

A Teacher's Guide to

Changeling: Order of Darkness Book One

By Philippa Gregory

About the Book

It is 1453: The Church reigns supreme in Europe, but there are disturbing signs that the Muslims in the East are getting stronger and suspicions that the End of Days may be approaching. Novice priest Luca Vero, aged seventeen, joins a secret church order that battles evil by investigating mysteries—spiritual mysteries. At the same time, recently orphaned Lady Isolde of Lucretili, also seventeen, finds herself banished to the local nunnery. Isolde and her Moorish servant and best friend, Ishraq, immediately suspect that something is not right at the Abbey: nuns are fainting in chapel, seeing visions, sleepwalking, even finding bloody stigmata on their palms. Is it the work of the devil? Her worst fears seem confirmed when the Abbey receives a visitor: investigator Luca Vero, accompanied by his servant, Freize, and a dour clerk, Brother Peter. What dark force is terrifying the nuns and causing them to act this way? Can Luca and Isolde uncover the true source of the problem?

Discussion Questions

1. In the first chapter, we learn that Luca's monastery has accused of him of heresy. What is heresy, and why is it so harshly punished by the Church?
2. Why has Luca, who loves numbers and calculations, never heard of the numeral zero? Why is he so excited when he learns about it?
3. Isolde's brother tells her that her father's will left her two options: to marry the drunken and brutish Prince Roberto, or to renounce her wealth and live her entire life as a nun, with no husband or family. Why does Isolde choose the nunnery? Which option would you choose? Why?
4. How does the relationship between Luca and Freize change over the course of the book?
5. Luca and Isolde both have some of the qualities a monk or nun should possess, but lack others. What do you think were the most important requirements for the religious life? What would you do if you found yourself poorly suited for the career your parents chose for you, or the one you planned to pursue?
6. How do various characters—Isolde, the Lady Almoner, Freize, and others—perceive Ishraq? In what ways is she different from others in her society? How do people today react to those they perceive as different from themselves?
7. What are some of the explanations that the nuns, the villagers, and others offer for the strange goings-on at the nunnery, and for the wild creature they capture? How do people today seek to explain phenomena they cannot understand?
8. How does the Lady Almoner explain the presence of gold in the nunnery's storeroom loft to Luca and Freize? What is the true explanation?
9. Why do Luca, Freize, and the Lady Almoner think that Isolde and Ishraq are holding a Satanic mass using the body of Sister Reeve? What are they actually doing? Why does no one believe their explanation?

10. We never learn how Isolde and Ishraq escaped the Abbey's gatehouse cellar. How do you think they escaped? Why do you think Freize claimed that he released them?
11. What are the differences between the way that Isolde's father raised her and the education he provided for Ishraq? Why were the two trained differently? Whose knowledge and skills do you think are more useful? Whose position in society would you prefer to occupy?
12. The villagers think that Sara Fairley's son Stefan was taken by a werewolf; Brother Peter thinks that Sara had a hand in his disappearance. What actually happened?
13. Together, Freize and Ishraq save the captured werewolf from execution. Why? How?

Activity Suggestions for Using *Changeling* book in Classrooms and Libraries

1. Try doing the same math problem using Roman and then Arabic systems of numerals. Which is easier? Why do you think Western society gave up Roman numerals for Arabic numerals?
2. Find out more about the life options—marriage or the convent—available to noble women like Isolde. Make a chart that compares and contrasts the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. Or divide into teams that argue the merits of each life choice.
3. Freize is a loyal servant and friend to Luca, but he has his own perspective on events and is not afraid to disagree with his social superiors. Rewrite one episode in the book from Freize's point of view. Try to capture not only his ideas and attitude, but his tone and use of language.
4. Isolde and Ishraq are close friends, but most of the characters in the book see Ishraq as strange, frightening, or inferior. Find out more about how fifteenth-century Christian Europeans perceived people who, like Ishraq, were ethnically, racially, or religiously different from them.
5. For centuries, most Europeans knew very little about human anatomy, in part because they never performed autopsies out of respect for the dead. Find out more about the history of autopsies. Try using the Internet to find out more about Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), the founder of human anatomy, who lived during the time in which this book is set.
6. Two herbs, bella donna and wolfsbane (or aconite), play important roles in the book. Find out more about the ways early modern Europeans used plants as medicines, poisons, and charms. Compare these uses with how plants were used in other cultures (in Africa, East Asia, or the Arab world, for example). Why do you think herbal remedies are becoming more popular again in recent years?
7. Luca has never seen a fork; Isolde owns one only because her father, an Italian nobleman, encountered them in the French royal court. Find out more about the history of table manners or of manners in general. How have they changed over time in our culture? How do they vary from culture to culture? What purpose do manners serve?
8. As we see in the book, fifteenth-century Europeans believed in werewolves and in other creatures we consider mythical. Find out more about werewolf stories. What powers were werewolves supposed to have? Do any other cultures have stories about wolf-man creatures? What other mythical creatures or magical beings did medieval westerners believe in?

9. In the book, we see a wide variety of relationships start, change, or end, based on revelations about trustworthiness. Pinpoint some key moments in the text where one character realizes s/he cannot trust another. Think about moments in your life when you realized that someone was not worthy of the trust you gave them, or moments in your life when you decided to offer someone new your trust.

Period Overview and Supporting Information

Life in fifteenth-century Europe: In the period before industrialization and urbanization, and long before the digital age, the majority of Europeans were poor and illiterate. Most people worked on farms, tending crops or animals. A tiny minority formed a wealthy aristocracy that owned most of the land and wielded all of the political power. But more powerful even than them was the Church.

The Church: In the fifteenth century, the Church—no one called it the Catholic Church, because until the Reformation there were no other churches in the West—was extremely important. Most governments were small, weak, or fragmented. The Church was not only the spiritual institution of most Europeans, but was also the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful institution in all of western Europe.

Abbey, monastery, nunnery: Abbeys, monasteries, convents, and nunneries are all Catholic institutions in which monks and nuns lived and worshipped, under the authority of the Abbot or Abbess. A monastery is a male community; convent and nunnery are synonyms for female communities. Usually, either one can be referred to as an abbey; in *Changeling*, a shared central abbey is set between a monastery and a nunnery. Abbeys were common in Europe. They offered food and shelter to strangers and travelers.

Prayer times: Life in a monastery or convent was highly regulated and included frequent prayer. Monks and nuns daily prayed the Liturgy of the Hours, a list of prayers recited at different times of day. In the fifteenth century the Liturgy of the Hours had eight scheduled prayer times: Matins (at midnight), Lauds (at dawn), Prime (in the early morning), Terce (at midmorning), Sext (at noon), None (in midafternoon), Vespers (at dusk), and Compline (at night before going to bed).

Lay sister: In the fifteenth century, convents had a social hierarchy that reflected that of the larger society. Elite women who could bring a dowry to the convent became sisters, but poorer women from illiterate peasant families came to the convent penniless and became lay sisters. Lay sisters did menial work—domestic chores, agricultural work, spinning—while the sisters spent their time in prayer. In places where sisters avoided contact with the world, lay sisters were the nunnery's link to the outside—they would take the convent's products to market, talk to outsiders, and greet visitors. In other words, while on paper a convent was a house of God in which all were equal, in practice convents—like the rest of Europe—had ladies who did not work and servants who did.

Numbering systems: Today we use what are called Arabic numerals. These are the digits 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, used in a place-value notation system in which the same numeral can have different values depending on where it is placed; for example, the numeral 1 would have a value

of 1 in the right-hand column, but a value of 10 in the next column to the left. In Luca and Isolde's time, however, most people in the West still used Roman numerals, where the numerals are I, V, X, L, C, D, and M, and they always have the same value no matter where in a figure they are located. Arabic numerals first appeared in the West in the tenth century, and were spreading quickly through Europe after the invention of movable-type print in the mid-fifteenth century—the very time that *Changeling* takes place. Arabic numerals permit much more advanced types of calculations; they would be very exciting to someone who “thinks about numbers,” as Luca does.

Changeling: In the village he grew up in, Luca was rumored to be a changeling, a fairy baby that had been switched with a human child and left to be raised in its place by human parents (though changelings could also be troll or elf babies, and the term could also refer to the human baby that had been spirited away). Changeling stories were often used to explain a child with abilities or looks that did not run in the family, as when Luca's poor, illiterate, and apparently infertile parents suddenly found themselves the mother and father of a handsome and clever son. Sometimes, rumors of changelings also circulated about wealthy or powerful families: that the heir to the fortune, or the throne, was not the true heir.

Fall of Constantinople: After its decline in the fifth century, the Roman Empire had divided into two parts: the eastern half, called the Byzantine Empire, used Greek as its learned language and had Constantinople as its capital, while the western part—western Europe—used Latin as its scholarly language and had Rome as its capital. The two parts had their tensions, but both were Christian areas. Then, in the spring of 1453, the Ottoman (or Turkish) empire laid siege to and captured the city of Constantinople. To fifteenth-century Christians, the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans—which spelled the end of the Byzantine empire—was a catastrophe. They feared that the Muslim Turks might go on to conquer the rest of Europe and to stamp out Christianity. Many thought that the fall of Constantinople was a sign that the End of Days was coming.

End of Days: Medieval Christians believed that Christ's second coming was imminent. They were always on the lookout for signs that the End of Days, in which a series of major disasters would strike and Christ would return to earth, was approaching. Some took the fall of Constantinople to be a harbinger of the End of Days—Constantinople was, after all, a major center of Christian authority, the Rome of the East—and became extremely anxious about the fate of the Church, humanity, and the world.

Stigmata: Stigmata are marks that miraculously appear, without any physical cause, on a person's body, in the places where Jesus's body would have been marked by his crucifixion. The most common stigmata appear on the palms of the sufferer's hands, but they can also be on the feet, the chest, or the brow (where Jesus wore a crown of thorns during his crucifixion). Throughout history, most people with stigmata—called stigmatics—have been women. When *Changeling* takes place, one well-known stigmatic was Catherine of Siena, a nun who lived in the 1300s and was declared a saint by Pope Pius II in 1461.

The Golden Fleece: In Greek mythology, the Golden Fleece is the fleece of a sheep or ram that was winged and had golden wool; it is part of the story of Jason and his Argonauts. But there are also many stories about ways that one can use a regular sheep's fleece to collect tiny particles of

gold from running streams. One very old account is from Georgia in eastern Europe and dates from the fifth century BCE. Fleece were submerged in a stream and would catch tiny flecks of gold from deposits upstream. The fleeces would then be hung to dry before the gold was combed out. In parts of Georgia, people still pan for gold using fleece.

Children raised by wolves: There are many myths and stories about feral or wild children, said to have been raised by wolves or other animals. In Roman mythology, the city of Rome was founded by twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, who were nursed and raised by a she-wolf. Throughout human history there have been other stories of children raised in the wild by wolves or other animals. Few have ever been documented as factual, but the compelling notion that animal parents could raise human children, along with the hope that children lost in the wilderness might still be alive, means that these stories flourish even today.

Character Guide

Luca: Luca is in training to join the priesthood, not because he feels a call from God (the official criteria) but because it is a promising profession for bright young people. His parents put him in the monastery because it is virtually the only way they can give Luca an education. After his parents die, it makes sense for Luca, who has no property, to remain and pursue a career in the priesthood. But wanting an education is not the same as wanting to devote himself and swear unswerving obedience to the Church, as Luca's hunger for knowledge and for adventure makes clear.

Freize: Luca's companion, Freize was also a young boy living at the monastery, but his situation was very different: he was a kitchen boy, a lowly servant. While Freize is older and stronger now than Luca, the fact that he is less educated and was living at the monastery as a servant, not a student, places him lower on the social hierarchy than Luca—no matter how protective he is of the friend he calls the little lord.

Peter: As a clerk, Peter holds an administrative position in the church and so is (presumably) loyal to it—one reason Freize is so suspicious of him.

Isolde: As a young noblewoman, Isolde has wealth and privilege: she wears beautiful gowns and people stop what they are doing to bow low when she enters a room. But she also chafes under many limitations: the only options open to her as an adult are a life as a wife, or a life as a nun. Women who refused to marry, or who failed to receive proposals, could not continue on forever (or for very long) as unmarried adult women, because that category made no sense in their society. They had no choice but to enter a nunnery, no matter how weak their devotion to religion. Noblewomen could read and write, but beyond that were taught only the skills that would make them elegant and entertaining—how to dance, sing, and play musical instruments; how to decorate a home and to dress themselves well; and how to do decorative arts such as sketching and embroidery. Some ladies also learned other European languages (though not ancient Latin or Greek, the languages of higher learning), but Isolde did not.

Ishraq: Ishraq is the only character in the book who is not white or Christian. As such, she is a puzzle to many around her. Isolde, who was raised alongside her, sees her as a friend, even a

sister, but most who meet her do not understand who or what she is. Ishraq is a Moor, which means that she is a Muslim of African or Arab descent, raised somewhere in the Ottoman Empire. Muslims lived in Asia, Africa, and the Arab regions of the world; in Europe, the only significant Muslim population was in southern Spain. Isolde's father brought Ishraq and her mother back with him from a Crusade. This means that they were prisoners of war, and Ishraq is, technically, Isolde's servant. However, Lord Lucretili treated Ishraq and her mother well. Although many Moors living in Europe were slaves, Ishraq and her mother were not. Lord Lucretili raised Ishraq so that she would fit in with her own culture, rather than with his own, making sure she could ride horses, fight, shoot a bow and arrow, and hunt. He also sent her to Islamic centers of learning, where she studied medicine and anatomy. Ishraq dresses in Moorish clothes and refrains from following Christian rites, and both practices make her an outsider.

Giorgio: Isolde's brother and the new Lord Lucretili. Because he is male, Giorgio enjoys many social and legal privileges denied to Isolde. When his father dies, he becomes the head of the household; Isolde knows that she must obey her brother's will, just as she obeyed her father's. Giorgio inherits his father's title and his lands and other property. He need not marry if he does not wish to. He alone has seen his father's will, the contents of which he communicates to Isolde.

Sister Ursula, the Lady Almoner: The term almoner refers to a church official who is responsible for giving out alms (money) to the poor. However, Sister Ursula's main job is to manage the abbey/convent—she controls the work schedule and the storeroom, and lives separately and better than the other sisters. She is suspicious and resentful of Isolde and Ishraq— with, as it turns out, good reason.

Pope Nicholas V: Born in 1397, he served as Pope from 1447 until his death in 1455. He established the Vatican library and began an ambitious building program in Rome. A great patron of the humanists, he is considered the first Renaissance pope.

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