

READING GROUP NOTES
THE GREATEST KNIGHT BY ELIZABETH CHADWICK

1.The Greatest Knight is based on a true story from a detailed biography written in the early thirteenth century. Had you ever heard of William Marshal before you read the novel? Did reading the book make you want to go and find out more about him? Do you have a favourite scene?

2.At the beginning of the novel there is a short flash back scene to William's childhood where the reader is told he was almost hanged as a small boy. Do you think he would have been a different man in adult life if this incident had not happened?

3.William's father said that he cared not and that he still had the anvils and hammers to get better sons. But William seems to have been a happy, confident little boy and to have grown into a man comfortable in his own skin. What kind of home life do you think he had in childhood?

4.At the battle for Drincourt, William omits to take prisoners for ransom and thus finds himself impoverished. He thinks to himself at the time 'Fight for your lord, fight for your honour, but for yourself too.' Do you think he kept to this path throughout his career? Was there ever a time when he deviated?

5.William was known in his youth as 'Gaste-Viande' or 'greedy guts' Is this borne out in the rest of the novel? What part do descriptions of food play in bringing this period of the Middle Ages to life? Would you like to eat any of the dishes described such as spiced chicken with saffron, roast goose with verjuice and raisin sauce, or honeyed fried pork trotters? Are the descriptions of medieval dishes what you expected people of the time to eat?

6.William saves the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine when her enemies attempt to ambush her and Eleanor is so grateful, she pays his ransom and gives him a place at the head of her son's retinue. What does this tell you about the characters of William and Eleanor? How does their relationship develop through the novel?

7 Other women appear in the novel including Clara, William's mistress. Do you think William would have survived without her intervention when he was a prisoner? Do you think they would have stayed together if Clara had borne a child? Women of Clara's status (courtesans) were part of a baronial household. What do you think Clara felt about her status? Do you think William treated Clara well?

8.William and his brother John are on uneasy terms throughout the novel. John says on page 34 'You would find life as my knight dull after Normandy.' Do you think he was jealous of William? Do you think he felt that William did not know his place in the pecking order as a younger brother? Do you think if he had accepted William, that William would have been content to stay at home and serve in his retinue?

9.William journeys all over Europe and visits the Middle East. Were you surprised at the extent to which he travelled? When he went to Jerusalem, he bought his own

burial shrouds. Did you think this a strange thing to do? What do you think his motives were for doing this?

10. William was a champion of the tournament. Did the rules and progress of a medieval tournament differ from your expectations? Was there anything that particularly surprised, amused or interested you about life on the tourney circuits? Are there any modern events that have parallels with tournaments? Why?

11. At times the Young King seems to have been a very difficult project for William. Do you think that serving him was good for William? What life lessons did William learn from serving him? How did the Young King benefit from having William in his retinue?

12. William was accused of having an affair with the Young King's wife and was banished from court. The author has stated one interpretation of this particular happening, but it is open to speculation. Do you think William did have had an affair with Marguerite, or do you believe that he was set up by his rivals? William handles the situation by offering trial by combat to his accusers, and by maintaining a diplomatic silence otherwise. Do you think he was blind not to see the situation blowing up? Was he deliberately blind? How would you have handled the problem?

13. In his lifetime, William was renowned for his unswerving loyalty. Where do you think this originates from? Do you think it was always to his advantage? Were there times when he would have been wiser to back off?

14. Henry II and his sons seem to have spent much of the time quarrelling with each other. Do you think this was a case of incompatible personalities or was it always going to be inevitable? How did William succeed in weaving his path through the politics?

15. When the Young King dies, William agrees to take his cloak to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. What were his feelings about doing this? What were his motives? What do you think he felt about the hardship of a journey from which he might very likely not return?

16. William spent two years in the Holy Land and no one knows what he did there, apart from praying at the tomb of the Holy Sepulchre and buying his own burial shrouds. Why do you think William would make such a purchase? How important do you think this was to him?

17. When William returned from the Holy Land he was given the wardship of Heloise of Lancaster and King Henry hinted that William should settle down with her. William declined to do so. Do you think it was because even at that time he had set his eye on a greater prize? Or that he chose not to marry Heloise because he was not attracted to her? What do you think his life would have been like if he did marry her?

18. William also took young Jean D'Earley under his wing on his return. Do you think the medieval practice of giving older knights adolescent youths to foster and bring on is a good one? What is your impression of William's relationship with Jean

and Jean's with William? Do you think any of William's responses were tied up with regrets about his former lord, the Young King.

19. At the time William took Heloise as his ward, he founded a priory at Cartmel on lands that had been given to him personally by the king. The church is still there today as a place of worship. What do you think inspired William to found the church? Do you think his experiences in the Holy Land led him to do this? Why do you think he wrote a warning into the foundation charter issuing a curse to anyone who meddled with his church?

20 William prevented Richard from attacking his father Henry II on the flight from le Mans by killing his horse and saying that he would leave Richard's taking to the devil. What does this tell you about William's character? What does this scene also tell you about the relationship between Richard and his father? What would have happened do you think if William had indeed killed Richard? Have you ever been in a position where you have had to defend someone else and know it might have repercussions for yourself?

21 When William marries Isabelle de Clare, there are at least 21 years between them in age. Isabelle and William seem to settle together very quickly and to be compatible, and we know from history that this was probably the case. How would you feel in the same circumstances – being given in marriage to someone you hadn't met, who was much older than you, and with no say in the matter? What do you think about the position of women at that time in history? Do you think they had any kind of power? What do you think about the age for marriage being twelve for girls and fourteen for boys?

22. William calls Isabelle his 'safe harbour'. How important to him do you think having such grounding was? Do you think he had always needed this in his life? Was William a safe harbour for Isabelle? What did you think of the fact that William takes Isabelle away on honeymoon? Would you expect medieval people to have had honeymoons?

23. Isabelle is given no choice in her marriage to William but she takes to the task with determination and alacrity. What advantages do you think she found in being married to William? Were there any disadvantages? How does her marriage to William compare with William's brother's marriage to Aline de Port?

24. As soon as Richard is crowned, he goes on crusade. William is left as one of the co-rulers and has to try and keep a balance between the different factions. Do you think he did a good job? What were the personal conflicts he faced? What would you have done in his situation?

24 When William comes to Nottingham his loyalty is questioned by the King. Would you have suspected him in Richard's position? Do you think William was worried that he might be accused of treason? Do you think it angered him?

25. William hated travelling by sea. If you had the chance to go back, would you embark on a voyage across the English channel on a medieval ship? How would you

feel about moving from place to place on a regular basis – say once every two or three days as the royal household did, and taking your furniture with you?

26. A national newspaper said of the author that she ‘makes historical fiction come gloriously to life.’ Do you agree with this statement? If you do, how do you think the author achieves this? What scenes particularly reflect this?