

The Courting of Bristol Keats

book club questions

SPOILER WARNING: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is sometimes necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of the novel, as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *The Courting of Bristol Keats*, we suggest that you wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Although Bristol's name is in the novel's title, and we are most often in her point of view, the novel contains many different points of view, often within a single chapter. Why do you think the author made this narrative choice? Was there a perspective that especially stood out for you? How do you think the experience of reading this novel would have been different if we only had Bristol's perspective?
2. Bristol and her sisters grew up on the run, 'always eyeing the road and the exits,' as Bristol explains. How has their upbringing shaped their worldview? Discuss the sisters' relationships with one other. How do you think those relationships might be affected, now that Bristol knows she is fae and her sisters aren't?
3. Bristol's first impression when she sees Elphame is that 'it was a world that went on forever. That was all Bristol thought when she scanned the horizon. . . . *Forever.*' What do you think she means? What surprised you most about the depiction of Faerieland in this novel?
4. Bristol realises that 'Bowskeep and everything she'd ever known was the *alternate* realm, an above-average forgery created by a god to keep mortals out of their original one. It was the ultimate bait and switch.' How do you understand the relationship between the mortal and fairy realms? What are the biggest differences between them? Why do you think some fae, like Bowskeep's mayor, prefer to live in both worlds?
5. At the Willoughby Inn, Bristol can't square the creatures she encountered with her idea of fairies. As she tells Harper, 'What I saw were strange beings. Grotesque monsters. Not cute little things with wings.' Did you have a preconception of what a fairy was before reading this novel? If so, how did the characters in these pages confirm or contradict that preconception? Later, Tyghan explains to Bristol, 'Like your kind, fae come in all types, and we tend to mix and congregate in the same way. We're not rocks that you can classify. Try to remember that.' Did this fact surprise you, like it did Bristol?
6. When she was a baby, Bristol's parents placed a 'tick' in her to repress her innate magic. How do you understand their reasoning? Do you think it was the right thing to do? Regardless, do you sympathise with their decision?

7. As the novel progresses, more of Bristol's magic begins to seep into her body and she undergoes a transformation: her nails turn blue and pointy, and golden scales appear on her body. But she is afraid to fully transform, mostly for her sisters' sake. What do you think you would do, in her shoes? Do you think she will ultimately decide to have the tick removed? Over the course of the novel, did you notice other ways in which Bristol transformed, aside from the physical?
8. When they are falling in love, Kierus asks Maire, 'Do we always have to be what we were? Only what others planned for us? Do you think it's possible to start over—to leave the past behind and become something else?' How are Kierus and Maire typecast in Elphame? Do you think, by fleeing Elphame and starting a family in the mortal realm, they are able to 'leave the past behind and become something else'? Why or why not? Do you believe it's ever possible?
9. Bristol asks Tyghan, 'Can't a person ever start over? That's all [my parents] wanted. To be something else than what you all made them be. A second chance.' Tyghan replies, 'There are no second chances! Not for what [Kierus] did! We all want second chances, but are they always justified? Do you think they are in this particular case?'
10. Julia tells Bristol, 'Unforgivable is a tricky word. Only you can decide what that means. Not kings or councils. Forgiveness is a thing of the heart, and every heart is wounded and mended in its own way.' What do you think she means? Do you agree? Will Bristol be able to forgive Tyghan and her parents?
11. Tyghan and the other fae are so desperate for Bristol's help that they decide not to tell her the truth about her parents, for fear she will turn on them. Do you think that choice paid off? What are the repercussions? What do you think would have happened if they had been honest with Bristol from the start?
12. When Bristol learns the truth about her parents and Tyghan, she can't decide who was most deeply wronged. Kierus tells her that 'everything I did, I did to protect my family, and I would do it again. I love you all more than life itself. You need to know that. I didn't want to lose any of you.' Bristol believes him, but still asks herself, 'Was love enough? Was it a good enough excuse for what he had done? Did she even want his answers? . . . She was trapped in a mathematical conundrum, a place where two and two no longer equaled four, an Escher drawing where stairways led you in circles. There was no way out.' Do you think the characters all did what they needed to do, even if it meant hurting people they loved, or was there a different path?
13. Bristol's psych professor says something that sticks in her head: '*Our past is a shadow that follows us. For better or worse, it shapes us, and sometimes it controls us.*' Do you agree? How is this true for Bristol? Do you think there's a way to break away from one's past? Can that also be dangerous?
14. Tyghan, too, wrestles with the shadows of his past, and the deep scars he carries. As Eris notes, 'Betrayal was a bitter wound that still held Tyghan captive, a wound Eris feared he would never recover from.' As a result, Tyghan has real trust issues. Bristol wonders: 'Was

that another purpose of his anger—to keep everyone at a safe distance? Because if you couldn't trust your best friend, who could you trust?' What do you think? How does Tyghan deal (or not) with his dark past, over the course of the novel? How does it affect his relationship with Bristol?

15. Tyghan believes that 'honor was like glamour, useful only when it served a purpose; otherwise, it just got in the way of who you really were. Honor was for a time when the great gods still walked the earth and sat shoulder to shoulder around campfires celebrating their victories. These were not those times.' What do you think he means by 'honor' in this context? What is the alternative, at least for Tyghan?
16. Bristol reflects, 'Life wasn't always about change but sometimes about sameness. And sometimes sameness made you look beneath the surface, look at the bones that held it altogether—and the flaws that could be its undoing. Change was a distraction. Sameness demanded reflection. Bristol wondered if it was the sameness that drove her mother away. That it made her see things she didn't want to see.' In our fast-paced modern world, more of us are considering the power of quiet and reflection. What might happen if we actually slow down and consider deeper aspects of our lives? Would it frighten us, or make us more thoughtful and intentional, or have another effect? What do you think?
17. Why do you think Bristol and Tyghan are so drawn to each other? Do you think it's possible for Bristol to love both her father and Tyghan, given how gravely they hurt each other? Do you think they will stay together?
18. This novel is part of a duology, meaning there will be a sequel. What are the biggest questions from the first book that you would like to see answered in the second? Do you have any guesses as to what might happen to Bristol, Tyghan, and the other main characters? Discuss.