



SONG OF THE SALTINGS

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SUMMARY

On the isolated island of Brack, the people live by an ancient bargain: every year, a sacrifice must be made to the Glimm, the creature that haunts the salt marshes.

Eight years after the monster spared her, 16-year-old Lotta tends the Council's sacrificial horses and keeps her distance from the villagers who whisper about her fate.

But something is stirring. The island is dying. It hums beneath her feet, and a song threads through her dreams. Is the Glimm calling Lotta back?

A chance encounter with Moss, a village outcast, will change both their lives, and the fate of the island, forever.

To uncover Brack's deepest secrets, Lotta and Moss will need to trust each other and risk everything they hold dear.

Because on Brack, monsters come in many forms.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Fantasy world building – looking at classic fantasy novel structure
- Power of authoritarianism / Groupthink / Social ostracisation /
- Scapegoating / Inequality
- Folklore as inspiration for stories – e.g. Lambton Worm and Jenny Greenteeth (English), Kelpie (Scottish), River Mumma (Jamaican), Kappa (Japanese), Nixie (German), Rusulka (Slavic), Bunyip (Aboriginal)

THEMES

Witchcraft / the Natural World / Bravery / Folk Horror / Coming of age / Elitism / Community / Danger / Mythical Creatures / Sacrifice / Tradition / Superstition / Music

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do you think the poem extract before the prologue shapes your expectation of the novel you're about to read?
- Consider the descriptions of the landscape throughout the book. If you were speaking from the perspective of the natural world in the novel, what do you think you'd be asking for? How would you plead your case to the people of Brack?
- Rumours can have dangerous power, especially in small communities. What role does fear have in the rumour mill? What responsibility do you think an individual has to investigate the facts of something they've been told about another person? Why might someone feel compelled to repeat a rumour they've heard?
- Why do the people of Brack show resistance to Lotta's attempts to change the narrative about the Glimm? What might they be afraid of? The book examines why people go along with structures that are against their own interests. Why would they agree to such a monstrous idea as sacrificing their own children?

- Throughout history processions have served as tools for asserting political power, reinforcing social structures and commemorating religious and cultural events. What effect might the annual procession have on the people of Brack?
- Superstitious belief plays a key role in life on Brack – what superstitions, if any, have you inherited from your family or culture?
- Throughout the novel Lotta is often led by a deep sense of instinct when it comes to action. Where do you think you've been led by instinct in your life? Have you made decisions based solely on instinct or are there other factors at play?
- The novel reflects on different ways of living alongside the natural world and making a home. For many of the island inhabitants their experience of the island is predicated on a narrative of obligation. If they do (a) then they will receive (b). What relationship do you have with the natural world?
- The hidelings are the chosen outcasts on Brack, and they suffer for their exclusion from society. What are the dangers of excluding people from their community? What are the negative effects on the community when they ostracise their own kind? Is a classless society possible? What do the hidelings have that the villagers don't?
- Memento mori ('remember you will die') is an artistic symbol or trope acting as a reminder of the inevitability of death. What are potential examples of memento mori for the people of Brack in the novel? What are the examples of memento mori imagery for the reader?
- Survivor's guilt can happen when individuals survive a tragic, near death, or traumatic event when others perished. How much of a role do you think this guilt could play in Lotta's determination to explore the island's secrets?
- Instances of individual and collective grief are found throughout the novel, and the characters deal with their grief in varying ways. How do

you think grief can change a person's character and life choices? What do you think isolation might do to someone grieving?

- Hope for change is a powerful motivator. Why do you think Lotta was able to harness her hope for a different life on Brack? At what point in the novel did you find yourself wishing for change for the island and its inhabitants?

- What purpose do folktales serve in communities, including, but not only, ones about dangerous creatures, e.g. the Lambton Worm, Jenny Greenteeth, kelpies (the water horse, not the dog breed), taniwha, werewolves, the black dog of Yorkshire?

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Song of the Saltings was written in a bit of a fever dream fed by folklore, films, books, conversation, locations, history and a lot of meanderings through the unconscious. I first became interested in writing about the folklore of my Celtic heritage when I wrote *Red Rocks*, which was based on the myth of selkies, or seal people. This was later followed by *The Grimmelings*, about a vengeful kelpie, or waterhorse, that stalks a family who own a riding stable in the South Island, which allowed me to incorporate my childhood love of horses. Both books were set in contemporary New Zealand.

For this book, I wanted the freedom of setting it in a fictional place, in a made-up time, with a creature that wasn't borrowed directly from existing folklore. And so the Glimm was born. I started with a basic premise – an isolated and fractured community that once sacrificed children to a creature that dwelt in the saltmarshes – and the character of a girl who was spared. A sense of place is very important to me, and I wanted to evoke the moody atmosphere of the Scottish islands I visited in 2024 for research, with their moors and saltmarshes and bogs, their ancient standing stones and whispered stories.

When I started to write the opening scene, where Lotta meets the hideling Moss and rescues his horse from the bog, I had no idea how she

was going to do it. I just had to keep writing it and see what happened. That was when Lotta surprised me by singing to the bog to set the horse free. Where did that come from?

Well, I like to think it was a mystical place, but the truth is more mundane perhaps: it came from my unconscious. It came from the place in my brain that has stored every book I've read, every film I've seen, every piece of music I've heard, every place I've been. Out of all these ingredients, my unconscious created the song of the saltings and handed it to me at a crucial time. That song shaped Lotta's internal journey and the whole plot of the book. Where did the song come from? That was what I set out to discover in writing this book. It highlighted the importance, if you want to be a writer, of reading widely and thinking deeply so your mind produces stories that are unique to you.

I hope you enjoy the layers of *Song of the Saltings* and fall in love with its characters and setting as much as I did.

Rachael

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachael King is a writer, reviewer, former literary festival director and ex-bass player living in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Her books for young readers include *Red Rocks* (now reissued as *Secrets at Red Rocks*), *The Grimmelings*, the Violet and the Velvets series and *Song of the Saltings*, her first Young Adult novel.

Rachael has a BA from Auckland University and gained a Masters in Creative Writing from the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University in



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2001. Her first novel for adults, *The Sound of Butterflies*, was published worldwide and translated into eight languages. It won the award for best first novel at the 2007 Montana New Zealand Book Awards. Her second novel, *Magpie Hall*, was published in 2009 and was longlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

Over the years, Rachael has played bass guitar in six bands, worked in bookshops, radio, television and magazines, and was the programme director of the WORD Christchurch Festival for eight years until the end of 2021. The festival hosts hundreds of writers from around New Zealand and the world. Now she is lucky to make a living writing novels full time.

Rachael received a Waitangi Day Honour Award in 2020 from the New Zealand Society of Authors (formerly PEN) for her work at WORD bringing exiled Kurdish writer Behrouz Boochani to New Zealand. In 2023 she was named Best Reviewer at the Voyager New Zealand Media Awards.

Red Rocks won the Esther Glen Medal in 2013 and is now an Emmy award-winning television series called *Secrets at Red Rocks* (available to watch on Neon and Sky Go in New Zealand, with a second season on the way).

The Grimmelings won both the 2025 NZ Booklover's Award for Junior Fiction and the Booksellers New Zealand Children's Choice Award, as well as a Storylines Notable Book Award. Drawing on her experience as a teenage girl bass player, in 2025 she published the first two books in the Violet and the Velvets series, about a primary school girls' rock band that solves mysteries. Both received Storylines Notable Book awards and two more are due in 2026.

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