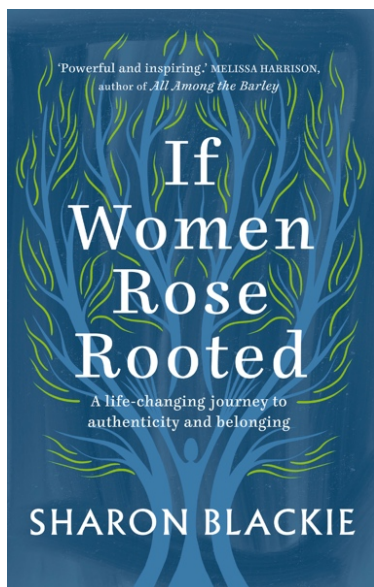


# *If Women Rose Rooted*

by Sharon Blackie

## Readers' Guide



Offering readers an immersion into a life-changing journey from the wasteland of modern society to a place of nourishment and connection, *If Women Rose Rooted* has been described as both transformative and essential. Sharon Blackie leads the reader on a quest to find their place in the world, drawing inspiration from the wise and powerful females in native mythology, and guidance from contemporary women who have re-rooted themselves in land and community and taken responsibility for shaping the future. Beautifully written, honest and moving, *If Women Rose Rooted* is a passionate song to a different kind of femininity; a rallying cry for women to reawaken their natural power – not just for the sake of their own wellbeing, but for love of this threatened earth.

*'If women remember that once upon a time we sang with the tongues of seals and flew with the wings of swans, that we forged our own paths through the dark forest while creating a community of its many inhabitants, then we will rise up rooted, like trees. And if we rise up rooted, like trees ... well then, women might indeed save not only ourselves, but the world.'*

To see a video of the author talking about the inspiration for *If Women Rose Rooted*, please visit the book page on [www.sharonblackie.net](http://www.sharonblackie.net).

### General suggestions

- Sharon offers us poetry at the beginning of every chapter. Read these aloud to one another as a 'ritual of beginning' for your discussions.
- In all of the chapters, at least one Celtic myth is related in the text. For some of those gathered in your group, these myths will have an ancestral resonance. Ask if setting up a ritual/ancestor space feels appropriate, and engage together about how you might create that space – including candles, special objects, images, etc.

## **Chapter One**

### **Reclaiming Our Stories**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- Is there a particular myth or folk tale from your ancestral tradition that you resonate with?
- Do you think that women and men are on a cultural journey toward equality? What current news stories support your belief?
- What are your earliest memories of realising that there is an ongoing destruction of our planet at the hands of humans?
- Do you have a favourite powerful woman from history? Tell her story.
- Discuss Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' together, in the context of Sharon's comments about whether or not it fits contemporary women.
- Sharon mentions some women and women-led social movements that were oriented toward protection of the land at the time of writing (2015). What movements are topical and current now? Who are the women in the news stirring up 'trouble' in the news today?

#### *Journaling Prompts*

- 'Before there was the Word, there was the land, and it was made and watched over by women.' How does this sentence make you feel?
- What do you think the world would be like if Boudica had won her battle with the Romans and they had left the British Isles forever?
- Has your life and your journey – or any part of it – mirrored Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey'?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Wells and Waters**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- What experience do you have with drinking 'wild water' from springs and other natural sources?

- Read aloud the 'Voices of the Wells' story. In what way has your voice (or the voices of your ancestors) been impacted by cultural violence?
- Describe a time when you felt particularly close to the natural world, or particularly connected to a place. It could be a walk in the woods, or an experience of immersion over days or months (or even years). When you think of this time, how do you feel in your body?
- Sharon speaks about the Wasteland in this chapter. Describe a time when you felt the desolation of the Wasteland in your life. What is your story of your Wasteland?
- 'If women want to change things, we need authority, and authority comes in good part from inside ourselves.' Has this been your experience? What authority do you claim? Where does your authority come from?

### *Journaling Prompts*

- Water can be a healer. How has water healed you in the past?
- How are you separate from nature?
- 'The Wasteland is a rootless place, and its ground is infertile ... The Wasteland burns us up and burns us out.' How has it burned you out?
- Read about the Celtic concept of 'Sovereignty'. Imagine how the world might be if everyone around you embodied this concept and understood it as a truth. How would your life be changed?

## **Chapter Three**

### **Islands of the Heart**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- Read aloud 'The Selkie's New Skin' to each other. Have you shed a skin that you now wish to reclaim? What is it? How would your life change if you put it back on?
- Sharon discusses throughout this chapter a sense of being called by wild places, of feeling a sense of belonging to rural open fields, Ireland, the countryside of Wales where her mother lived. Have you ever been called in that way to a wild place? Where? How is that feeling different from your day-to-day relationship with the natural world where you live?

- Describe a time in your life when you knew that you had to change and grow ... or die. A time when you received 'the Call'.
- Have your group do this process: Take out a large piece of paper and draw a timeline of your life, from earliest memories to present. The timeline can be a straight line, a spiral or whatever shape feels right. Place on the timeline, in groups of years, what your dominant description of yourself would have been (at the time). For instance: student, mother, good girl, professional, etc. Be as specific or as general as you wish. Find the spaces between these self-identities, and illustrate them above or below the timeline. Draw a picture of the interstices between being what you were and then what you became. Notice how many pictures you have and how they have changed over time. Add a few words about how you feel now about that time. (deeply challenged, joyful, free, despairing ...)

### *Journaling Prompts*

- How would it feel, in your body, to regain the skin you have lost? What would it feel like when you slipped it on?
- 'No star is ever lost we once have seen. We always may be what we might have been.' What might you still be that you once thought you would become? What is that star you saw once, and can still find again? How will you find it?
- What does an island mean to you? Isolation and a sense of being too bounded, or safety?
- 'Something in us knows that there is somewhere we should be going.' Where should you be going, now?

## **Chapter Four**

### **Deep Caves and Bottomless Lakes**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- Oweynagat (the Cave of Cats) is considered in Irish mythology to be a portal to the Otherworld. Have you ever experienced a place that feels as if it might be such a location? – what the Irish call a 'thin place'?
- Caves, lakes, wells, cauldrons, wombs ... what ideas link these things, one to the other?
- Read aloud the Ceridwen's Cauldron story. What do you think this myth is about? What is the legacy of Taliesin?

- Sharon writes about the Jungian term ‘Shadow’. What is your experience with your own Shadow? How do you see it emerging in your day-to-day life with loved ones and friends, or even strangers?
- If you had to strip away everything in your life – your job, your partnerships, family, your friendships, your community, money, home – what central core would be left?
- Read aloud ‘The Madness of Mis’. Have you ever felt like flying away to the hills and growing fur and feathers?
- Have you ever experienced the kind of compassion from a friend or family member that Dubh Ruis offers Mis during the deepest period of her grief? Tell a story about this person.
- Listen to Sophie McKeand's poem [Process \(In Memory\)](#) together, and discuss.
- Are you comfortable with sitting in the dark of change and grief? Tell a story that illustrates a time like this in your life, and how you sat with the darkness.

### *Journaling Prompts*

- ‘Remember the gifts of the dark ...’ Have you ever been in a physically very dark place for some length of time? How did it feel, and what were its gifts, if any?
- ‘Our Descent starts with disillusion and ends with dissolution.’ In her beautiful long poem ‘Anna Liffey’, Irish poet Eavan Boland speaks of a river always being en route to, always seeking, its own dissolution (by eventually giving out into the sea). How is it possible to be en route to dissolution, and to carry on towards it (like a river), while still loving life?
- Recount a period in your life when you experienced grief. From your perspective now, what – if any – gifts did it bring to your life?
- Write a bit about Mis and her experience of self-imposed exile in response to grief. What would it have been like to live inside her at her most disconnected?
- Is ‘out of control’ an option in your life? Has it ever been? Would you like it to have been? If so, what would it have done for you?

## **Chapter Five**

### **Finding the Path**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- Read aloud 'Elen of the Ways'. Have you ever had a relationship with someone who has clarified or the defined a path forward for you?
- The Heroine's Journey that Sharon describes requires allies. What allies might you find on this part of your own Journey?
- Look at images (you can easily find them online) of triple spiral motifs from Newgrange (Co. Meath) and other Irish Iron Age engraved stones. What does this symbol mean to you?
- Rhiannon had to hold tightly to her own sense of self while being surrounded by people who doubted her integrity. When in your life have you found it hardest to hold your own, to keep grounded in your own path and story?

#### *Journaling Prompts*

- Describe a dream that you have had that seemed to be a 'dreampath' – a dream that had some deeper meaning to your waking life, and to the Journey you were on at the time?
- 'The path winds its way across unfamiliar, uneven territory, and this long, arduous Journey requires endurance, stamina, and focus. There is nothing for it but to keep walking.' What does this kind of resilience look like to you, today? How might you find it?
- Have you ever wanted something very badly, but found yourself being 'seduced' away from it by distractions? Describe one such event in your life.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Moor and Bog – Retrieving the Buried Feminine**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- 'There comes a point in each of our lives when we face a choice. Will we stay as we are, embracing the pales shadow of womanhood permitted to us by the patriarchy? Or will we sink deep into the heart of the bog, and find out what it is to reclaim our creative power as women?' Talk about the challenges of finding our creative power as women in today's world.

- How do you embody creative energy as a woman? Do you sense a rhythm of energy and creativity flowing from your menstrual cycle? Does your body have regular sensations that go along with the flow of creativity? How has pregnancy and birth (if you have been through that process) impacted your creative life?
- Discuss a female role model who embodies work you feel called to do, or to participate in.

### *Journaling Prompts*

- What do you think of when you think of a bog, or a moor? How might you approach such a place, and find the lessons it holds for you?
- 'I do not remember a time, especially when I was young, when I ever felt safe in a woman's body.' Have you? How might you find a way to feel safer?
- If you could welcome into your life the perfect female role model for you today, who would she be?
- Name and describe 'feminine' places in your local landscape.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **The Enchanted Forest**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- Have you ever walked in an old-growth forest? If you have, talk about your experience. If not, find out whether there's one near you, and plan a group visit to walk there.
- 'What ails thee?' What ails you, today? And what might heal your inner Wasteland?
- Read the story of Gawain and Lady Ragnelle. How does this tale convey the healthy masculine and healthy feminine balance that Sharon is describing in this book?
- Discuss the concept of 'mother trees', and what the science of 'new' biology is telling us about the role of ancient trees in maintaining ecological harmony in forests.
- 'This time I will burn all my bridges.' What does that sentiment, in the context of walking 'the path', mean to you?

- *Solastalgia* is a word most of us understand as a deep and personal feeling, but one which is rarely discussed. Do you experience *solastalgia*?

### *Journaling Prompts*

- What is your image of the Grail? What does it look like to you? What does it mean to you? How might you approach it?
- Write a page or two as if you were a 'mother tree' in a forest. What does it feel like? How do you sense the world around you? How do you relate to humans and other creatures who walk through your woods? What might you have to say to them?

## **Chapter Eight**

### **The Fertile Fields**

#### *Book Group Questions*

- Read aloud the 'Lady of Lyn y Fan Fach' story. Women who bring gifts into community are often misunderstood, despite the importance of what they have to offer. Have you ever experienced bringing a gift into a community that did not seem ready to receive it? How did you respond?
- 'It has taken so little time to lose the rich knowledge that was built up over thousands of years by our ancestors ...' Do you wish to re-skill or re-learn some of these 'old ways'? Which ones call to you, and why? How can this reading group or group of women hold each other accountable for re-learning a skill and then passing it on to someone younger?
- 'Conscious femininity is bringing the wisdom of nature back into consciousness.' Discuss.
- Do you feel as if you belong to, or are drawn by, a particular kind of landscape (as opposed to a particular place)? For example, do you relate more to deserts, rainforest, moorland ...? What makes you feel this sense of belonging?
- Who were the native inhabitants of the land you call home? Do you know a story from that lineage about a place or landscape feature nearby?

### *Journaling Prompts*

- What does the term 'wise woman' mean to you? How might you embody those qualities, or learn to?



- 'It has taken so little time to lose the rich knowledge that was built up over thousands of years by our ancestors ...'
- Is there one thing you wish you could have learned in your life? Why do you want to have this skill – and what, if any, are the barriers to learning it now?
- Is there a piece of land that has claimed you at some point in your life? Describe it, and think about what it has taught you.
- Think of a favourite spot near the place you call home. Name it, with some reference to your lived experience with the place. For instance, an open field surrounded by suburban houses could be 'The Deer Field' or 'The Buttercup Place'. An urban park could be 'The Shade-in-Summer Acre' or 'The Gathering Space'. After you've named it, tell a story about how the place has come to take on that name for you.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Mountains and Rocky Heights**

#### Book Group Questions

- Do you have an idea of how you would like to be when you are an elder?
- Sharon describes a process by which she created 'a Wasteland of my own making' when she was living in her croft on the Isle of Lewis. Have you ever had a time where you created a Wasteland of your own life?
- 'We have lost respect for the Grandmothers.' How does this show up in your own lives and in the lives of our culture?
- Sharon describes in some detail her experience with the horse Arthur, and the lessons that horses offer us. Do you have any experience with horses, and what lessons have you learned from those experiences?

#### Journaling Prompts

- What feeling does the word 'hag' evoke in you?
- If you can remember your own grandmother(s), what aspects of her (their) presence evoke positive memories in you?

- What qualities might a horse mirror back to you, or teach you about yourself?

## Chapter Ten

### If Women Rose Rooted

#### Book Group Questions

- How might we, as women, cultivate a sense of rootedness in our daily lives?
- ‘In these times it is not enough to awaken ourselves, to find our community; the world is in need of restoration, and each one of us is challenged to do the work of collective change.’ What do these words mean to you? Do you agree or disagree? How do we step onto the path of ‘collective change?’

#### Journaling Prompts

- ‘Women are spinners and weavers; we are the ones who spin the threads and weave them into meaning and pattern.’ If you were to weave a tapestry that reflected how you would like to be in the world, what would it look like? What colours would you use, and what kind of thread?
- ‘Listen now to the land's long dreaming.’ Go outside and see what happens when you try to tune into the land’s ‘dreaming’. Don’t worry too much about defining what that means. Just go outside, and listen. What do you hear?

## The Eco-Heroine's Journey

In the final section of *If Women Rose Rooted*, Sharon offers a summary of the main stages of what she calls the ‘Eco-Heroine’s Journey’, and some prompts for thinking about these stages in your own life. They’re copied here for ease of reference.

### 1. *The Wasteland*

This first stage of the Eco-Heroine’s Journey asks us to sweep aside the veil which prevents us from seeing the world as it is: to understand what is broken, and what needs to change. This isn’t just about understanding climate change and failing ecosystems: it is about acknowledging social, economic and political injustices too. This stage requires us to examine the ways in which women are treated in the world, and minorities, and animals – any groups and clusterings that are considered to be ‘other’ – any groups who do not fit the preferred archetypes in our dominant

culture.

Flinch, but don't look away. It is easy not to think about these things, and to put uncomfortable emotions to one side out of a sense of powerlessness. It is easy to get disheartened. So many of us go through stages of feeling helpless, or believing there's nothing that can be done. But there's always something that can be done, no matter how small. The Journey is not about saving the world with one dramatic action: that is beyond our reach, and besides, it's not the Eco-Heroine's way. The Journey is about accepting that we each have a responsibility for the way we live our lives, for our footprint on the planet. It's about accepting that we each have a responsibility for the local places we live in, and for the communities around us. It's necessary first of all to see and understand the big picture – but then we need to zoom in, and focus on our own particular part of it.

- What are the ecological, social and political injustices in the world you live in?
- How is the Wasteland manifested in your own life? What kills or confines all that is vibrant and alive in you? In what ways have you been cut off from the wellspring, from the source of life?
- Have you assumed any archetypes of the patriarchy which do not fit you? Have you launched yourself on a Hero's Journey, adopted a Heroic way of being in the world?

## *2. The Call*

Now we must decide whether we will listen to the Call which lures us down a path that we know will lead to change. We have seen the Wasteland for what it is: what will we do now? Do we dare listen to the Call? Will we follow it, will we step off the edge?

It is possible to refuse the Call, just as I did for many years, paralysed by my own fear. But life is not about being safe and secure; life is about growing, learning, transforming. The Journey is life, and if you refuse it, it will come calling again. Each time, the Call will be louder; each time, the stakes will be higher and there will be more to lose. Think of the Selkie: to stay is ultimately to die.

- In what ways have you lost your skin, and what does that skin represent? How did you lose it? Is there a lost part of yourself which you yearn for now? Have you ever constructed a new skin which is false, or which does not belong to the person you believe yourself to be?
- Is there a phase in your life which seems to be ending?
- What is the Call which you hear? Where does it come from?
- Will you go? What does it mean, to go? How will you begin?
- What are you going to seek? What is the nature of your quest?

### *3. The Cauldron of Transformation*

Step off the edge . . . and then, if it happens, let yourself fall. Feel the grief and the loss; feel the environmental despair. Feel the rage.

Do you fear it? Stay with the dark anyway. Don't fight it; don't try to manage your way out. You will simply postpone the inevitable, and it will come around again. Don't fear the dark: it's a natural part of the Journey. The most beautiful butterflies emerge from the darkness of the cocoon; the finest plants push their way out of the deep, rich, fertile soil. Out of the darkness comes strength, and focus. There is always another rebirth. But it always begins in the dark.

Be still. Listen. Let yourself disintegrate.

- What are your dysfunctional ways of being, your patterns? What are the parts of you which must be left behind?
- What is it which sustains you, when everything else around you dissolves? What holds you up, when all support structures fail?
- How will you learn to be still, and listen?

### *4. The Pilgrim's Way*

Stay for a while in the dark, lick your bleeding wounds – but then pick yourself up, and find your way to the path. Put one foot in front of the other, and walk: a pilgrimage begins with one small step.

Don't be proud; even if your path is a solitary one right now, the Eco-Heroine's Journey is co-creational at heart, focused on building relationships – with other humans, with plants and animals, with the land itself. Accept the help which is offered; make friends and allies wherever you can.

- What is it that shows you the way? Who or what offers hints about the path you might follow? Do you find clues in your dreams? Do synchronicities occur, or has someone appeared in your life who sets you off on your way?
- Who are your allies, human, plant and animal?
- What tests and temptations might you face? What cultural myths must you uncover and overcome in your own life?
- Like Rhiannon, what truth about yourself must you insist on and uphold throughout the long passage of your Journey?

### *5. Retrieving the Buried Feminine*

Creativity is at the heart of the feminine mystery. We are the ones who give birth, who bring life to the world. Creativity isn't just about knitting scarves or going on painting courses; it isn't about creating great works of art or writing bestselling books. Creativity is an authentic approach to life: an openness, a spontaneity; a determination to nurture rather than destroy. Stop telling yourself

you're not a creative person; think about the ways you can manifest that deep, life-giving feminine wisdom in your own life.

- What is your relationship to the feminine, and who are your role models, if any?
- Do you feel as if you are comfortable with your body, and fully inhabit it? Do you have a sense of being grounded, rooted in the Earth?
- What aspects of being a woman have you buried deeply?
- What does creativity mean to you, and in what ways do you offer the gift of life?

### *6. Restoring the Balance*

The fight against the patriarchy isn't always a fight between men and women. There are masculine and feminine qualities in each of us, and each of us has those qualities in differing amounts – and sometimes at levels which naturally fluctuate at different times in our lives. This part of the Journey is about understanding, appreciating and embodying the qualities which fall into both categories, and bringing ourselves – and the world – back into harmony.

But in our own culture we still need urgently to fight against the dominant masculine, to ensure that women are listened to as well as men, to demand that we are respected and kept safe, and to insist that our ways of knowing and being are valued. It can be exhausting, but always insist on these things, and always fight for them where you can. We can only change the world if we have authority, and the power to act.

- How do masculine and feminine qualities express themselves in you and in your own life and relationships? Does one way of being dominate?
- In what other ways are you out of balance?
- In what ways do imbalances manifest themselves in your place and your community?
- How might you begin to restore those imbalances and fight for women's voices to be heard, for feminine qualities to be recognised and respected?

### *7. The Heroine's Return*

As Alice Starmore so clearly and evocatively stated, it's hard to care for what you don't know. So many of us have lost the deep knowledge of our places and communities which our ancestors once had, and as a result we no longer feel that we belong to them, no longer feel that it is our place to guard and protect them. If we want to bring our unique gifts to the world, to speak for the Earth, to recover the Voices of the Wells, we have to do so from a place and a community to which we belong.

It is perfectly possible to create a deep sense of belonging, either to a new place or to a place you have lived in for a long while. Wherever you are, for however long or short a period of time you stay there, it is important to learn to belong. Learn the history and the stories of the place and its people.

Learn the ecology and geology, and come to know the landscape. If you live in a bog, what does bog mean to you? What is the black, buttery peat at the heart of you? If you live in a city, what do its tower blocks and skyscrapers represent to you? An urban forest, concrete trees reaching for the sky? What webs are woven with its roads? Stand under the skies of your place, understand and anticipate the changing of its seasons, and know the phase of today's moon. Embrace the weather with all its vagaries, for a place cannot be separated from its weather. Walk your streets, explore your woods, and always, always take account of the small beauties.

- What do you already know about the place you live, and what do you think you need to learn in order to feel a sense of belonging?
- Do you know its plants and animals, understand its ecology and geology?
- What do you know about the community around you – the origins and history of the people who live in your place?
- What myths and stories arise from your place?
- In the context of your own Return, what do you think is the unique gift that you are bringing back to the world, or your community?

### *8. Becoming Elder*

Becoming elder is a Journey all of its own. It is a Journey to accepting and valuing the richness of ageing. It is joy in freedom from old constraints.

If you haven't already experienced it, think of menopause as a new Journey. This is not simply a physical change, it is a spiritual and psychological transition too.

Pass your wisdom on. Think about telling your own story. No one experiences life as you do: you have a unique story, a unique set of experiences, a unique way of seeing the world. Tell that story; use it to inspire and encourage others.

Remember that old age is not always sleepy or withdrawn. Remember the archetypal fierce crone. Remember Marion Woodman's description: 'She is not withdrawn. She is alarmingly present. Like a tuning fork her truth shatters hypocrisy. Others in her presence are released into what is true in themselves. Or flee.' When it is necessary, become fierce. Be wrathful.

- What does this Journey through menopause or to elderhood mean for you?
- How might it better equip you to continue to offer your gifts to the Earth and the community around you?
- What will you welcome letting go of?
- Embracing the simplified clarity of elderhood, what will you focus on now?

When the journey you are presently on seems to be over, remember that there is no real end. There may be new journeys ahead; there may be journeys-within-journeys. There is always something new to learn, always another gift to be brought out into the world. Embrace each new cycle; welcome every twist and turn. It is how we know we are alive.