

Book Club Guide

Inlcuding a letter from author Charlie Lovett, a Q&A with Charlie Lovett, suggested questions for discussion, and additional resources for your book club meeting or personal reflection.

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Dear Readers,

On January 23, 1980 I had my first experience of a British medieval cathedral when I went with a school group to Ely. I was seventeen years old and I have loved English cathedrals ever since. In 2000, I made a six week pilgrimage tracing the roots of British Christianity from Iona, Scotland to Canterbury. Along the way I visited sixteen medieval cathedrals, often spending the entire day exploring the precincts, taking tours, and attending services. Often, somewhere within the cathedral complex, I would come across a wooden door, firmly shut, bearing a small sign that read “Library: Closed to the Public.”

Years later, when I sat down to begin my third novel, I considered the two I had already written and noticed a common thread (other than rare books). *The Bookman’s Tale* was partially set in a university rare book library. *First Impressions* included two English country house libraries in two different centuries. What other kinds of libraries are there, I thought? Then I remembered those closed doors at all those cathedrals. I wanted to discover what was behind those doors—so I wrote *The Lost Book of the Grail*.

Having found the setting for the book, I needed to populate it with characters. What sort of person, I thought, would want to spend all his time in a cathedral library? If you want to know how I answered that question, look no further than Arthur Prescott. He is a true example of character following setting.

In crafting *The Lost Book of the Grail*, I wanted to write a page turning story with a historical mystery; I wanted to create characters that you would love and become frustrated with and encourage; I wanted those characters to be deeply meaningful to one another; I even wanted to explore the place of books, libraries, cathedrals, and faith in modern society. But I also wanted to help you experience a little bit of the joy and awe that I felt when I stepped into Ely Cathedral nearly four decades ago. If you can feel even a little of that, you’ll know what drove me to write this book in the first place.

Happy Reading,
Charlie Lovett



&



with author Charlie Lovett

Q: How did you begin work on *The Lost Book of the Grail*?

A: This book began with the setting—an English cathedral library. I had written *The Bookman's Tale*, which is partly set in a university library, and *First Impressions*, which is partly set in two English country house libraries. So, I liked the idea of finding a different kind of library setting. I had spent a lot of time in English cathedrals and I thought there could be all sorts of fun secrets hiding in a cathedral library. For me setting, character, and story are all closely linked. Once I had my setting I asked, "What kind of person would hang out in a cathedral library?" That question led me to Arthur Prescott, and he led me to the story.

Do you favor digital or print media?

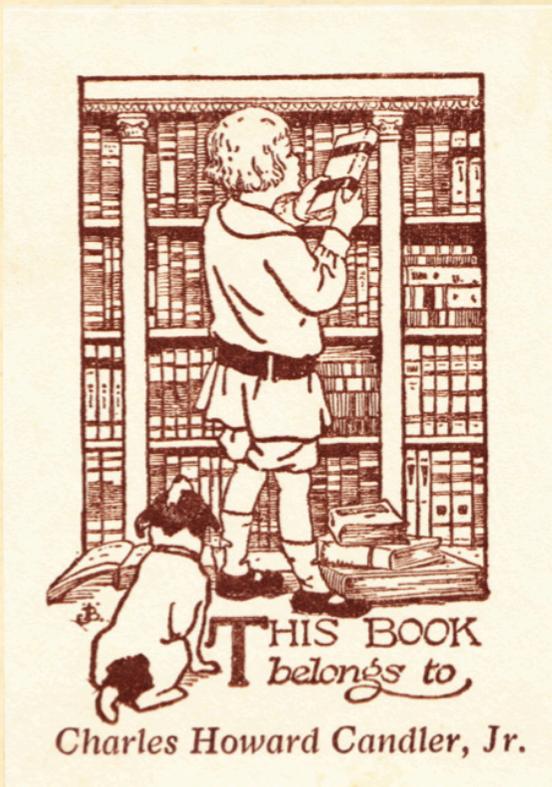
A: One of the reasons the first discussion between Arthur and Bethany was so easy for me to write is that I agree with both of them. I could not have written *The Lost Book of the Grail* without the chance to hold ancient manuscripts and page through rare books. But I also could not have written it without digital archives of newspapers and scanned materials. I still believe the best way to preserve knowledge, stories, and culture for future generations is to print books. Well-made books last for centuries and their wide distribution is a natural defense against companies going bankrupt, governments falling, and other unknowable future events. But digital archives can make long hidden information available to everyone, improve scholarship, and even help protect rare materials by reducing the need for handling.

Where did you do your research?

A: I stepped into my first English cathedral in 1980 and have been visiting them ever since. In 2000 I made a six-week pilgrimage tracing the development of Christianity in Britain. So I already had a lot of the background knowledge needed for this book. But I did visit several cathedral libraries, most successfully at Worcester Cathedral. There my wife and I were able to arrange a private tour with one of the librarians who showed us many things that ended up in the book—an 1,100-year-old gospel book in its original binding, medieval graffiti in the margins of manuscripts, and more. I also visited Hereford Cathedral, which has the largest surviving chained library in the world.

Did you love the Arthur stories when you were growing up?

A: I read a lot during my childhood and teens and I had a lot of favorite books, but I didn't read King Arthur until I was much older, and even then, I felt more or less the opposite of how Arthur Prescott feels. What he likes about the legends ("reading them in Malory was a constant reminder that these stories were written hundreds of years before the invention of the novel, before the idea that a long narrative could be anything other than a collection of vaguely related short narratives" (p.37) is exactly what failed to attract me—their disconnectedness. Approaching them as an author, I went back and read the 1917 edition illustrated by Arthur Rackham. I had a copy sitting on my shelf that belonged to my grandfather during his boyhood, so it seemed right to have Arthur Prescott's grandfather give him a copy of this edition.



Charlie Lovett's grandfather's boyhood bookplate from his copy of *The Romance of King Arthur*.



Arthur Rackham's illustration of The Grail Maiden (first mentioned p. 89).

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- 1) Why is it especially appropriate that Arthur thinks Bethany is a statue when he first sees her (p. 43)? How does Arthur view the world at the start of the novel? How does Bethany change that view? How would you describe Arthur's character arc?
- 2) Arthur and Bethany both have personal connections to legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table as well as to the Holy Grail stories. What is your own connection to the King Arthur tales? Did you grow up reading them? Encounter them through Monty Python or T. H. White? Is an enthusiasm for these stories necessary to appreciate *The Lost Book of the Grail*?
- 3) England is full of ancient churches and cathedrals, each with its own unique history. Why do you think the author chose not a real cathedral or a completely invented one, but a pre-existing fictional cathedral (created in the 1850s by Anthony Trollope) for his setting?
- 4) How does the author use the historical flashbacks at the beginning of each chapter to shed light on the contemporary story? Did you like these sections? Why do you think he chose to tell the story of history through ordinary people rather than through kings and archbishops?
- 5) Why do you think the author includes Arthur's relationship with Gwen? What is the true nature of that relationship? Does Gwen see Arthur as a member of her church flock? If so, how does that perception change their friendship?
- 6) What role do David and Oscar play in the novel? How do they provide context and counterpoint to the character of Arthur?
- 7) On pp. 46–51, Arthur and Bethany debate the relative merits of print vs. digital media. Did this discussion reveal anything to you about the usefulness of either format? What do you think is the proper relationship between print and digital media in our society?
- 8) What role does music play in the narrative? Why do you think the author chose particular pieces of music such as John Rutter's *Requiem* (p. 230–233)?
- 9) On p. 279, Bethany says, "You know, Arthur, you can decide to believe. That's all it takes sometimes is a decision." Do you think Bethany is right? Can moving from unbelief to belief be as simple as making a decision? And if not, what does it take to believe?

10) At several points in the novel, Arthur ponders the purposes of libraries—both the cathedral library and the “media center” at Barchester University. Are libraries relevant in a digital culture? If so, what role should libraries play in our society? What about rare book libraries? Do they offer more than storage and protection of valuable artifacts?

11) The subtitle of the novel is *A Visitor’s Guide to Barchester Cathedral*. How do you feel that the chapter titles and the short excerpts from the guidebook connect to the narrative?

12) The novel is about, among other things, the ways in which we connect to the past. How do you connect to the past—your own and that of your family and cultural heritage? Do you use books, stories, objects? Is it important to maintain connections to the past? Why or why not?

13) At the end of the book Arthur makes a decision. Do you think he makes the right decision? Why or why not?

14) The book includes many references to works of art, music, architecture, and literature, some of which exist and some of which don’t. How does the inclusion of real works like Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* or the Arthur Rackham illustration of the Grail Maiden add to the world of the novel?



The frontispiece from the 1634 Stansby Edition of *The Most Ancient and Famous History of the Renowned Prince Arthur King of Britaine* (first mentioned p. 15).

Further Resources

How to Make a Perfect Pitcher of Pimm's:

American readers may not be familiar with Pimm's (see p. 212), a classic English cocktail often served at garden parties during the long days of summer. If you can find a bottle of Pimm's Cup #1, you can use that and skip the first part of the recipe.

- 1) Mix together 4 parts gin, 3 parts sweet vermouth, and 1 1/2 parts orange liqueur (Cointreau or Triple Sec).
- 2) For each pitcher of Pimm's dice up half an English cucumber, a dozen or so strawberries, and a couple of pieces of citrus fruit (orange and lime are my favorites). Put the fruit and the Pimm's mixture in the pitcher and let sit for a couple of hours.
- 3) In a tall glass, pour about a half glass of Pimm's over ice. Spoon in a little of the fruit mixture if needed. Top off with ginger ale or pale European lemonade (Lorina clear sparkling is best). Give it a stir, finish with a sprig of fresh mint, and enjoy!

More Information:

Inside the Writer's Studio podcast special edition with Charlie Lovett discussing *The Lost Book of the Grail*.

<http://charlielovett42.podbean.com/>

Charlie Lovett's article about the Nanteos Cup, "My Brush with the Holy Grail," on Salon.com.

<https://www.salon.com/2017/03/05/my-brush-with-the-holy-grail/>

Charlie Lovett discusses *The Lost Book of the Grail* on the podcast Covered from Hologram Radio.

<https://hologramradio.org/?s=Lovett>

The Requiem by John Rutter sung by the Choir of Clare College, Cambridge

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jV7kQKy-O7s>