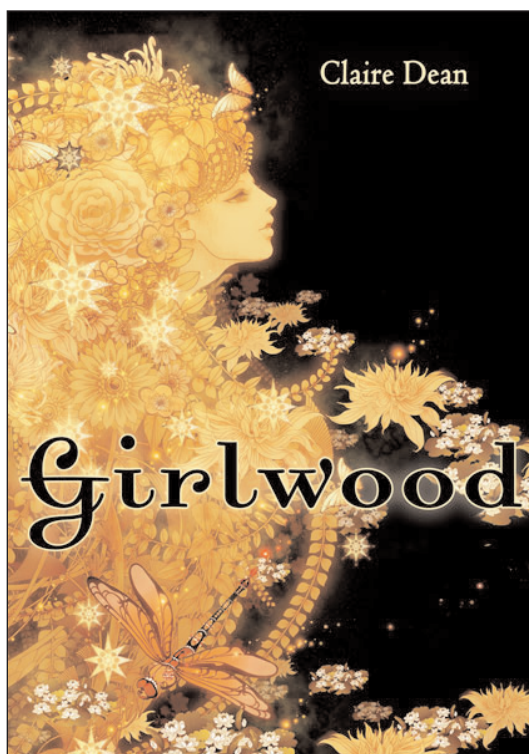


Girlwood by Claire Dean

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About the Book

Polly Greene has always been considered strange, a girl who can see a person's true colors, a 13-year-old more comfortable foraging in the woods with her eccentric grandmother than hanging out with friends. But all that is about to change when Polly's older sister, Bree, vanishes into the woods. Polly, the only one who thinks Bree can survive, begins to leave food in the woods for her sister and finds a hidden grove where she believes Bree is burning a fire each night. Along with an odd but endearing group of friends, Polly clings to the hope that she can see her sister through the harsh, snowy winter. And in the process she discovers the cruelty, bounty, and magic of the woods.



Discussion Questions

1. A description of a plant opens every chapter. The author then uses that plant as a narrative thread within the chapter. Look back at this device throughout the novel and explore specific examples. The ability of nature to heal is an important theme in the story, and knowledge of natural remedies is imparted from the grandmother, Baba, to her daughter and granddaughters. Discuss the idea of healing pertaining to each generation of women – mention Bree's self-destruction and Faith's grief. How do Baba's plants nurture the idea that healing is an organic process?

2. The novel begins: "The first and last kiss Polly received from her sister was as contrary as Bree herself." Why does the author use the word contrary to describe Bree? Bree leaves in the first pages of the novel. In her absence, Polly helps paint a small but vivid picture of her troubled sister. Consider the character of Bree. What do readers know and what are they left to guess about her character?

3. The grove later named "Girlwood" is central to the story. Polly feels a magical presence the first time she is led to the hidden location by her grandmother. It is in Girlwood that she first discovers a strand of Bree's hair, forms strong friendships, and is able to use her grandmother's lessons. Discuss the significance of this unique setting. Be sure to mention its sanctity and the impending threat of development. How does Girlwood help to maintain Polly's hope that her sister will return?

4. The wolves are a source of both fear and awe for the characters in the story. What is their significance? Discuss Polly's two encounters with these majestic creatures. Polly explains that in Olivia she sees a wolf: "a girl who was loyal, proud, and much braver than anyone thought." Discuss the significance of this observation. How does it impact Olivia's behavior?

5. Discuss the strong environmental stance the novel takes regarding the development of the wilderness. What message is the author trying to convey to readers? Do you agree with this message? What, if anything, do the attempts of Polly and her friends to save the forest teach about activism and fighting for what you believe in?

6. Discuss the character of the grandmother, Baba. Early on Polly observes, "Baba was the proof that you could be extraordinarily happy even if you were never liked." Why does Baba's lifestyle attract so much criticism from the community? Look back at descriptions of Baba, her house, her garden, and her remedies. Do you understand why Polly's mother tries to distance herself from Baba? What makes Polly and Baba's relationship so special? Do you believe that Baba knows where Bree is? How does Baba's passing help bring the family back together?

7. The novel breaks down human life, like all life, into very simple parts. To survive one needs food, water, and shelter. Human cycles include growth, death, and rebirth. Discuss these basic human necessities and cycles within the context of the natural world. What is the significance of nature in relationship to Bree's disappearance, the destruction of Girlwood, and Baba's death? With these events in mind, consider the importance of the blue flower that Baba calls "Faith."

8. When Carly makes mean comments to Olivia and Polly in the hallway at school, Olivia asks, "What's wrong with you?" What is wrong with Carly? Are there any ways in which Carly is a sympathetic character? Discuss the party in the grove. What do you think Carly sees in the trees that scares her? Why is it important that she calls out her father's lie in front of her classmates? Do you believe Carly has changed by the end of the story? What do you predict for her future?

9. Polly sees auras around people throughout the story. Discuss the significance of this gift and its impact on Polly's identity. Based on her observations, what do the different colors signify? Do you believe this ability is a supernatural power? Visit www.clairedean.net for more information and to take an aura quiz.

About the Author

Claire Dean writes from a bright green house behind an ever-growing garden in Idaho. She was inspired to write *Girlwood* for her daughter, who asked for a story about good stuff. "When I asked her what that meant, she said, 'You know, about hope and magic and fairies and girls.' Good stuff, indeed." Next up is a story for the author's son. To learn more about *Girlwood* and to find out what color aura you have, visit Claire Dean at www.clairedean.net.