

# *The Harrowing*

JAMES AITCHESON

## Reading Guide

1. The main part of the novel is written in the present tense, rather than the more conventional past tense. Why do you think this is, and what effect(s) does it create?
2. For all their villainy, the Normans are rarely glimpsed, apart from during a handful of fleeting encounters. How does this affect the reader's perception of them?
3. Whereas most novels are divided into numbered chapters, *The Harrowing* is split into eight larger sections of uneven length ('First Day', 'Second Day' etc.). How does this affect the mood of the story as it unfolds?
4. Of the five main characters, which one do you most closely identify or sympathise with, and why?
5. Resistance and collaboration are key themes of the novel. Which path, if either, do you think is presented as morally right? Which would you choose?
6. Tova, the protagonist, is the only character whose tale isn't narrated in the first person. Why do you think this is, and does it matter?

7. Each of the five main characters is guilty of some past wrongdoing. Can you forgive them for the things they've done, or are some crimes simply unforgivable?
8. Women play a more prominent role in *The Harrowing* than in Aitcheson's previous works. To what extent are Tova and Merewyn defined by their gender in the novel?
9. What is symbolised by the book Guthred carries, and what is suggested by its destruction towards the end of the novel?
10. Although set in the past, *The Harrowing* also owes much to post-apocalyptic, crime, horror and anti-war fiction. How would you characterise it?
11. By focussing on refugees in a time of humanitarian crisis, the novel touches upon contemporary issues. Can we ever learn from history? Is it important that historical novels engage with modern concerns?
12. The novel concludes with Tova narrating a story of her own to the refugee children. What do you think is the meaning of this unusual final scene? In what sense does it offer closure?

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