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DISCUSSION GUIDE

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WALKER
BOOKS

The GIFTS THAT BIND US

Caroline O'Donoghue

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

In *The Gifts That Bind Us*, O'Donoghue plunges the reader back into the heart of the world created in *All Our Hidden Gifts*. With the pressures of exams mounting, and adolescence giving way to adult choices and life plans, Maeve, Lily, Fiona and Roe try to discover what their gifts truly mean, and what they are capable of. As they begin to understand more about the world they now inhabit, they still need to reconcile what happened to them last summer; but when the secretive Children of Brigid return, bringing new threats and schemes, the stakes are raised for them, and for all of Kilbeg.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline O'Donoghue is an author and journalist. She has published two adult novels, *Promising Young Women* and *Scenes of a Graphic Nature*, and is currently working on a collection of personal essays exploring her experiences of feminism and witchcraft. She has a regular column in *The Irish Examiner*, and has written for *The Irish Independent*, *Glamour*, *Buzzfeed* and *Vice*, among others. Caroline also hosts *Sentimental Garbage*, a podcast in which she reviews commercial women's fiction titles with other authors. Visit Caroline on Twitter: @Czaroline

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Gifts That Bind Us picks up where *All Our Hidden Gifts* ends, in a world full of magic, wicca, tarot and power struggles. It is also laced through with the realities of teen life – angst, exam pressure, ill mental health, relationship troubles and fears for the future. As such, there are huge themes running through the book that may find an echo in readers' lived experience. From self-harm, dissociative behaviours and LGBTQ+ discrimination to the fear of making decisions that could affect the rest of a teenager's life, there is much here to discuss beyond the carefully realized fantasy. Group members should be encouraged to feel comfortable in sharing their opinions and views, and group leaders should also ensure that adequate support, signposting and information is available for any member who may require it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started:

What did anyone like about the book? How did it make them feel? Would anyone like to expand on their answer? How "real" is the story being told? Consider whether the central theme of wicca and magic affects the way readers understand the more "real life" issues that Maeve and her friends are facing. It may also be worth recapping the events of *All Our Hidden Gifts* before beginning, or agreeing acceptable levels of "spoilers" should anyone in the group not have read it.

1. The gifts

I suppose I'll always remember this as the summer that Roe learned to drive and I learned to read minds. – p.7

At the beginning of the novel, each character has been developing their gift. What does it mean for a group of friends to have secrets that are only shared amongst them? Is this an allegory for friendship, or simply magical powers? What does it mean that some "inherited" their power, where Maeve was born a "sensitive"? Does this affect her thinking? If so, how? Of all the "gifts" in the novel, which do readers consider the most powerful, and why?

2. The bind

"Sorry if I'm being thick here," I say sheepishly. "But what is a bind?" – p.201

Consider the title of the novel. What is the significance of the word "bind"? What do readers take the meaning or meanings of the title to be? What does it mean to be bound to someone? How does it relate to the four friends? And how does it relate to the magic of the novel?

3. Us

If you were to see the four of us out together, you'd probably think we were four best friends, and that the best-
friendship held an equilibrium that shot out in all directions. – p.11

The novel sees the core group of four from the first book, but also an expanding group of other characters – Manon, Aaron, Heather, Honor, etc. Explore together how O'Donoghue increases the scope and reach of the novel – how does she grow the world in which the action takes place? Is this a change for the reader, the characters, or both? What effect does this have on the experience of reading the book?

4. Lily

"What did you do, Lily?"

"Practising," she says without remorse. "Like we're supposed to." – p.68

What did readers make of Lily, having come back from being the river? Why does anyone think her behaviour is so detached? Does her behaviour change throughout the novel? Consider how she acts at the beginning and the end – what causes any change? Can this relate to real-life situations, and friends coming back from traumatic events? If so, how?

5. Shifting friendships

She's very fond of Fiona. The two of them have formed a kind of separate relationship, independent of me and Roe. – p.21

How have the relationships of the group developed since the first book? What has changed? What has stayed the same? Are these changes due to the magic, or are they more a part of growing up? Or both? Discuss how O'Donoghue creates a sense of teenage friendship through Maeve's eyes. How accurate is that picture?

6. Lights vs holes

"No," he replies quietly. "That sounds very beautiful."

"What do you see?" ... "Holes." – p.268

How do Aaron and Maeve compare to one another? Are they really more similar than Maeve is to her friends? Consider the powers they possess – Maeve can see thoughts through lights; Aaron can see someone's deepest guilt as "holes" in the person. Are these two sides of the same ability? Discuss Aaron's response when Maeve explains how her power works – does this change anyone's opinion of Aaron?

7. Life choices

For some reason, I can't stop the anxiety rising in my throat. The idea that, at the end of next year, I will be the only one left in Kilbeg. – p.50

How does the author portray not only the fantastical elements of the story, but also the everyday concerns of teenage girls in Ireland? How does the theme of being "left" manifest throughout the novel? What are the different characters looking to do? Does the reader always get the full picture?

8. Manon

"I'm not ashamed." Manon snaps at her mother. Then she levels her gaze, steely, at the headrest.

"My name is Manon Renard," she says. "My family are the Renard trickster gods." – p.329

The introduction of Manon to the novel brings with it a whole new concept of magic and fantasy – gods. What does it mean that Manon is descended from the Renard trickster gods? Why does O'Donoghue introduce the concept of other, pagan gods, at this point in the novel? What are the implications for the other characters, or the direction of the novels, that other gods exist? You may like to research Renard stories, and French folklore, or other trickster gods in advance, to inform the conversation.

9. Feminine power

“Because everything that hates magic, also hates sex.” – p.285

Discuss the given quotation as a group – you may want to look at the whole passage. What does Nuala mean? Can you define, or give examples of, the “everything” here? Does the statement ring true? Consider it within the context of the book, but also any real-life examples where attitudes towards both can be compared.

10. Sister Assumpta

“Some things. My gift is that I can see things. My curse is that I am not allowed to interfere.” – p.362

Discuss the character of Sister Assumpta. Did anyone suspect that more would be revealed as the novel progressed? What does it signify that she died so soon after Maeve discovered her truth? What does anyone think the significance of the knife she gives to Maeve is? How does Sister Assumpta fit into the idea of the well of Kilbeg? You may like to consider the idea of repeated events, histories, destiny, etc., and compare with Maeve’s feelings towards Heaven in the first novel.

11. Wells of magic

“When you say ‘Wells’,” Fiona ventures, flipping through the pages, “you don’t mean literal wells. Like, with a little stone wall and a bucket.” – p.195

How did readers respond to the idea of Kilbeg, or more specifically, St Bernadette’s, being a well of magic? Does the idea of “hotspots” relate to anything outside of the novel? Do any readers think of particular places as being “charged” or in some way different to others? And what does the idea of this well being drained mean to Kilbeg? Can a place be drained of its “magic” or life force, or its passion? Did any readers reflect on places they know that have fought to protect their identity and their wellbeing? Or have been “drained” in some way?

12. Master manipulator

“Before that I was nobody. Just another master manipulator in their ranks.” – p.306

Discuss the way the Children of Brigid operate. Where does their power and influence come from? How do they use “master manipulators” to get what they want? Open the discussion up to real-world examples – can readers identify any groups, bodies, organizations, etc., that use similar tactics or operate in similar ways? You might like to consider not just religious groups, but lobbyists, political parties, companies, conglomerates, etc., too. What can this novel tell us about the way we, as consumers, can be manipulated?