BOOK CLUB NOTES

HOLS WAN

a divine adventure
LOUISE OMER

SCRIBE

Dear Book Clubbers,

Thank you, from my heart to yours, for accompanying me on a personal journey that was both devastating and delivering. I felt very alone for most of it, so it's a gift to share the agony, ecstasy, and strangeness of my pilgrimage with you.

I wrote three drafts of *Holy Woman*. The first in my mother's home on Kaurna Yerta, the second in Dublin during lockdown, the third in Galway on Ireland's west coast. During the first draft I laid the scaffolding of my theory, the second I excavated memories I'd pushed deep, and the third I tied it all together as I came to see the transformation of my self and spirit. The travelling period had lasted a year, and I needed almost two years' distance to truly understand it. Meaning requires time and softness to fully unfold.

The second draft in particular was an excruciating process. It was another journey of discovery as I stayed in one place, 16,000km from home. Perhaps I needed the geographical distance to get perspective on my story, to learn about the definition of coercive control, to give myself permission to use the word domestic violence. Every day I wrote for three hours, diving into my subconscious to unearth scenes of mundane and low-level manipulation, humiliation, and fear, that were intertwined with my experience of love. When I returned to the realm of the living, I would stalk Dublin's Portobello Canal and rest my back against my favourite tree, smoking and watching mute swans dive for underwater reeds, or snap and grunt, or take wet green shits on the bank. I grew to hate and love the weight in my belly, the gulping dark that accompanied the unearthing.

This writing released me. It was an essential path to untangling the manifold ways that patriarchy incurs relationships of domination and submission. It taught me how I had participated in my own destruction. Which then led me to discover my own power and agency.

Why is 'God' a man? This was the question I began with. Many will say that the divine has no gender, that the words we use to describe the ineffable are just a linguistic tool, but I say that the spiritual is political. 'It matters what stories make worlds,' wrote Donna Haraway. Patriarchal religion provides an ideological foundation for male supremacy. Its myth and symbols create what feminist scholar Carol Christ calls a 'psychological dependence on male authority'.

If we want to build a world that is whole, and just, and free, then it's time to interrogate these structures and stories. And dismantle them.

It all begins by exploring power in our own lives — from intimate relationships to the systemic. Literature has the magic ability to unlock doors within us. I hope that *Holy Woman* provokes your spiritual search, amplifies your questions, and ultimately, inspires your own liberation.

Louise Omer

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Unlike many people, Louise did not inherit faith from her family. Why did Pentecostal Christianity appeal? How does it compare to your early experience(s) of religion?
- 2. Around the world we see historical examples of goddess traditions being repressed and appropriated by Christian culture. Looking at Mexico's *Virgen de Guadalupe*, how do you think this relates to Spanish colonisation?
- 3. The Swedish priest Susann Senter claimed that solely masculine imagery for god was destructive for women. Before you read this book, what was your general image of God?
- 4. The author came of age believing that the Bible was the literal word of God. Who wrote Christianity's holy scriptures? And what significance did learning this have for Louise?
- 5. In Ireland, what was the wider cultural significance of the successful Repeal campaign?
- 6. Why has the ordination of women throughout Christianity been such a historical struggle?
- 7. In Rome, Louise desperately searched for Pope Joan; yet her research led her to discover that Christianity naturalises male authority and female submission. How does she reason that this relationship can leave people vulnerable to abuse? Do you agree?
- 8. How would you describe the character of the husband? Why do you think his name is capitalised as 'the Husband' throughout most of the text?
- 9. What does it mean to 'defect in place'? Can you think of the people in *Holy Woman* who fit this description?
- 10. In much of white Western culture, Islam is othered and constructed as inherently patriarchal. But what are the similarities between Christian and Islamic cultural misogyny? And who are some examples of Islam's rebellious and powerful women?
- 11. In your opinion, what happened in Morocco with Rachid? What did Louise find in him as a partner? How did 'politics play out upon her skin'?
- 12. Louise was baptised at 19. In light of this, what is the significance of the final scene?

THE HOLY WOMAN PLAYLIST

When I was travelling alone, music was my constant companion. I listened obsessively to songs, and they became associated with feelings and place. This playlist is a geographical and emotional map.

Wiyathul (Gurrumul) was often playing in my auntie's house, where the first chapter of *Holy Woman* began. I was deep in grief after the break up of my marriage, and this song always makes me feel soothed and nurtured.

I listened to Far From Home (Ladytron) in Uppsala, Sweden, dodging snowstorms to interview renegade priests. In the depth of a northern hemisphere winter it dawned on me what a stupidly enormous task I'd undertaken, and the kind of dynamic energy I would need to continue.

At Elephant Bookstore in Sofia, Bulgaria, I bought a copy of Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller...* and gratefully fell headfirst into its mystery and intrigue as diversion from the terror of my existential crisis. I discovered the song The Reader (Bill Ryder-Jones) and this became the soundtrack to my hopeless search for answers in the remote Bulgarian town, Veliko Tarnovo.

The 8th is Irish musician Emma Lohan's protest song and tribute to Savita Halappanavar and the indescribable abuses committed by the church and state against women. It was sent to me by an Irish loved one and encapsulates the mournful yet hopeful fight for justice.

And lastly, **Moon (Kid Francescoli)** is important because the moon was my companion across the world — if I felt lost wandering dark streets at night I would look up to see 'Grandmother Moon' and her ethereal glow, confirming I was on the right path. In many traditions, the moon is a symbol of the feminine divine.

Listen to the full playlist here.



Louise Omer is a writer born on Kaurna Country with essays, criticism, and poetry published in The Guardian, The Saturday Paper, The Lifted Brow, and more. Beyond Australia, she has lived in Scotland and Ireland, and has a heart connection to many lands, seas, and people.







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