

READER'S GUIDE



IN THE **GARDEN**
OF **MONSTERS**

CRYSTAL KING

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Caution: There may be spoilers in the discussion questions.

1. Julia has no memory of her past, and no clues about where she's really from except her American accent and her letter of acceptance to the *accademia*. How do you think this influenced her decision-making before going to Sacro Bosco and after she arrived? How do you think she would have done things differently if she had her memory? What would you do if you had no memory of your past?
2. Salvador Dalí is a famous eccentric artist who really did visit Sacro Bosco. Lillian calls him “a living paradox.” What did you know about him before reading *In the Garden of Monsters*? If you know his work, which is your favorite? What did you learn about him in this story? Has your impression of him changed? Do you agree with Lillian's thoughts on him?
3. *In the Garden of Monsters* changes the relationships in the myth of Hades and Persephone. How does the novel's por-

trayal of these mythological figures differ from traditional interpretations? What new dimensions do these characters gain in this retelling? What do you think of the shift? Did you see the twist about Ceres coming? How do these changes impact your understanding or appreciation of the original myth?

4. Food plays a large role in this story as an instrument to get Julia to eat the pomegranate seeds. Which meal was your favorite? Would you try all of the food? Do you think any of the meals hold a particular symbolism?
5. Julia pushes back on the idea of being just a muse, but Persephone has been one of the biggest muses throughout history. Why do you think Julia continued to model rather than taking another job when she felt this way? When she regains her memories, do you think that changes her feelings on this matter? What kind of power do you think muses hold?
6. Dalí doesn't believe women can truly be artists, but there have been talented female artists throughout history. Who are your favorites? How do Dalí's thoughts on this tie into the other themes of the book?
7. Gala is based on Dalí's real wife. When Proserpina says Dalí's "love for Gala will be both his curse and his muse," what do you think she means? Did you know about Gala before reading this book? What is your impression of her? Do you agree with the other characters' opinions of her?
8. Sacro Bosco is a real garden full of monsters in Italy. Had you heard of it before this book? Did this story make you want to visit it? Which statue was your favorite?
9. The garden in the novel is a central element. What does it symbolize, and how does its meaning evolve throughout

the story? How does the garden reflect the internal states or journeys of the characters?

10. Julia is haunted by echoes of her past lives throughout the story, revealing that she and Pluto have gone through this journey for centuries. Why do you think this time was different? How do you think the monsters in the gardens changed the outcome? What set the couple free?
11. *In the Garden of Monsters* explores one take on ghosts and what they are in our world. Do you believe in ghosts? Have you ever seen one? Do you think they are just echoes of past lives, as they are here, or something more?
12. The novel blends historical elements with mythological ones. How does this combination affect the narrative? Does it enhance the realism of the story, or does it serve another purpose?
13. “We’re all flawed beings, even gods. Perhaps that’s what makes us eternally fascinating to each other.” What do you think of this statement from the book? Do you agree? How has this theme shown up for each character? Do the changes to the original version of this myth highlight this message for you, and if so, in what ways?

AUTHOR Q&A—CRYSTAL KING

What was the inspiration for writing *In the Garden of Monsters*?

Around the time COVID hit, and publishing was in a strange place, I was thinking I might want to try something different in my novels. I was having a conversation with a friend of mine, the author Kris Waldherr, who had just written a really wonderful Gothic novel about the women of Frankenstein, *Unnatural Creatures*, and we were talking about how Gothic novels have recently grown in popularity. I began to wonder: If I were going to write a Gothic, what would I write? I immediately thought of the garden I had been to a couple years before, in Bomarzo, Italy, the Sacro Bosco. It's the perfect place for a Gothic story. There is a strange castle in a tiny remote town on the top of a hill, and below it is a garden literally full of statues of monsters and mythological gods. And that was it. I knew I wanted to write a book there.

What is so interesting about this garden?

In 1552, an Italian prince, Vicino Orsini, began developing the garden, which he later dedicated as a memorial for his wife upon her death in 1560. He hired sculptors to turn the tufa and *peperino* stone in the valley below the castle into all manner of mythical creatures. Not only do you have the *orco*, or the mouth of hell, the demesne of Pluto/Hades, but across from it is Ceres (the Roman name for Demeter). Farther along in the garden, there is a bench depicting Proserpina (Persephone). There are sirens, dragons, nymphs, and monsters carved from stone. It's a place utterly unlike any other garden you have ever been to, and even in its day, it was highly unusual.

The Sacro Bosco was a product of its time, reflecting the Renaissance's fascination with alchemy, astrology, and the supernatural. It was an era where art and science were not yet distinct disciplines, and the park embodies this intersection of knowledge and imagination. Traditional Italian gardens have a specific geometric rationality, with well-laid paths, fountains with water games, and inspirational sculptures. Unlike the manicured gardens of Renaissance Italy, the Sacro Bosco was designed to blend with the natural environment, creating a sense of being lost in a mystical world, with sculptures carved where stones already jutted from the earth, seats hewn from rock to fit into the natural landscape, a tilted house that will make you dizzy, and a myriad of fantastical stone creatures to discover.

There are many theories on why Orsini created the garden in the way that he did. Some scholars think that it may have been designed based on the idea of alchemical transmutation—the idea of turning lead into gold or, more importantly, transforming the spirit into something purer. However, as I mentioned in the Author's Note, there are also schools of thought that he based the garden upon the early Renaissance epic poem *Orlando*

Furioso by Ludovico Ariosto, or that he was influenced by the medieval story *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (which is featured in Ian Caldwell's popular novel *The Rule of Four*). My sense is that he included elements of all these things in this garden.

When Salvador Dalí's little film clip ignited the imagination of the masses, it essentially helped put the garden on the map and led to the purchase and renovation of the garden, which now any visitor can go see. It's about an hour north of Rome and very much off the beaten path. It's surprising to me how many Romans I've met who aren't familiar with the garden. But it's definitely worth the trek.

What inspired you to include Salvador Dalí in this novel?

I was first intrigued by Dalí's involvement in the garden when I saw the video he made at the Sacro Bosco (you can find it on my website, www.crystalking.com/dali). It's a minute and a half long and features him among the statues in the garden. I have to admit, at first, I wasn't sure if I wanted to include Dalí. I hesitated because I knew he was controversial and had ideas about the world that would definitely have gotten him canceled today. He was a narcissist, and he had very unorthodox views about sexuality, politics, people, food, and certainly about painting and sculpture. And besides, I didn't even really like his art very much. But I figured I'd do a little research about him, and it wasn't long before I was really hooked. His life was pure drama, pure spectacle. He had a brilliant, curious mind. And the more I learned about his art, the more I realized how talented and highly influential he was.

He was a true Renaissance man, a master of multiple art forms, including painting, sculpture, and drama. Beyond his artistic endeavors, he penned autobiographies and even a novel, *Hidden Faces*. His passion for food was evident in his cookbook and in his art. His career was marked by extraordinary collaborations

with figures like Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli, Walt Disney, and Alice Cooper. His diverse projects ranged from designing five hundred ashtrays for Air India to creating the iconic Chupa Chups lollipop logo. Posthumously, his unique and captivating tarot deck was published, adding to his legacy. His prolific output was significantly influenced by his wife, Gala, who played a crucial role in his creative process.

The more I learned about the couple, the more I realized I wanted to include them in my story. *In the Garden of Monsters* is very different than retellings of the Persephone myth, and I liked the idea of including some of Dalí's surreal ideas as part of the story. I knew I didn't want him to be the main character, but he was a perfect vehicle for delivering up so much of the plot. It helped that Dalí already saw pomegranates as a symbol, which he included in many of his paintings. And voilà! That was it. I would tell the story from the point of view of a model he hires and brings to Bomarzo for a week to paint. Of course, Gala had to come along. Dalí's relationship with his wife was just as surreal as everything else about him was, and her controlling, demanding nature was the perfect counter to his flamboyant, over-the-top antics.

I did my best to represent Dalí in a way that was true to the person that he was in life while recognizing his many shortcomings.

There is so much food in this book, which makes sense, given that your past novels were about culinary figures. How did you decide what food to include?

I honestly think that this book has more food in it than my previous novels. That's partly because the Persephone myth revolves around the six pomegranate seeds, so that gave me a lot of opportunity to incorporate food as part of the plot. The story takes place over the course of a week, and every night, there is

a dinner, and every day, there is a lunch that the characters participate in. Julia lived many lives and would have tasted foods from all sorts of historical points in time, so I approached food as sort of a compendium of flavors through the centuries. There are dishes from Salvador Dalí's 1973 cookbook, *Les Dîners de Gala*; the early Renaissance text *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*; Bartolomeo Scappi's *L'Opera*, published in 1570; Pellegrino Artusi's 1891 cookbook, *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well*; as well as many Italian regional favorites that have been popular in modern times.

My husband and I love trying to re-create some of the historical recipes. He's the chef, and I'm the baker, so it works out well. Some of the dishes we make all the time at home are recipes we've collaborated on for my novels.

This novel is also a bit of a ghost story. Have you always been drawn to the supernatural? Do you believe in ghosts?

Regarding my attraction to the supernatural, I find myself in a curious position. While I can't claim to be a staunch believer, I'm also not among the 18 percent of Americans who, according to a 2009 Pew Research study, have experienced ghostly encounters. My stance is more agnostic when it comes to the paranormal. However, what truly captivates me is the historical and cultural significance of ghosts. The concept of ghosts has ancient roots, tracing back through thousands of years of human history. This enduring fascination reflects our collective desire to understand the mysteries of life and death. Questions like whether parts of us linger after we're gone, the existence of an afterlife, and the possibility of maintaining contact with those who have passed are not just intriguing but also deeply human. These questions and the myriad ways different cultures and individuals have tried to answer them provide a rich tapestry of inspiration. Ghosts, in this context, are more than just spectral

figures; they are a gateway to exploring the profound mysteries of human existence. They offer an endless treasure trove of story fodder, allowing writers like me to delve into, understand, answer, or even playfully engage with these age-old questions.

Your first two books are more traditional historical fiction, but this one has a fantasy bent. Are you done with writing more true-to-life historical novels?

My writing is deeply influenced by my fascination with the past, particularly Italy's rich and varied history. The country's long and storied heritage serves as an inspiring backdrop and offers an endless wellspring of inspiration. While I am still dabbling in historical fiction, I am also interested in writing novels with more contemporary and fantastical settings, infusing them with historical elements. My passion for ancient myths stretches back to my childhood when I gravitated toward the stories of the gods and goddesses who, although they had so many human qualities and failings, also had magic and powers to bend the world to their will. Their stories are also history, even if they are mythological. (A fun fact: people in Greece still often believe their family lineage is descended from the gods and consider them their ancestors.) And today we still know and love the stories of these thousands-year-old myths, which makes infusing them into the present day in my novels great fun.



RECIPES FROM *IN THE GARDEN OF MONSTERS*

by Crystal King and Joseph Doucette

One of the joys of food writing is creating and eating the foods that I'm writing about. Sometimes this means re-creating historical recipes and making them more palatable for modern audiences, and other times it is merely developing the dishes that began in my imagination. I am fortunate to have a husband who is an excellent cook, and my own forte tends toward baking. Between us, we have a lot of fun in the kitchen and cooking for friends. These three recipes from In the Garden of Monsters are our imagined creations.

DATE, POMEGRANATE, AND PISTACHIO BITES

In the novel, these delicious treats don't have pomegranates incorporated within the recipe and are instead dotted with a single pomegranate seed on top. I find that incorporating the seeds gives these morsels a wonderful richness. If you don't want to break open a pomegranate yourself, you can sometimes find the seeds in the precut fruit area of your grocery store, or often frozen. You can find edible gold powder online or sometimes in the baking section of your local stores. You need quite a bit of it to coat all the bites, however, so using powdered sugar is an easier, sweeter, and more economical route to go. Because of the pomegranate seeds, these are best eaten cold. The flavor also deepens after a day or so in the fridge.

Makes approx. 24 bites

INGREDIENTS

- 1 ¼ cups (125 g) pistachios, shelled*
- ¼ cup (35 g) almonds*
- 2 cups (375 g) pitted Medjool dates*
- ¾ teaspoon rosewater*
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon*
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cloves*
- 2 teaspoons honey*
- ¼ cup (37 g) pomegranate seeds*
- ½ cup (60 g) powdered sugar*
- Optional: edible gold powder*

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1.** In a food processor, combine all ingredients except the pomegranate seeds and powdered sugar. Puree until the mixture is sticky.
- 2.** Add the pomegranate seeds and pulse into the mixture. You want to incorporate the seeds, not chop them finely.
- 3.** Take 1 tablespoon of the mixture and form a ball.
- 4.** Roll the ball in the powdered sugar. You can also opt to roll them in edible gold powder instead, for a more luxurious display.
- 5.** Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes before serving. You can also freeze them in an airtight container for a month.

GILDED CHICKEN

This recipe is a simple and delicious glimpse into our Renaissance past and makes for a delightful display at a dinner party. In the novel, during Poliphilo's dinner, the characters feast on gilded capons. A capon is an old chicken and will have a bit of a gamier flavor than a regular chicken. They are not always available (but you can ask your butcher), and chicken is a perfectly good substitute. This recipe would also work equally well with other types of fowl. You can adjust the recipe fairly easily depending on the size of the bird. Make sure you use fresh herbs, as you are stuffing the bird with them. Also, for the sauce, avoid pine nuts sourced from China, which tend to have an unpleasant aftertaste. Nuts from Turkey, Greece, Italy, or Spain are more expensive but worth the price. A tip: keep your pine nuts in the freezer to help preserve the flavor.

4 servings

INGREDIENTS

For the bird:

1 capon or chicken
1 shallot, quartered
1 large lemon, quartered
1 bunch (handful) of fresh thyme
1 bunch (handful) of fresh tarragon
Salt and pepper to taste
Olive oil to drizzle
Edible gold powder

For the sauce:

2 teaspoons sugar
2 ½ lemons, juiced (not from the lemon you stuff the bird with)
½ teaspoon cinnamon
4 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted and very finely chopped
4 tablespoons butter
12 oz (340 g) chicken stock
2 teaspoons chopped tarragon

INSTRUCTIONS

For the bird:

1. Sprinkle salt into the cavity of the bird.
2. Stuff the bird with shallot, lemon, thyme, and tarragon, and then tie up the bird.
3. Add the bird to a low-sided roasting pan or, ideally, a cast-iron skillet.
4. Salt and pepper the top of the bird, then drizzle olive oil over the skin.
5. Sprinkle with edible gold powder.
6. Roast at 375°F (190°C) for 90 minutes or until it reads 165°F (74°C) on a meat thermometer. For the first hour, tent the bird with foil. Remove the foil for the last 30 minutes to brown the skin.
7. Remove the bird from the oven and pan but leave the drippings. Let the bird rest for 10–15 minutes before carving.

For the sauce:

1. Add sugar, lemon juice, cinnamon, and pine nuts to a bowl and stir. Set aside to let the sugar dissolve.

2. Add pan with drippings to a stovetop burner.
3. Add butter and chicken stock. Cook down by half on medium heat.
4. Add sugar/lemon mixture to the ingredients in the pan. Cook on medium heat for a few minutes until it begins to thicken.
5. Add the chopped tarragon. Cook for another minute, then remove the pan from the heat.
6. Carve the chicken and serve with the sauce.

TORTA ALLA RICOTTA

During the first lunch in the mouth of the *orco*, one of the desserts is a ricotta tart. This delicious pie traces its origins back to the Renaissance and may even hearken back to medieval times. Bartolomeo Scappi, the protagonist in my second novel, *The Chef's Secret*, includes a recipe for a cheese tart in his 1570 cookbook, *L'Opera di Bartolomeo Scappi*. Scappi's version was much loved by Pope Julius III but was made with provatura cheese rather than ricotta. Today, ricotta pie is considered to be a particularly Sicilian treat, and every *nonna* has a different recipe for it, which may sometimes include chocolate, lemon, raisins, or even orange flavors. To keep with Scappi's tradition, this version includes rosewater in the crust, which gives the tart a delightful flavor to balance with the elderflower and ricotta. If you don't have elderflower extract but you have a bottle of St-Germain liqueur handy, that will work as well.

8 servings

INGREDIENTS

For the crust:

1 ¾ cups (250 g) all-purpose or 00 flour

⅓ cup (67 g) sugar

pinch of salt

½ teaspoon baking powder

½ cup (113 g) cold unsalted butter

2 eggs

3 teaspoons rosewater

extra flour for rolling

For the filling:

1 ½ cups (360 g) ricotta cheese, whole milk
¼ cup (34 g) pine nuts, ground into a paste in a mortar or food processor
2 large eggs
½ cup (100 g) sugar
1 tablespoon grated ginger
1 teaspoon elderflower extract
pinch of salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the dry ingredients in a food processor and pulse to mix. Add the cut-up butter and pulse until the mixture is coarsely ground.
2. Add the beaten eggs and rosewater and pulse until the dough comes together.
3. Form the dough into a smooth disc and wrap the dough in plastic wrap. Let it rest in the refrigerator for at least an hour. Remove the dough from the refrigerator and roll it with a rolling pin (lightly flour the surface and pin if the dough sticks).
4. Butter a 9-inch tart mold or pie pan. On a lightly floured surface, roll the pastry into an 11-inch circle and place it inside the pan, pressing it against the edges. Pass the rolling pin over the edge to eliminate excess dough. Prick the bottom of the pastry several times with a fork to let steam escape and keep it from bubbling. Let it rest in the refrigerator for at least 10 minutes before filling it.
5. Add all filling ingredients to a mixer bowl and blend until combined.
6. Add the filling to the tart pan and bake in a 350°F (176°C) oven for about 55 minutes.
7. Remove from oven and let it cool completely on a wire rack. Cover and refrigerate until well chilled.