

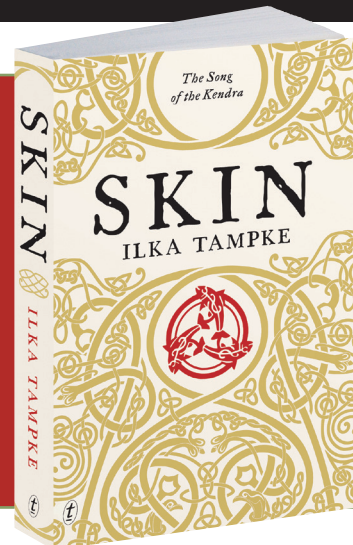
Skin

Ilka Tampke

ISBN 978-1-922182-33-3

RRP AUS \$29.99, NZ \$37.00

Fiction paperback



Praise for *Skin*

'I loved the depth, sincerity and beauty of *Skin*. It gives a name and a shape to our capacity for yearning.' Isobelle Carmody

Skin will appeal to lovers of historical fiction and lovers of literary fiction equally as well. It is an accomplished, absorbing and powerful debut.' *Hoopla*

About Ilka Tampke

Ilka Tampke was awarded a Glenfern Fellowship in 2012. Her short stories and articles have been published in several anthologies. She lives in Woodend, Australia. *Skin* is her first novel.

A reader's introduction to *Skin*

Ilka Tampke has imagined not only a lost world, but also a lost spirituality in her debut novel. She brings to life both Iron-Age Britain and druidism through the story of Ailia, a motherless girl without the 'skin' that is so important to her tribe. But even without skin, she is destined to be their Kendra, their spiritual leader.

As a child and young woman, Ailia yearns for knowledge, but she is forbidden from seeking or gaining it because she lacks 'skin', the totems that the tribe sees as integral to a person's connection with their land and its 'Mothers'. Ailia is drawn to the forbidden, enticed by the mysterious Taliesin, and begins to learn about the Mothers' realm despite remaining skinless. Her love for Taliesin drives her to break tribal taboos—but perhaps this was the Mothers' plan all along. Through mystical 'journeys' and rites, Ailia begins to understand both the 'hardworld' and the 'Otherworld'.

As Ailia embarks on her own quest for knowledge, the Roman invasion is imminent. If Taliesin is part of the Mothers' realm, Ailia's other lover, Ruther, represents the Roman way. Enthralled by what he has seen in his travels, Ruther wants the tribe to embrace the change that the Romans will bring. But Journeyman Elder Llwyd is certain that the Romans will disrupt the tribe's connection with the Mothers and the land. He is equally certain that the Mothers will protect the tribe from the

Roman threat. Tribequeen Fraid keeps a more open mind.

As Ailia gains knowledge, and is initiated as the Kendra, Llwyd and Fraid look to her for guidance. In the end Ailia's guidance leads to tragedy, possibly because she had not yet discovered her skin. At the novel's end, though, she is determined to be Kendra of Albion, and strides off into the future, secure in her identity.

With its compelling heroine, *Skin* evokes a people's connection with their land and explores themes of knowledge and freedom, change and tradition

Questions for discussion

1. Freedom is an important concept in the novel, especially in relation to knowledge. There is tension between the idea that people are free to make their own choices and the idea that their destinies have been determined. How free is Ailia? How does she use that freedom (if she has it)? If she has always been marked to become the Kendra, could things have been different for her? Would different decisions have led to different outcomes for the tribe?
2. Discuss other ways that ideas of freedom are explored in the novel. For example, is Ailia's love for Taliesin 'free'?
3. Ailia is often warned of the consequences of breaking hardworld taboos. For example, Llwyd warns against being caught in the light of the setting solstice sun for fear of tearing the skin (124) and Sulis warns of 'Infection', disease of the hardworld' (231) if Ailia journeys without skin. Are these warnings borne out by later events? When Ailia returns from her journey with the Mothers of fire, she is 'sickened with fear for what I had done... What had happened was wrong' (151). Was it wrong? Is Ailia wrong when she disobeys Cookmother's instructions, or Sulis's? Whose laws should she obey, the hardworld's or the Mothers'?
4. Ailia's inability to contest the Maiden's crown on Beltane prompts Ruther to explicitly question the tribal laws (26) but Ailia cannot countenance such a disavowal. Dispensing with the laws would benefit

Ailia in some ways, but she remains bound by them. 'The laws of skin had denied me much but I knew in the heart of my bones that they were true' (55). Ruther asks, 'How are you so loyal to what has abandoned you?' (172). What do you think is the answer to that question? Are we to understand that the laws are self-evidently right? Given Ailia's strength and thirst for knowledge, would you expect her to rebel against the rule of skin?

5. Do the Mothers have any control over events in the hardworld? What kind of beings do you imagine them to be?
6. Ruther thinks Llwyd 'cannot see beyond the old ways. He sees the Empire only as a threat, but perhaps it is a gift. There is so much that will be gained' (171). Is the Roman invasion presented as wholly negative in the novel?
7. At the end, Ailia realises that 'we had to surrender to this force if we were to protect anything of ourselves' (334). 'To live by Roman law would wound the Mothers, but the blood of whole tribes soaked into their ground would destroy them' (335). Is this an argument for compromise? Was the tribe's stand against the Romans noble or foolish?
8. What qualities make Ailia a leader? Did the Mothers make her a leader or choose her as one? At the end of the novel she heads off to fulfill her role as Kendra of Albion—what kind of leader will she be in the future? Was Fraid a strong leader?
9. Why is Ailia so afraid of being alone as a child, and why does she fear the long night on the isle? Is her destiny as Kendra one of solitude or community?
10. Ailia is caught between her desire for knowledge and tribal law. What are the tensions between freedom and custom in modern life?
11. Why does Ailia yearn so deeply for knowledge? Is learning an end in itself for her, and in general? Or does it bring other rewards? What are its costs?
12. In the acknowledgments, Tampke says she has taken inspiration from Aboriginal Dreamtime stories for the 'lessons' at the start of each chapter. What do you make of this comparison?
13. In the modern world, is it possible to have a connection with the land such as Ailia has?
14. Fraid challenges Ruther over the place of women in Roman society (168). How equal are women and men in Ailia's tribe?
15. Do you think Tampke romanticises the Celtic tribal ways and the Druids?