

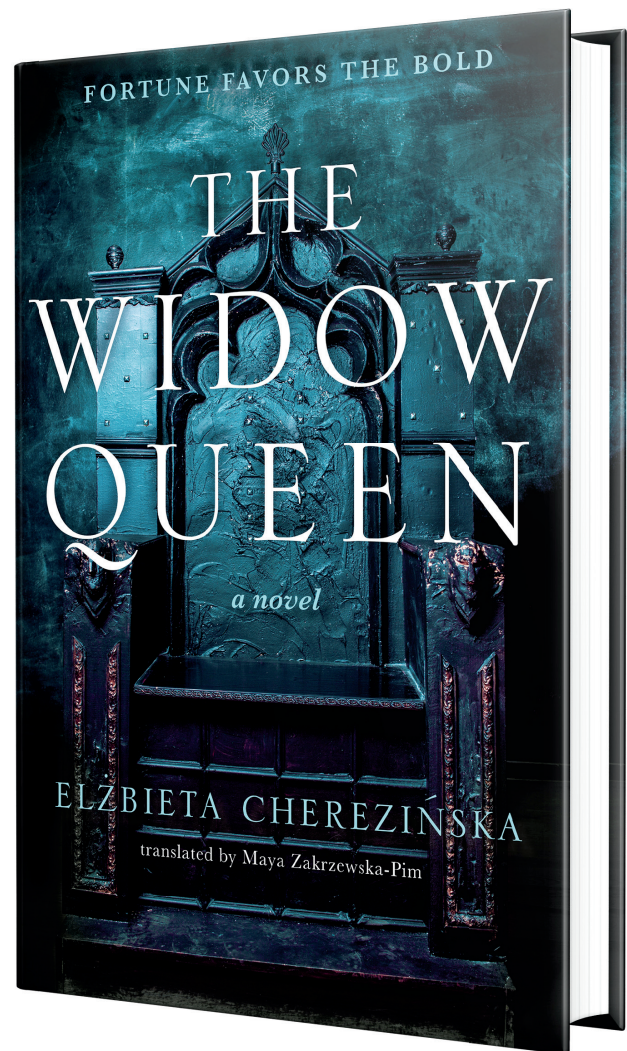
READING GROUP GUIDE



Elżbieta Cherezińska is the #1 bestselling and award-winning author of fourteen novels. She was born in Pila, a small town in the west of Poland, and currently resides on the Baltic coast in Kolobrzeg, Poland. *The Widow Queen* is her first novel to be translated into English.

Maya Zakrzewska-Pim (translator) Maya Zakrzewska-Pim grew up in Warsaw, Poland. She studied English at Trinity College Dublin and is working on a PhD from Cambridge. Her previous Polish to English translations include Ignacy Karpowicz's *Gestures* and *Sonka*.

1. As you were reading the opening scenes depicting Świętosława's youthful rule-breaking and her brother Bolesław's excruciating tests of resilience, what did you observe about the differences between how girls and boys were treated? How was Świętosława able to overcome the limitations imposed on her?
2. What does Świętosława learn from Oda about survival? Did your opinion of Oda shift throughout the novel?
3. What does the novel show us about the spread of Christianity in Europe? What teachings does the monk Ion impart beyond religious doctrine?
4. In chapter 5, Mieszko declares, "A woman dons a crown only as the wife of a ruler. And a ruler's wife must be smart enough not to be dismissed and replaced by another. And, above all, she must give birth to an heir." Do the stories of Empress Theophanu, the Saxon leader who survived Otto and ruled as a regent, reflect the truths in that statement?



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5. What strategies does Świętosława use to quash her potential rival, Thordis? Are these strategies useful only to women?
6. Olav's path to glory is arduous; though he is the rightful heir to the Norwegian throne, he owes his freedom to Vladimir and sees his life as a continual state of indebtedness. When he raids the Wolverine to avenge his mother, is he justified or is he showing emotional weakness?
7. If you had been a judge, how would you have interpreted Mieszko's final document? Was it a will or a testament? Was his intention to empower church leaders or merely appease them?
8. How did you react to the scene at Odin's temple and the rituals of a Viking funeral? How does the author's vivid depiction compare to the way you had previously imagined a Viking's path to Valhalla?
9. What makes Świętosława's lynxes an ideal companion for her, just as the hawk is for her father?
10. How would you have responded to Olav's proposal if you had been the widow queen? Would you have been willing to dutifully marry Eric and, later, Sven? What surprising forms of love does she experience in those marriages?
11. The achievements of King Cnut are well documented, but the identity of his mother is unclear to historians. What do you predict for the fictional Sven, Świętosława, and their sons in *The Last Crown*? What universal lessons are imparted by these cycles of life, from birth and youth to wisdom and legacy?
12. Elżbieta Cherezińska conducted painstaking research while writing *The Widow Queen*, but in the book's dedication, she pays homage to "the anonymous, forgotten princesses...marked in biographies of dynasties with a sad 'N.N.'" Why didn't those early chroniclers want to preserve the story of the real-life Świętosława (whose actual name cannot be confirmed)? In what ways can a contemporary fiction writer enhance our understanding of historical truth?