

Conversation Points for *Burning the Raven Tree*

Set in northern Michigan in 1965, *Burning the Raven Tree* explores how fear, silence, and the stories people choose to believe can shape identity and justice. Blending historical suspense, psychological tension, and Slavic folklore, the novel asks who is believed, who is protected, and what happens when both institutions and communities fail the vulnerable.

Suggested Topics

The hidden cost of deinstitutionalization

The mid-1960s brought urgently needed reforms to America's mental-health system—but too often without the community care, housing, or oversight necessary to support those released from state hospitals. The novel explores both the harm committed inside institutions and the harm caused when vulnerable people were left with nowhere to go.

Women, mental health, and the “witch” label

Distressed, abused, or unconventional women have long been branded hysterical, unstable, dangerous—or even witchlike. *Burning the Raven Tree* examines how quickly a community can turn a misunderstood woman into a monster, particularly when trauma complicates her ability to tell her own story.

Child welfare, family privacy, and hidden abuse

As child-welfare and juvenile-court systems evolved, abused and neglected children could still fall between the cracks. The novel considers how ideas about family privacy, parental authority, and “discipline” allowed communities and authorities to ignore what they suspected—or already knew.

Silence: survival or complicity?

Silence can protect someone who has survived trauma, but it can also shield an abuser or make an entire community complicit. The novel asks when silence is an act of survival, when it becomes a moral failure, and what breaking it may cost.

Trauma, memory, and competing versions of truth

Traumatic memory is often fragmented, suppressed, or reshaped as the mind tries to survive. Through an ancient oak that remembers what humans cannot—or will not—the novel explores the distance between what happened, what is remembered, and what people choose to believe.

Folklore as a keeper of cultural memory

The novel draws on Slavic traditions—including Baba Yaga, the Zorya sisters, the world tree, Perun, and Veles—as well as the real shoe-tree legends of Michigan. These myths are not simply decorative; they shape how the characters understand protection, sacrifice, evil, and their own identities.