

A painting of a woman in a dark, long dress standing on a cliff, looking out over a vast, blue, hazy landscape. The woman is in the foreground, her back to the viewer, looking out over a vast, blue, hazy landscape. The sky is a mix of light and dark blues, suggesting a cloudy or overcast day. The ground below is dark and rocky, with some patches of green. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Sisters of Castle Leod: A Novel

Elizabeth Hutchison Bernard

BOOK CLUB KIT

A Letter from the Author

I remember, as a child of eight or nine, telling my mother that I couldn't decide which I wanted to be: a nun or a Spanish dancer. Odd, because I was neither Catholic nor Spanish. I guess, even then, I had a vague sense there were two sides to my nature. When I discovered the sisters Sibell and Constance Mackenzie, I immediately saw the same dichotomy in them—one a spiritualist, the other a barefoot dancer—which is, I suppose, what first made me want to write about them.

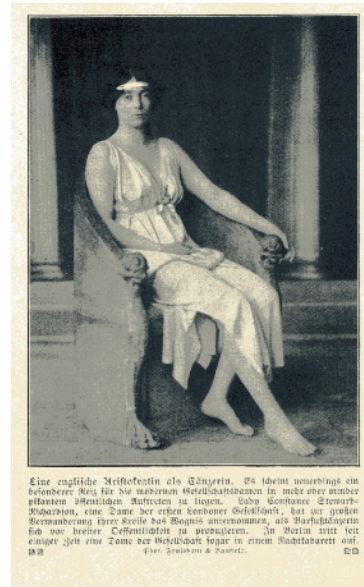
One night, early in my contemplation of writing the novel, I woke up a little past midnight to see, in the semi-darkness, what looked like someone in a hooded red cloak hovering close to my bed. The figure remained there only a few seconds and then disappeared. For me, it was an unsettling experience, but I brushed it off as simply a trick of shadow and light. The next day, I began reading one of the romantic novels penned by the Countess of Cromartie and ran across this paragraph: "It was a glorious warm night. I remember every trivial thing I did that evening. I ran up to my room and put on the first cloak I found hanging there, a scarlet one with a hood." My inner debate about which sister's perspective I should tell the story from ended in certainty that the narrator *must* be Sibell.

While writing *Sisters of Castle Leod*, I tried to open my mind to the force of Sibell's personality. I feel I came to know her well. She was a writer with an exquisitely beautiful imagination, and I am confident that she would understand and approve of her story being told with a good deal of latitude. In relating that story through her voice, I hope to have opened for readers at least a small window into her soul.



Author Photo by Tina Celle

Photo Gallery



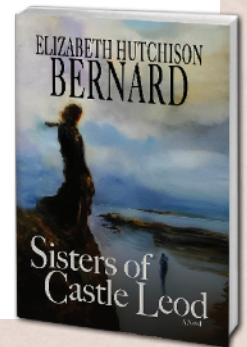
Eine englische Mittelfestin als Sängerin. Es scheint allerdings ein
 besondere Reiz für die meisten Musikliebhaber in mehr oder weniger
 glänzenden Museen zu liegen. Das Constance Stenort-
 Produktion, eine Dame der ersten Verbände Gesellschaft, hat die große
 Verantwortung ihrer Stelle bei Beginn übernommen, die Musikanten
 sich vor breiter Öffentlichkeit zu präsentieren. Im Berlin tritt seit
 einigen Jahren eine Dame der Gesellschaft sogar in einem Soubrette auf.
 Eine Gräfinin & Sängerin. © B.



Castle Leod, Strathpeffer, Scotland. Photo courtesy of Craig Wallace.

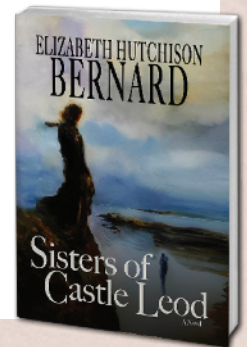
Reading Group Guide

1. In Sibell's early years, who do you think has the greatest influence on her: her mother or her father? Does that influence have a positive or negative effect on Sibell's self-esteem?
2. At the start of the novel, Sibell is reluctant to assume the responsibilities of being heir to Lord Cromartie's titles and estates. Does her attitude towards wealth and power change during the novel?
3. Discuss how Sibell's relationship with her younger sister Constance is central to her spiritual journey.
4. How would you compare Sibell and Constance? In what ways are they opposites? How are they alike?
5. At various points in the novel, Constance talks about her view of the world. How would you summarize her philosophy? Do you find Constance a sympathetic character? What do you admire about her most? Least?
6. What are the major turning points in the relationship between Sibell and Constance? Do you find their behavior towards each other, as sisters, to be believable?
7. Even before her first glimpse of the Night Watchman, Sibell has faith in the reality of the Unseen World. Does the author try to influence the reader's perception of the supernatural events in the story as being real, or imaginary? How?
8. In the novel, is Sibell justified in feeling betrayed by her sister's subterfuge in secretly changing the course of the stream? Is there anything Constance could or should have done, after the fact, to make amends? Which of the sisters is more at fault in the continuation of their estrangement?
9. Is Edward a good match for Sibell? What would you say is Sibell's primary motivation for selecting him from among many other marriage candidates? Over time, do you think Sibell comes to be genuinely happy with the marriage? Does she have regrets?



Reading Group Guide

10. What is the connection between Sibell's Phoenician spirit guide, who occasionally appears to her in dreams and visions, and the character of Demetrius?
11. What purpose in the story does the Tarot card reading by Monsieur Alarie serve? How does it affect Sibell's actions, consciously or unconsciously, upon her return from Venice?
12. When Sibell encounters Demetrius in New York City, seven years after their journey to Tyre, do you think she is disappointed, or relieved, that he no longer believes in the Link of Fire? What does the fact that Sibell refuses to be persuaded by Demetrius's revelations about Dr. Belfry tell you about her?
13. Sibell wrote a book on reincarnation, and she believed in it herself. Do you think Sibell would have been convinced that Bella is indeed a reincarnation of Janet, even without the "proof" of a birthmark?
14. How does Sibell change during the novel? What factors play the biggest role in the development of her character?
15. Sibell published many short stories and books, being well known in her time as an author of romantic fiction. Some, however, criticized her pagan romances as anti-Christian. In the novel, what evidence is presented regarding Sibell's feelings about religion and Christianity in particular?
16. Based on this novel, whose life would you rather have lived: Sibell's or Constance's?

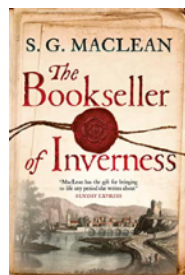


If You Enjoyed *Sisters of Castle Leod*, You May Also Like...



The Deception

A sleight of hand. A trick up the sleeve. A call for the dead. It's all part of the game in this twisty tale by the bestselling author of *After Alice Fell*. *New Hampshire*, 1877. Maud Price was once a celebrated child medium, a true believer in lifting the veil between the living and the dead. Now penniless, her guiding spirits gone, the so-called "Maid of Light" is desperate to regain her reputation—but doing so means putting her faith in deceiving others. When the deception hints at a possible murder, Maud realizes how dangerous a game she's playing.



The Bookseller of Inverness

A gripping historical thriller set in Inverness in the wake of the 1746 Battle of Culloden. After Culloden, Iain MacGillivray survived only by pretending to be dead as the Redcoats patrolled the corpses of his Jacobite comrades. Six years later, with the clan chiefs routed and the Highlands subsumed into the British state, Iain works as a bookseller in Inverness. One day, he notices a stranger lurking in the upper gallery of his shop, poring over his collection. The next morning when Iain opens up shop, he finds the stranger dead, his throat cut, and the murder weapon laid out in front of him—a sword with a white cockade on its hilt, the emblem of the Jacobites. He soon finds himself embroiled in a web of deceit and a series of old scores to be settled in the ashes of war.



The Lost Ones

England, 1917. Reeling from the death of her fiancé, Stella Marcham welcomes the opportunity to stay with her pregnant sister, Madeleine, at her imposing country mansion, Greyswick—but she arrives to discover a house of unease and her sister gripped by fear and suspicion. Before long, strange incidents begin to trouble Stella—sobbing in the night, little footsteps on the stairs – and as events escalate, she finds herself drawn to the tragic history of the house. In the classic tradition of *The Woman in Black*, Anita Frank weaves a spellbinding debut of family tragedy, loss and redemption.



The Spiritualist

Sometimes truth is the greatest illusion of all. On a cold January morning in 1856, Evelyn Atherton's husband is found murdered after attending an exclusive séance. Having "married up" into New York society, Evie herself is the immediate suspect. Ostracized and vulnerable, she knows that to clear her name she must retrace her husband's last steps. And so, joining forces with her husband's best friend—and the only Manhattan lawyer who will accept her case—Evie dives into the mysterious underworld of the occult. Before long, the trail brings them to a charismatic medium, Michel Jourdain. Evie's instincts tell her the smooth-talking Jourdain is a charlatan—and her only hope for exoneration. But getting close to Jourdain means embracing a seductive and hypnotic world where clues to murder come through the voices of the dead.



Affinity

"Gothic tale, psychological study, puzzle narrative..."—*The Seattle Times*. An upper-class woman recovering from a suicide attempt, Margaret Prior has begun visiting the women's ward of Millbank prison, Victorian London's grimmest jail, as part of her rehabilitative charity work. Amongst Millbank's murderers and common thieves, Margaret finds herself increasingly fascinated by an apparently innocent inmate, the enigmatic spiritualist Selina Dawes. Selina was imprisoned after a séance she was conducting went horribly awry, leaving an elderly matron dead and a young woman deeply disturbed. Although initially skeptical of Selina's gifts, Margaret is soon drawn into a twilight world of ghosts and shadows, unruly spirits and unseemly passions, until she is at last driven to concoct a desperate plot to secure Selina's freedom, and her own.

Your Opinion Counts

Word-of-mouth is crucial for any author to succeed. If you enjoyed *Sisters of Castle Leod*, please leave a review online—anywhere you are able. Even if it's just a sentence or two. It would make all the difference and would be very much appreciated.

Thanks,
Elizabeth

