

"C. J. Cooke [is] one of my favorite authors."
—SAMANTHA DOWNING, author of My Lovely Wife

THE LIGHTHOUSE WITCHES



Author of
The Nesting

A Novel

C. J. COOKE

BOOK
CLUB KIT

DEAR READER,

Thank you so much for choosing *The Lighthouse Witches* for your book club! This is a story from the heart, and involved research in Norway, Iceland, and various parts of Scotland and England, so it means a huge amount to me that it's now being read around the world.

My inspiration for *The Lighthouse Witches* came initially in terms of the setting. Since 2014, I've been working at the University of Glasgow, and I was intrigued to learn that Scotland has over 900 islands. Islands, I find, are fascinating places; for an introvert like me, they hold a delicious promise of respite, cut off from the rest of the world. And for anyone who—like me—has suffered with their mental health, there's a powerful symbolism in an island. There have been many times that I have felt as though I've been living on my own personal island, isolated and very much adrift. Lòn Haven is a fictional island off the east coast of Scotland, near the "Black Isle," and here a small island community holds fast to some long-held folk traditions and stories with tragic consequences.

The element of witches came as the result of a "Wait, what?" moment. When I learned about the Scottish witch trials, I had already spent years working in Scotland. I had unwittingly visited sites where terrible scenes had unfolded, and where no commemorative plaque informed visitors of this dark history. I became committed to understanding why such silence persisted around the terrible accusations and executions of thousands of people. Why, I wondered, when we now have the tools to access the past, do we choose to edit it so heavily?

Of course, this is not solely a book about witch trials. It's a book about motherhood and family relationships. As I wrote about the fractious relationship between single mother Liv and her teenage daughter, Sapphire, I was thinking about the stages of parenting, and how different it is to parent a teen than it is to parent a toddler. I was thinking about what it is to be a teenager now, in 2021, and how different it is compared to 1998. Recalling one's teenage years while parenting a teen is a strange nostalgic conflation of memory and wisdom, a palimpsest of youth and mortality. I wanted to explore both Liv's vulnerability as a woman in her mid-thirties, recognizing her own mortality in the face of her daughter's development into womanhood. And of course, I wanted to write about sisterhood, about how those early sibling dynamics shape us as adults, and how those relationships evolve.

I hope you find *The Lighthouse Witches* to be an enjoyable, thought-provoking read. I love hearing from readers, so please drop me a line if you're interested in setting up a virtual event, or if you'd like a batch of signed bookmarks for your group.

BEST WISHES,
C.J. COOKE

ON WILDLINGS

The Lighthouse Witches tells the story of islanders who continue to believe in “wildlings,” and I was inspired partly by lore specific to the Isle of Skye, where lore has it that fairies came to Dunvegan Castle one autumn evening and found the MacLeods’ baby heir unattended and crying in his crib. According to the legend, fairies rocked him and sang him a lullaby, then wrapped him in what is known as the Fairy Flag, which can be seen in Dunvegan Castle today. Centuries later, it is part of MacLeod tradition that every nurse sings the fairy lullaby to babies to keep them calm and safe. It was only long after I finished researching *The Lighthouse Witches* that I remembered that I had first heard and loved this story as a five-year-old—my mother bought me an audiobook series called *The Storyteller*, and one of the stories was about the Dunvegan Fairy Flag. So read to your children, folks! Those early stories do stay with us as adults!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The island of Lòn Haven is described as having a “Viking soul.” How does this setting shape the story? In what ways does it seem to affect the characters who live there?
2. Discuss Saffy’s relationship with her mother. Why do you think she hates her so much?
3. Why do you think Luna is so reluctant to marry Ethan?
4. How is motherhood explored throughout the novel? How does Liv feel about it, and why do you think that is? Do her feelings change?
5. How do you think Patrick’s experiences affected him? What did you think about his actions toward Liv?
6. At one point in the novel, Liv asks Isla why she stays on Lòn Haven, given its history of disappearances, including Isla’s little brother. Why do you think Isla stayed?
7. Patrick is astonished when his mother agrees to the charges against her. Why do you think the women who were accused of being witches agreed to their charges?
8. Why do you think people continued to believe in the wildling myth for as long as they did?
9. Liv confesses that she came to Lòn Haven both to take the commission at the lighthouse and because she was running from something. Why do you think she was running? Did you agree with her reaction?
10. How do you think Rowan’s accusation of Finn would have affected him?
11. At the end of the novel, Saffy feels she can find a rational explanation for the reason why she “bounced forward.” What do you think happened?
12. Liv writes to Luna that “forgiveness is a kind of time travel.” What do you think she means by this? Do you agree with her philosophy?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. J. COOKE

is an award-winning poet and novelist published in twenty-three languages. She teaches creative writing at the University of Glasgow, where she also researches the impact of motherhood on women's writing and creative writing interventions for mental health.

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