



THE WITCH'S DAUGHTER

by Paula Brackston

A

about the Author

- A Conversation with Paula Brackston

B

ehind the Novel

- “Writing *The Witch’s Daughter*”
An Original Essay by the Author

K

eepon Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

A
*Reading
Group Gold
Selection*

For more reading group suggestions,
visit www.readinggroupgold.com.



A Conversation with Paula Brackston

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

I've always written—stories, journals, long letters, even a novel—but it took me a long time to believe I could *be a writer*. To me, writers were mysterious people who knew what they were about, were focused, clever, and serious authors from the outset. My life seemed to consist of getting and getting rid of unsuitable boy-friends and equally ill-fitting jobs. I tried to write in rare moments of calm along the way. I've worked as a nanny, a travel agent, a secretary, a stable hand, and a goatherd!

When I hit thirty I knew something had to change. I trained to teach English as a foreign language so that I could freelance, allowing me time to write. Even then I did far more teaching than writing. So I left London and persuaded a publisher to commission me to ride around Wales for a month and write a travel book about my experiences. That, I guess, was the start, for me.

What kind of research did you have to do to bring this story to life on the page?

I set myself a real research challenge with *The Witch's Daughter*, since the novel is based in the present day and in three historical periods. And, of course, I had to immerse myself in the subject of magic. The Internet proved a boon, not least because I live in a remote area of Wales and the local library would have struggled to meet my needs. For a writer, however, the Web can be a pernicious stealer of time—if you're not careful you end up with a vast collection of materials and information and no book! I find it helps to have things around me that are of the period I am researching. I stick pictures up by my desk (which is under the stairs), find knickknacks or bits of costume jewelry in junk shops, even start to wear clothes that

*"The clearer
the [characters]
become to me,
the easier it is
to find the tale
they want
to tell."*



put me in mind of where and when I am trying to write about. My family is very tolerant of all this, but they were a bit nervous about the witch's cauldron I wanted to cook dinner in.

When you start a new book, do you like to outline the entire story or fly by the seat of your pants? What about your characters? Do you figure them out entirely before you start writing or do they reveal themselves to you along the way?

An idea will start forming in the murky mists of my mind, and out of that will step my main character. I'll spend some weeks noodling over a story before I write anything down. It has to incubate before it's ready to fall onto the page, even in note form. The characters drive the story, and the clearer they become to me, the easier it is to find the tale they want to tell.

How do you come up with your character names?

I enjoy choosing names for my characters, but it often takes me a while to find the right one. Sometimes I'll finish a book and then go back and change the main character's name. In *The Witch's Daughter* names were even more significant than they ordinarily are. Both Elizabeth and Gideon had to have names that could be changed, slightly or more fundamentally depending on who they were "being" or where they were. Fortunately, I've always been quite good at anagrams.

If your book were to be turned into a movie, would your dream cast be?

I think Rachel Weisz would be the perfect Elizabeth Hawksmith. Gideon would be harder to cast, but I'm always impressed by the performances of British actor Tom Hardy. He'd make a splendid job of it. Well, a girl can dream.

*About the
Author*

*"I'll spend
some weeks
noodling over
a story
before I write
anything down."*

Which fictional character do you have a secret crush on?

I'll try and avoid giving you a list! I spent many weeks as a teenager dreaming about Emily Brontë's Heathcliff. And I've always had a bit of a thing for Bram Stoker's Dracula. Both a little worrying, really.

Desert Island time. You can bring one person and one thing. What would you bring?

As I couldn't choose between my children I guess it'd have to be my partner. He's good at all the things I'm rubbish at, like lighting fires, building shelters, fishing, etc. He's also a good listener, so I could construct whole new books in my head and tell them to him, while sitting next to the fire he's just lit, outside the shelter he's built, eating the fish he's caught. A fair division of labor, I feel. I'd take a fine-bone china cup and saucer. I'm sure there would be something on the island we could make tea out of, but it wouldn't have the same calming-yet-restorative effect if I didn't have a decent cup. Now I feel irredeemably British!

What's up next for you?

I'm working on a new novel. I don't want to give too much away, but I'm exploring another historical period, and right now I've got a wonderful new witch standing at my shoulder and whispering ideas in my ear.



An Original Essay by the Author

Reading
Group
Gold



Writing *The Witch's Daughter*

I have long been fascinated by the idea of witchcraft, and wanted to write a book based on this notion: *What if there are witches living among us, here and now, using real magic?* This in turn set me thinking about witches in times before our own, and how opinions have altered down the centuries. In Bess's time (the sixteen hundreds) cunning women, or those using hedge craft to heal, were often accused of *maleficia*, that is, the use of magic to attempt to bring about bad events or harm to others. From our twenty-first-century perspective this seems like fear and superstition causing panic and injustice, and we accept that most of these women were harmless, and indeed in many cases effective healers. But then: *What if some of those women were true witches?* This gave me my start point for Elizabeth's origins.

By granting her immortality I was able to place her in other eras that I find fascinating. For me, there has always been a frisson of menace about Victorian London. It was a place of so much poverty and suffering, where the poor and the desperate rubbed shoulders with the wealthy but could only dream of the comfort and security their birth had assured them. The poorest, as always, were the most vulnerable, which is why I wanted Elizabeth (who of course has a strong social conscience) to live where she did, helping the prostitutes as best she could. And I wanted to include Jack the Ripper, since he symbolizes all that was dangerous and cruel about the city as the century shuddered to a close.

I was particularly keen to position our heroine in the First World War. I wanted to see her tested to her limits, and to watch how she might be persuaded to use her magic to heal, whatever the personal cost. The very name Passchendaele conjures up suffering and emotion. The more I researched the third battle

*Behind
the Novel*

“I hope readers find themselves as bewitched as I was by the idea of secret magic being among us.”

of Ypres—the conditions the troops and non-combatants endured, and the grim realities of the field hospitals—the more I knew Elizabeth would be irresistibly drawn to such a place.

I was born in Dorset and although I moved to Wales when I was five I have spent many years visiting that part of England. I love the quintessentially English feel of the landscape. It is Thomas Hardy, and cream teas, and thatched cottages, and bucolic life, and all that is good and quiet and peaceful about the countryside. This setting, then, was the perfect foil for the darkness that continued to pursue Elizabeth and threatened both herself and Tegan.

I found writing *The Witch's Daughter* a wonderful and entirely consuming experience. My family had to put up with many long months of me going about with a distracted look on my face, or were forced to drag me away from one of the myriad books I devoured while researching. My children got used to all their bedtime stories being about witches, or the seventeenth century, or medical procedures one hundred and twenty years ago. My son is now well informed on the weaponry of the Great War, and my daughter insists on dressing as a witch for fancy dress parties. They are as thrilled as I am that Elizabeth's story is now going out into the world. I hope readers find themselves as bewitched as I was by the idea of secret magic being among us if only we care to look for it.

A Note from the Author

I do hope you enjoyed reading *The Witch's Daughter*. I am always interested to hear readers' comments, so feel free to comment on my Website blog at www.paulabrackston.com or e-mail me at paulabrackston@yahoo.co.uk.



Recommended Reading

Reading
Group
Gold



The Birthday Boys by Beryl Bainbridge

I devour everything by Bainbridge, but this is my favorite book of hers. She must have investigated the facts behind Scott's doomed expedition meticulously, but none of that research gets in the way of the characters. It's a brilliant example of a writer in total control of her material, apparently effortlessly inhabiting the minds of her characters and giving them wonderfully individual voices.

Jamaica Inn by Daphne du Maurier

The author writes tension and suspense superbly. The air of menace in this book is expertly maintained throughout, and even now the writing feels modern and vibrant.

As Meat Loves Salt by Maria McCann

A fantastic example of writing from the perspective of a terrifyingly flawed character, while also telling a moving love story. One of the very few books to have ever made me cry.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet by David Mitchell

I always enjoy David Mitchell's writing, but the setting of this novel makes it a particular favorite. I really felt I was living in a Dutch enclave in eighteenth-century Japan to such an extent that I was often quite bewildered when I put the book down and found I was in twenty-first-century Wales!

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Gideon is a dark, unsympathetic character, and yet Bess found herself drawn to him. Why is there such a strong attraction to people we can see are bad—in literature and in life? Did you, as a reader, find yourself repulsed or intrigued by Gideon?
2. How did you react to the witch trials and surrounding procedures in the book?
3. One of the themes of *The Witch's Daughter* is identity, and trying to pinpoint what makes us who we really are. Is there a pivotal moment or event in which Elizabeth realizes magic is an inextricable part of herself?
4. Names play an important role in the story. How are they used to reflect this theme of identity?
5. Bess never uses her magic for personal gain. What do you think about the choices she makes regarding her use of the craft?
6. Why is Elizabeth's relationship with Tegan such a crucial one, both for her and for the story?
7. The early seventeenth century and the early twentieth century were both times of great political instability and upheaval. Meanwhile, Victoria's reign provided decades of growth and prosperity for many. Which period in history did you most enjoy in the book, and why?
8. The Passchendaele section is perhaps the most visceral part of the book. How did you find yourself responding to the horrors of wartime Flanders?
9. Put yourself in Elizabeth's place. Are there things you would have done differently?