



March 1-15, 2023

***River Woman, River Demon* Reading Guide Questions**

1. Magical realism blurs the lines between the metaphysical and the mundane in ways that ask readers to reconsider the reality of the novel (and perhaps, of the world around them). How does *River Woman, River Demon* take the idea of magical realism and transform Eva's world via real magick? How does the magick in this novel both embrace and differ from its Latinx/Indigenous magical real predecessors?
2. The author Jenn Givhan writes, "The magical realism of this book is an alchemical and cultural extension of my childhood and motherhood experiences... The desert communities I write about remain a magical and potent place of inspiration for my stories." And as Eva notes, "The desert is strange. We all know how strange this place can be." How is the landscape its own magical character in this novel? Could you imagine this story taking place anywhere else or does the internal thematic engine grow organically from its environment?
3. Eva is an independent Latina mother deeply invested in the spiritual power of her culture but is plagued by trauma-induced ghosts. Eva must reconcile her traumatic past in order to become a whole, fully realized woman. Discuss the idea of the so-called "unlikeable woman" in literature and how this lens might limit our understanding of the complexity of a character like Eva. What facets of motherhood does she embody? Criticize? Overturn? How does she transform throughout the story? Can you imagine her and her family's life beyond the epilogue? What do you think the author intended by writing such a complicated heroine?
4. How do close, first-person point of view and the unreliability of Eva as a narrator propel the momentum and narrative tension of the story? Why do you think the author chose to stick so close to her protagonist, sometimes unrelentingly close?
5. Consider the other women in the novel, particularly Eva's sister Alba, the officer on her case La Detective, and her daughter Ximena. How do they embody and resist ideas of womanhood in Latinx/Indigenous culture? How does their wisdom help Eva to heal?
6. The author has been vocal about her experiences with post-partum depression/psychosis and the stigma that too often surrounds women and mothers, one which she hopes to tear down in her books. What signs of mental illness are present in the novel? How does Eva's journey shed light on mental illness? In what ways did you empathize with this mother/woman struggling through a mental health crisis?

7. In her CrimeReads essay “Becoming the Bruja My Ancestors Needed,” Jenn Givhan writes, “Brujas have been cast as the villains for too long. Just as witchy women now are hexing the patriarchy and becoming more mainstream, Latinas and women of color too are turning the tables on what bruja is capable of accomplishing within the horror/thriller genres and the larger social and cultural landscape.” Brujería and the magickal practices of folks of color are major themes in the novel. How does *River Woman*, *River Demon* challenge what it means to be a witchy woman of color in the United States and Latin America? How did the novel challenge your ideas of brujas and witches?
8. The author has called this novel her Chicana *Girl on the Train*, and she weaves historical and cultural references to folk magick (including bruja, hoodoo, curanderismo, and Wicca) throughout a page-turning thriller. What did you think of the blending of these more literary/scholarly elements with the suspense genre? How do you think the author pulled it off? Or, if the blending of genres didn’t work for you as a reader, why not? Why do you think the author knitted historical and cultural elements into a psychological thriller/murder mystery?
9. Eva’s husband Jericho and son Xavier utilize their own magick in the story. Discuss the themes concerning Black boys and men in a racist system. What do their actions tell us about the criminal justice system and the purpose of folk magick for men of color?
10. The owl on the cover of the book becomes a shapeshifter throughout the story, and Eva’s feelings toward the animal change as she learns the truth and undergoes her own internal transformation. Discuss the many symbols, including the owl, the ghosts, and the goddesses such as Santa Muerte and Pomba Gira. How do these deepen your understanding of the novel’s themes and magickal heart.

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