The Passion of Dolssa

Julie Berry

Author of All the Truth That’s in Me
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The Passion of Dolssa Discussion Questions – From the Publisher

1. Both Dolssa and Botille become fugitives at some point. In what ways do their escapes and journeys parallel each other? How does hiding from a threat influence their beliefs and actions?

2. Botille, her sisters, and Dolssa are all young women making their way through a heavily patriarchal world without the support of parents or a husband or the Church. How does their independence affect perceptions of them? In what ways does the community reject or support them because of their gender and familial status?

3. Who are the villains of the story? What makes them a villain? What sympathetic or redeeming qualities do they have, if any? To what extent should people who do evil things be viewed as sympathetic?

4. Dolssa’s mother says “For my sake, guard your tongue to guard your life, my daughter” (p. 10). Would it have been better for Dolssa to remain silent instead of speaking out? Why or why not? At what other points in the story does the dilemma of silence vs. standing up for one’s beliefs play a role for any of the characters?

5. The Passion of Dolssa is rooted in historical events and uses Old Provençal words to develop the setting. What aspects of the book do you find the most relatable today? Do you see any parallels between our world and the one Botille and Dolssa live in?

6. There are many narrators throughout the book, from the main characters like Dolssa and Botille to minor characters like Hugo to the villagers whose testimony Lucien records. What do these perspectives add to the story? How would the book be different if we did not hear the words and voices of these multiple minor characters?

7. How does Dolssa’s presence cause the village community to develop or fragment? Is her influence for the better or for the worse? What do you think she should have said or done differently after her arrival in the village?

8. Compare Dolssa’s actions when she is separated from her beloved and her mother to Botille’s actions when she is separated from her sisters and Symo. How do Dolssa and Botille react to loss? To reunion?

9. Botille and her sisters each have a specific gift or calling: matchmaking, fortune-telling, or hospitality. How do these gifts impact the sisters’ influence on one another and on their community? What significance do the gifts have to Botille once she is separated from her sisters?

10. At the very end of the book, Fernando wonders, “But which was the greater sin? To lie, or to help a heretic?” (p. 446). How does this moral dilemma show up throughout the book for different characters? What might Fernando himself decide to do after the book ends?

11. At the end of the book, Botille says of her sister Sazia, “If I’d had to spot her solely on the life she led, I never would have recognized her. Would those who knew me ever recognize me?” (p. 420). How do the values of and choices made by the characters change over the course of the book? Are the changes for the better or for the worse?
12. What happens to the story if you consider each of the three main characters (Botille, Dolssa, and Lucien) as antagonists to the other two? What does each pair of enemies fight over?

13. Botille and her sisters go from homeless outcasts to valued contributors to their community; Dolssa, who once lived a privileged life, travels the opposite way. What is significant about this reversal of character arcs?

14. The good intentions of minor characters often produce disastrous results for the main characters in the story. Is this a reflection of reality? Why or why not?

Discussion questions for The Passion of Dolssa by Julie Berry

1. “Passion” meant something very different in the thirteenth century than it does today; it referred to the suffering and deaths of Jesus and the Christian martyrs, while in contemporary times, the term means “strong feeling,” especially of a sexual nature. Do both meanings work when examining the book’s title?

2. The twelfth century abbot Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “If you question the heretic about his faith, nothing is more Christian; if about his daily converse, nothing more blameless; and what he says he proves by his actions.” Does Berry’s portrayal of heretics reflect this sentiment?

3. Was Dolssa’s “beloved” real, or was she delusional? If he was real, why didn’t he save Dolssa and her mother? If Dolssa was delusional, how do you explain the miracles that seemed to occur in her presence?

4. What happens to the story if you consider each of the three main characters (Botille, Dolssa, and Lucien) as antagonists to the other two? What does each pair of enemies fight over?

5. Did you find Berry’s use of multiple points of view effective? Why or why not? How about the use of nested stories?

6. Jobau appears to suffer from what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Is he tragic or heroic? Both? Would there have been a way for him to live a different life, given the horrors he both witnessed and committed as part of the Albigensian Crusade? How is he a personification of the changes that have come to the Languedoc region as a result of the “holy war?”

7. Botille and her sisters go from homeless outcasts to valued contributors of their community; Dolssa, who once lived a privileged life, travels the opposite way. What is significant about this reversal of character arcs?

8. Lucien is a zealot who is spiritually broken after Dolssa heals him. Does his state at the end of the book satisfy you? Has he received justice for his actions? What about his state at the beginning of the book, which is the end of his life?

9. Adoption is a repeated theme throughout the book. Na Pieret adopts her nephews as her heirs; Astruga adopts the de Prato family, becoming wife and mother. How do these subplots give resonance to the main story line?

10. How are Dolssa’s supernatural gifts similar to those of Botille and her sisters? How do they differ?

11. The good intentions of minor characters often produce disastrous results for the main characters in the story. Is this a reflection of reality? Why or why not?

12. Why did Berry choose to make Botille a matchmaker? How does her role as a matchmaker affect her interactions with Dolssa?

13. It’s been said that history is written by the victors. However, in many ways, this book is the story of the conquered: Old Provençal (the “Langue d’Oc,”) by the French language; the amicx de Dieu by the established Church; and the practical values of the peasants by the mores of the Catholic faith. What does the novel express through its depictions of some of history’s “losers?”
14. How does Dolssa compare with nonfictional female mystics: Joan of Arc, Hildegard von Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Thérèse of Lisieux? Many seem to travel the same path from feared heretic to saint. Why is this? Would Dolssa be sainted today?
15. Why did the Church fear heretics? What are some modern parallels?

Five Questions – Julie Berry

FEBRUARY 14, 2017 / AKARRAS823

Last year when I was doing some market research in YA historical fiction I went to the bookstore and grabbed four books off the shelf and bought them. One of those was Julie Berry’s The Passion of Dolssa. I was not disappointed when I began reading.

Dolssa is a high-born young woman in 13th century France with the gift of hearing words directly from God. In her community she is revered as a miracle worker and a mystic, but the Church hears of her good deeds and brands her a heretic. Dolssa barely escapes being burned at the stake and goes on the run.

Botille lives in a fishing village on the coast and makes a living running a tavern with her sisters, but is also the town matchmaker. When she discovers Dolssa half-dead, she brings her back to the tavern and hides her, nursing her back to health and forming an unlikely friendship. But the Church won’t stop in their quest to find Dolssa. It is up to Botille and the people of her village to save the girl from a fiery fate.

I wrote a full review of The Passion of Dolssa last April and you can read it here. It was a dark and twisty read full of great historical detail and a thrilling conclusion.

FIVE QUESTIONS

1. What was the original seed idea for your book? Did it start with a character, a situation, or an idea?

The Passion of Dolssa began gradually as several different pieces joined together. I’d always been interested in medieval mystics, and had read a fair bit about them. I had once thought, what if I recast Macbeth’s three witches as teenaged sisters running a roadside inn? At another time I thought, why do matchmakers always need to be older women? What if there was a young matchmaker? But none of these ideas found each other until I listened to an audio lecture on the Albigensian Crusade in southern France in the early 13th Century, and the subsequent inquisitions into heresy. Then everything clicked: what if a girl mystic was accused of heresy and sentenced to execution, then rescued and helped by a girl matchmaker who runs a tavern with her two sisters? Et voilà. The Passion of Dolssa. Plus a few years of research, writing, and revision, give or take.

2. What is your writing process? Are you an outliner or a pantser?

I’m pretty much a pantser, but I use outlines extensively when revising. The Passion of Dolssa underwent significant revision, and outlines were crucially to wrapping my head around the scope of the story and its many voices and moving parts.
3. Who are the writers which most influence your writing style?

Hm, I’m really not sure how to answer that one. I don’t there’s anyone whom I consciously try to evoke. I have lots of favorite authors, but I don’t know to that extent they find their way into my style. I love Charles Dickens, P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, C.S. Lewis, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters – the usual suspects, I guess.

4. Do you listen to music when you write?

I don’t. I love music, so it diverts my attention away from writing. Background noise isn’t my friend. It’s why I don’t write in cafés.

5. What are you reading right now?

I’m reading 13 Ways of Looking at the Novel by Jane Smiley, and Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad.

Julie Berry is the author of the acclaimed young adult novel The Passion of Dolssa, the award-winning, All the Truth That’s in Me (2013, Viking) and The Scandalous Sisterhood of Prickwillow Place (2014, Roaring Brook), and six other critically acclaimed titles for young readers. A forthcoming middle grade novel, The Emperor’s Ostrich, releases in June 2017 from Roaring Brook. She grew up in western New York and holds a BS from Rensselaer in communication and an MFA from Vermont College in writing for children and young adults. Before becoming an author, she worked in software sales and marketing. She now divides her time between eastern Massachusetts and southern California with her husband and four sons. Find her online at www.julieberrybooks.com, or on Twitter at @julieberrybooks.

https://annakarras.blog/2017/02/14/five-questions-julie-berry/
About the Ending: Unraveling The Passion of Dolssa

I’ve never done this before in my career, but I have decided to write a few hints to help readers who may be left with questions at the conclusion of The Passion of Dolssa. I don’t like spoilers, but I don’t want to leave anyone in the dark. If you’ve read the book already, and want to know more, read on.

I’m going to spell this out with a handful of questions and answers. They are in order, but you need to click on them to reveal them.

1. Who is Botille talking to as she relates her entire story?
   An unnamed inquisitor.

2. What does Botille continually do to try to protect those she loves?
   She lies. She invents a story and lures you in with its believability. Remember this: you can’t fully trust Botille.

How are we doing so far? That might be enough. If not, proceed.

3. Why does Botille need to lie?
   Because association with a heretic means you are a heretic. So there’s no hope of mercy for anyone known to have associated with Dolssa, and, by extension, Botille herself.

4. What, then, is the best way Botille can lie to protect those she loves? Hint: she tried to save Dolssa this way once. It involved Felipa de Prato. But it didn’t work.
   She tells the inquisitors they are dead.

Got it yet? Think. You will. But if not, I surrender. Here’s the full spoiler.

Symo and Bertran aren’t dead. They’re alive and well. Botille, knowing she would be executed for her testimony, makes one last Hail Mary pass to try to save them. As she comes to the close of her story to the inquisitors, she kills off her husband and son, hoping to stall the hunt for them just long enough to get a message to them. She is the woman in the basement of the church, waiting to be executed, and Fernando Diaz is her only hope of saving her loved ones.

Did that answer your questions? If not, please contact me and let me know. How does it affect your feelings about the story?

http://www.julieberrybooks.com/about-the-ending-unraveling-the-passion-of-dolssa