

Book Discussion Guide for THE BIRD AND THE BLADE by Megan Bannen



1. What is a “strong female character”? What does it mean to be a hero who is female? Does it differ from the typical male narrative? Should it? Why?
2. Jinghua tells Khalaf, “Cruelty is easy to repay, my lord. Kindness is another matter.” What does she mean by that?
3. Jinghua often contemplates her lack of control over her own life and future, yet early in the book she says, “It seems to me that I’ve made some choices—some very bad choices—that have led me to this moment.” Are there times when Jinghua thinks she has no control over her life when, in fact, she has options? What choices does she make throughout the novel and how do they impact the story?
4. What does Khalaf mean when he tells Jinghua, “And wilderness is paradise now’?” Why does he often express himself through poetry instead of his own words?
5. It is unusual to have an older adult as one of the main characters in a young adult novel. Why do you think Timur’s presence is important to the book? And what does he mean when he says, “We are all as flawed as our sons think we are”?
6. At the end of the book, Khalaf tells Jinghua, “You know nothing, slave.” Why does he say this, and how does it impact the rest of the story?
7. What is the significance of Jinghua’s last word?
8. The book is laser-focused on three characters: Jinghua, Khalaf, and Timur. How does their relationship change over the course of the novel? How does each character relate to the other two, and what do those relationships reveal about each person?
9. Turandokht barely makes an appearance in the book, but her presence looms large. What do you think of her? Is she the “bad guy” in this story? If not, who or what is the antagonist?

10. This is a book about the power of sacrifice, both large and small. What sacrifices does each character make? Are those sacrifices worth it?
11. Historically, the fate of the slave girl differs from version to version of this story. In both Pétis de la Croix and Puccini's versions of events, the slave girl meets a tragic end, but in other versions, Khalaf intervenes, giving her a second chance to move on with her life. Why do you think the author chose to stick with the more tragic ending? If you were writing this book, would you have done the same, or would you have made a different choice? Why?
12. The author mentions in the note at the end of the book that she took great liberties with history for the sake of fiction. Does that work here? Or is it better to err on the side of strict adherence to historical accuracy?
13. The author chose to write a book set in the 13th century Mongol Empire, but she uses fairly modern language, especially in dialogue. What did you think of that choice? Why do you think the author wrote it that way?
14. There are many quotations from works of literature that would have been available to the characters during this time period. Why do you think the author included them? Do these quotations enhance or detract from the scenes in which they're included? How?
15. The novel as a whole deals with many issues: gender inequality, love, duty, family, sacrifice, etc. What ideas do you think the author wants readers to take away from the book?

About the Author

Megan Bannen is a librarian and the author of *The Bird and the Blade*. In her spare time, she collects graduate degrees from Kansas colleges and universities. While most of her professional career has been spent in public libraries, she has also sold luggage, written grants, and taught English at home and abroad. She lives in the Kansas City area with her husband, their two sons, and a few too many pets with literary names.