these characters' fates for better or for worse? Is love worth it for these characters?

9) Joanna is often torn between her duties as a subject of the king and her duties as a woman of God, one whose Catholic beliefs are directly opposed to the court's mandates. At times, she must compromise in order to survive. Describe Joanna's personal moral code. Do you respect her as an ethical character? Why or why not?

10) Joanna has a complicated relationship with Catherine Howard; and Joanna can't quite bring herself to approve of Catherine's choices. Yet at the end of the novel, Joanna is willing to lie in order to bring Catherine happiness. Did you expect this? Would you have done the same?

11) Near the end of *The Tapestry*, Edmund says that Bishop Gardiner "would do anything if it meant bringing him—and this kingdom—closer to God." Contrast this with Joanna's personality and goals. How are Joanna and Gardiner alike and different in the ways they stick to their moral codes? Who do you most admire?

12) What do you think will come next for Geoffrey Scovill and Joanna Stafford?