

FAR AWAY BIRD

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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THE DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR *FAR AWAY BIRD* IS DESIGNED TO
ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB AND STIMULATE QUESTIONS,
CONVERSATION, AND ENJOYMENT OF THE NOVEL.

THEODORA



The woman who would become Empress Theodora of Byzantium is one of the most fascinating women in world history. Born into abject poverty and marginalized in the Byzantine sex industry, her rise to the throne should have been impossible.

During her rule, the Byzantine Empire introduced the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which is a sweeping overhaul to the Roman legal system. In these reforms, Theodora influenced the inclusion of several robust laws designed to establish greater equality for women. When bureaucrats tried to circumvent these laws, Theodora responded swiftly and aggressively to ensure their enforcement.

As a historical figure, however, Empress Theodora suffers from centuries old defamation. The prominent historian of her era, Procopius of Caesarea, wrote a book about Theodora that details stories of sexual excesses. These lewd tales have captured the imaginations of historians for generations while overshadowing her accomplishments. And so, Theodora lives on in history with an asterisk. Novels about Theodora either sensationalize her sexual exploits or just deny them.

Far Away Bird does neither. The author believes that Theodora's harsh life in the sex industry laid the groundwork for her commitment to helping women across the empire and provided the experience necessary to craft effective laws for women. She knew what needed to be done and asserted her influence to a male-dominated government that didn't share or understand her perspective.

This novel is about the *woman* Theodora. It's about the violent world she lived in. It's about the journey of a real-life heroine who makes mistakes, endures abuses, and takes a stand against the world for what she believes. You will witness her transformation from an exploited girl to an empress in these pages.

Far Away Bird was written using timeless archetypes and mythological themes, while attempting to stay true to history. Lastly, the character of Theodora is a manifestation of shared stories from numerous women alive today. They understood the nature of Theodora's struggles better than the author and bravely shared their stories to help portray the reality abuse and because, sadly, these struggles are not a thing of history.

“More than just an imagining of Theodora's rise to notoriety and power during the Byzantine Empire, the novel is a vivid tale of survival, healing, and femininity.”

-Gabriella Tutino, US Review of Books (Recommended)

SETTINGS IN THE BOOK

- 1 Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey)
- 2 Sozusa (Susa, Libya)
- 3 Alexandria (Alexandria, Egypt)
- 4 Antioch (Antakya, Turkey)



The Byzantine Empire was a continuation of the Roman Empire in the East. It was an empire divorced from Europe and centered in the modern-day Middle East. During the Sixth Century the era of Antiquity transitions into the Medieval Era. Paganism gives way to Christianity. Latin gives way to Greek. The East becomes the dominant culture while a proto-Europe descends into a dark age.

The Western Roman Empire had already collapsed.

Civilization was in decline.

And into such a world was Theodora born.

PART I – HIPPODROME

1. Chapter 1 depicts a real event known as the Trisagion Revolt that occurred in Constantinople in the year 512 C.E. We open with Theodora at age 14, who is an observer of the violent events.
 - As she witnesses the rebellion, how does Theodora see herself fitting into the world?
 - And does she have a realistic view as to the role of women in sixth century society?
2. Theodora's attitude toward civil unrest shifts after the death of her father.
 - Is her anger toward the rioting citizens justified or misdirected?
 - Are the demos of the city justified in their violence against the emperor or are they moralizing lawlessness and violence?
 - Or, to what extent are both true?
3. Women did not have many options without male income in those days.
 - How do you feel about Maximina's actions in the wake of her husband's death?
 - What could she have done differently?
4. At the koitona, Theodora takes ownership of her chores early on, while Comito does not. Theodora begins to work harder "not for the koitona, not for Madame Glyceria, but for herself."
 - What does her attitude toward work say about her?
5. There are many clues about the true nature of Theodora's koitona serving a secret role as a place of child prostitution.
 - To what extent is Madame Glyceria complicit in the trafficking of young girls?
 - Is Madame Glyceria also a victim of a powerful aristocracy?

- Does Madame Glyceria believe she's providing a net positive for the young girls, regardless of their exploitation?
 - Do you think Magister Origen believes he's doing a positive service to these girls as well?
6. Theodora's abuse at the koitona shapes her life in a terrible way.
- How specifically was she affected?
 - What happened to her sense of identity?
 - Without any threats to keep silent, Theodora chooses to stay silent. Why?
 - Why do you think people who knew or suspected Theodora's abuse preferred to stay out of it...or "look away" (as Theodora sees it)?
7. The book's title is 'Far Away Bird'
- What does Theodora's "far away bird" represent?
 - Why is this projection necessary for her to create?
8. Theodora attempts to murder Magister Origen and fails.
- When she flees the koitona, the deformed door guard unexpectedly helps her escape.
 - Why do you think he let her go?
9. Theodora eventually escapes the koitona and returns home. However, she resists admitting the sexual assault out of a desire to preserve her positive image among her family. "Because nothing bad ever happened to Theodora."
- How did Theodora's strong personality traits *actually work against her*?
 - Does she fear losing her status or image as a "strong" girl or "someone admirable" with such an admission?

10. The showdown between Maximina and Green Faction in the Hippodrome is a real event. Theodora's mother (whose name is lost to history) *did* confront the Green Faction and an anonymous member of the Blue Faction *did* stand up and offer a bear-keeping post to the destitute family. This true story is a footnote to history and it says a lot that we don't even know the name of Theodora's mother.

- Although Maximina technically failed at the Hippodrome, how do you feel about her?
- Is Maximina heroic?
- Did her bravery inspire others to act heroically?
- How do you think Maximina's actions will shape Theodora?

PART 2 – UNDERWORLD

1. Part 1 ends with Theodora's sense of optimism about her future. Part 2 opens with Theodora as a young woman who has become hyper-sexualized, openly promiscuous, consumptive, and arrogant.
 - How did you feel about that sudden contrast?
 - As a reader, did the change to Theodora's personality strike you as disappointing but believable?
 - How did Theodora's girlhood trauma play a role in her aggressive adult behavior?
2. The Notorious Theodora is an invented persona. In psychology, this is known as counterphobia, which is to engage excessively in behavior that you fear.
 - What do you think about her defense mechanism?
 - Why is the Notorious Theodora necessary?
 - What is it about her real self that she fears most?
3. After the first confrontation with Macedonia, Theodora confronts the dark side to her complex personality. The narration explains: "Shame itself became pleasure since Theodora couldn't live in a world where shame destroyed her. *Shame had to be made good*, and violation, a sacred ritual."
 - How do you feel about Theodora inverting the meaning of shame by turning it a positive?
 - How else might people deal with shame in self-destructive ways?
4. Macedonia was a real person in history. She was an informer for Justinian and the Blue faction. In the novel, Macedonia also reveals herself to be a tough mentor for Theodora.

- How did you feel about Macedonia's confrontation style of teaching?
 - Was it effective?
 - In what ways is Macedonia preparing Theodora for her future role as an empress more so than merely training her as a spy?
5. Macedonia has a few lessons about power. "The power of violence is not the violence itself, but whether you obey afterward. And you will not obey, Theodora." She tells Theodora that a sovereign woman "always wears her burial shroud."
- How do you feel about Macedonia's lessons on power?
 - How do you think Theodora is affected by these lessons?
6. In one of the Great Courses known as 'The Art of Storytelling: From Parents to Professionals,' Professor Hannah B. Harvey discusses tropes found in fairy tales that pertain to women. She delves into the recurrent theme of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. This is a powerful and recurrent theme that exists *outside* the male-oriented "hero's journey." In *Far Away Bird*, Theodora performs a live sex show known as The Virgin and the Faun, which is a retelling of Little Red Riding Hood. Theodora judges all people "guilty" for embracing this socially acceptable motif.
- Whereas Little Red Riding Hood is meant to be cautionary tale about budding womanhood, in what ways does the story ignore a darker reality for young women?
 - In what ways does Theodora believe that social acceptance or fascination to the beauty and the beast motif equate to complicity?
 - Why do you think this theme is so recurrent across cultures and history, even to our modern day?
7. Theodora develops a platonic relationship with Hyaptius, despite the manner in which they met.
- Why do you think Theodora is sympathetic to Hypatius?
 - What do they have in common?

- Despite the obvious differences in how each character was wounded internally, how is Theodora affected by recognizing a form of shared pain with a man?
8. Justinian opens up to Theodora about his peasant past, which in some ways, undermines his own authority in the relationship.
 - Why do you think Justinian does this?
 - What is it about Theodora that Justinian finds so attractive?
 9. During a testy session between Justinian and Theodora, Justinian asks Theodora, “What could an emperor do help women such as yourself?” Theodora’s response is her first attempt at articulating women’s rights.
 - How did you feel when she confronted Justinian about the bleak plight of women regardless of the political faction in charge?
 - In what ways is this relevant today?
 - Do you believe Justinian’s perspective changed at all regarding women?
 10. Macedonia never really succumbs to jealousy or anger at Theodora, despite some broken trust.
 - How do you feel about the relationship between Macedonia and Theodora?
 - Is Macedonia a good mentor in the end?
 11. Before Theodora leaves for North Africa, she sees her four-year daughter, Palatina. Moreover, Theodora feels guilt at leaving her child behind, whereas in the past, she had few, if any feelings about Palatina.
 - Why do you think she sees her daughter differently now?
 - What changed?
 - In what ways has Theodora not lived up to the powerful example Maximina set regarding motherhood?

PART 3 – EXILE

1. Before the arrival of Valeria, Theodora seems to have fallen into a state of idleness and boredom. “In her heart, Theodora knew that such a life was the best a woman could hope for, and she had that life.”
 - How did you feel about Theodora’s seemingly luxurious life?
 - What did the governor provide Theodora in that lifestyle?
 - More importantly, what did the governor take away from Theodora when she became a concubine?
2. Theodora is met with a crisis when she must train Valeria to be a concubine. Almost immediately, Theodora confronts her own anger and criticism of Madame Glyceria.
 - What did Theodora think was the biggest crime that Madame Glyceria committed?
 - What happened when Theodora tried to correct for that crime?
 - Did she make the situation better or worse?
3. Valeria protests sleeping with the governor in full.
 - How was Theodora unprepared to deal with Valeria?
 - How does Theodora think she’s improving upon Madame Glyceria’s form of instruction?
 - In what ways does Valeria’s resistance deal a devastating blow to Theodora’s belief that she can improve on training a girl for prostitution?
4. Why did Theodora risk everything to save Valeria?
5. Before the final confrontation, an apparition of Macedonia appears to state, “It’s time, Despina.” In mythology, this is known as the resurrection or return of the mentor (even after the mentor is killed or vanishes.) From Obi-Wan Kenobi to Gandalf, mentors reappear in critical moments of a story.
 - Why did Theodora unconsciously summon Macedonia at this critical moment?

- Why do mentors persist through time, even after they leave us?
 - How do you feel about the mentor-pupil relationship between Theodora and Maceodnia?
6. In real history, Theodora is famous for her salacious portrayal of *Leda and the Swan*. This lewd story is probably the most famous story about her that serves as defamation, even appearing on her Wikipedia page.
- How did her portrayal of *Leda and the Swan* in the novel's climax change the meaning of that story?
 - There were multiple symbolic meanings with the decapitation of the governor's prized swan, Krikou. Can you identify them?
7. How did Theodora's attitude about the Roman Empire change during her grueling overland travels?
8. In the Sixth Century, there were essentially three popes. One in Rome, one in Constantinople, and one in Alexandria. According to the history books, Theodora traveled to Alexandria after being cast out by Governor Hecabolus. She met and befriended Pope Timothy III, and she did convert to Monophysite Christianity during her stay.
- How did you feel about the portrayal of Pope Timothy III?
 - How did you feel about his view of good and evil?
 - Do you think Theodora's confession helped to heal her?
 - Why do you think Pope Timothy focused Theodora's confession, not on *her* sins, but the unspoken sins of others upon her?
9. Theodora's salacious past has always been a problem for her as a historical figure.
- Do you think the novel *Far Away Bird* exonerates Theodora in any way?
 - While Theodora may not be a "role model," do you feel like she modeled heroic behavior?
 - Knowing now that Theodora goes in to influence sweeping reforms for women across the empire, how do you feel about Theodora's story?

- Do you think her past is still a liability in today's world?

10. True to history, Theodora visits Macedonia on her return to Constantinople. To Macedonia, one path to empowerment (at a time absent of women's rights) was to cultivate equality through personal relationships.

- While this may be one of the few solutions available in the Sixth Century, is her advice still applicable today?
- Macedonia also suggests that another path to personal empowerment was to assume greater personal responsibilities rather than outsource those responsibilities to a man (or someone else). Is she correct?
- What happened to Theodora when powerful men assumed the responsibility for Theodora's welfare?
- Lastly, in what ways does Theodora move beyond her mentor at the end?

11. According to the history books, Justinian meets Theodora while she's working at a spinning wheel. In *Far Away Bird*, the two have a preexisting professional relationship and she works a spinning wheel as a means of financial independence.

- How has Theodora changed in the novel?
- What change was the most profound?
- How do you think the upper classes will feel about Theodora exerting power from the throne?
- Lastly, is Theodora ready to become an empress of the Byzantine Empire?