

Readers's Guide for

WEST OF THE MOON



1 At the beginning of *West of the Moon*, the author establishes a strong sense of place without naming the country where the novel is set or when it takes place. List some clues she gives in the first pages that tell you about the story's setting.

2 The goatman treats Astri horribly while she lives with him. What would you have done in Astri's place? Did Svaalberd deserve what happened to him?

3 Astri makes wishes for several fairy tale objects, like seven-league boots that get the wearer where he or she needs to go quickly and a magical ball of yarn that helps the user find his or her way. Although Astri doesn't receive these items, she does get something from each person who gives her help along the way. What gifts is she given by the dairymaid, the farmwife, and the innkeeper? How do these gifts aid her? What fairy tale object would you most like to have in real life?

4 An "allusion" is a reference to a particular place, person, event, or item without directly stating its name. One allusion is on page 87, when a dairymaid says that "an Englishman" told her: "There are more things in heaven and earth than can be dreamed." Research what text this is from and find out its author.

5 Traditionally, a changeling is a faerie (or troll) baby left when a human child is stolen from its mother. Is the Spinning Girl in this story a changeling? If so, in what way?

6 Astri asks herself a lot of questions about the rightness or wrongness of things. “It isn’t stealing to take something that’s stolen already, is it?” she asks. And, “Is it all right to use a bad thing for a good cause?” And, “Is it more wrong to steal from a guiltless person than from a bad one? Is it a worse sin to lie to my sweet sister than to steal from a cruel master?” What are your answers to these questions?

7 Wondering over the strangeness of the Spinning Girl, Astri ponders, “What is it that makes us human?” What do you think?

8 Think about where the Spinning Girl is when Astri and Greta leave her. How does her story end? Write what you think happens to her.

9 Astri imagines going to America as a fairy tale. How is this similar to the immigrant experience over the years? Is it still like this for modern-day immigrants to America?

10 When Greta gets sick, Astri tries to make a bargain with Death for her sister’s life. Later, she plays a trick

to get around Death. Who are some other fairy tale or folklore tricksters? Who are some of the characters they trick?

11 Older passengers on the ship form relationships with both Astri and Greta, and their help makes it possible for the girls to survive in America. Would you call these adults a new family for Astri and Greta? Why or why not? Who are some people in your life who have offered you help when you needed it most?

12 The author conducted very careful research to make sure the story was historically accurate. How does reading the appendix at the end of the book change or enhance your view of the story?



For further research: Read some of the Norwegian folktales that are referred to in the story (check the story collections found in the bibliography). Are they different from European fairy tales, like the ones collected by the Brothers Grimm? Can you think of any stories that have similar themes or characters to the “White Bear King Valemon” or “East of the Sun, West of the Moon”? Why do you think this might be?