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BLACK POWDER

BY ALLY SHERRICK

SYNOPSIS

England, 1605. 12-year-old Tom must save his father from hanging. He falls in with a mysterious stranger – the Falcon – who promises to help in exchange for his service. But on the long journey to London, Tom discovers the Falcon’s true mission – and a plot to blow up Parliament with barrels of black powder. Tom faces a terrible decision: secure his father’s release, or stop the assassination of the king ...

A rip-roaring, beautifully written life-and-death quest, packed with history and adventure.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

‘Can one moment change the course of history? That’s what this book is all about! Ally Sherrick tells a rollicking tale of conspiracy, treachery and betrayal set at a time when religions were at war. One plucky boy and a brave girl stand up for each other and what is right, against all the odds. Oh, and isn’t there something about remember, remember, the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot?’ **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Ally was born and grew up in Surrey. She graduated with a BA in Medieval History, English and French from the University of



Newcastle in 1987 and, in 2011, with distinction from the Writing for Children MA course at the University of Winchester. *Black Powder*, her debut children's novel, won the Historical Association's Young Quills Award, the North Somerset Teachers' Book Award and was shortlisted for eight others. Her second novel, World War Two-set *The Buried Crown*, also from Chicken House, was published in April 2018. She is married and lives with her husband and assorted garden wildlife in Farnham, Surrey.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'The Gunpowder Plot was a serious attempt by a band of desperate men to blow up King James I of England, members of the royal family, the King's ministers and his bishops and Parliament too. If they had succeeded, they would have changed the course of Britain's history.'

The background to the real-life plot is as exciting as any work of fiction and yet there are very few stories for children set at this time.

The idea for Black Powder was first sparked by a visit I made to the ruins of Cowdray Park, a Tudor palace on the edge of the town of Midhurst in West Sussex. During my visit, I discovered that a certain Mr Guy Fawkes had worked there as a footman, when a young man.

I was intrigued. And it didn't take long for a whole bunch of 'What ifs?' to start buzzing around inside my head. What if, years later, Guy Fawkes returns from his time as a soldier abroad and stashes a secret supply of gunpowder at Cowdray? What if, when he comes down from London to collect it for use in the plot he and his friends have planned to blow up the King and Parliament, he has a chance encounter with a young boy who has arrived at Cowdray on a desperate mission of his own? And then, what if he agrees to take the boy to London with him?

I have tried to follow the history of what is known about the plot as much as possible. However, there are a number of things I have made up for the sake of telling a good story; and events happen over a much shorter time period than they did in the real-life plot. But like all stories, Black Powder contains deeper truths too.' **ALLY SHERRICK**



THEMES

- Courage against the odds
- Friendship and loyalty
- Standing up for what you believe is right
- Family and love
- Bullying and prejudice
- Grief and acceptance of death
- Inequalities of power and wealth

WRITING STYLE

Black Powder is written in the third person, past tense, and sticks closely to the perspective of main character, Tom Garnett. The author's straightforward but immersive storytelling style is typical of historical fiction, allowing her to weave in period details effortlessly while remaining emotionally engaged with the characters. **314 pages, age 9+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. Which Side?

'It's as bad as it was in the old queen's day, with spies and soldiers everywhere sniffing for signs of rebellion. And always seeking to make us Catholics scapegoats.' (Page 9)

The Gunpowder Plot was born from the religious differences and tensions between Catholics and Protestants which had afflicted the country under successive Tudor kings and queens following King Henry VIII's break with Rome. At first, after James VI of Scotland (Mary Queen of Scots' Protestant son) became King of England on Queen Elizabeth I's death, he showed an inclination to be tolerant of Catholics as long as they didn't cause trouble and did not threaten his position. However, after two plots against him in the first two years of his reign - one



organised by Catholic priests – he was persuaded to re-enact the harsh laws of the old queen.

Most of those still loyal to the Catholic faith did what they could to endure the difficulties these laws brought and to keep out of trouble, even if this meant attending Anglican church services and worshipping in their own faith in secret. However, a band of desperate young men – many of them converts to Catholicism and disappointed in their hope for greater toleration from King James – decided to take matters into their own hands.

As a class, identify some of the comments in the book that different characters make about religion and other people's religious beliefs. Do you think they are fair or biased? Give reasons for your answers.

In small groups/pairs, research what life was like for a) Protestants during the reign of Elizabeth I's sister, the Catholic queen, Mary Tudor and b) Catholics under the Protestant monarchs, Elizabeth I and James I. Present your findings back to the class. What are the similarities in the way they were treated? How was this different to the treatment of people who worshipped in the same religion as the king or queen of the day?

Imagine you are either a Protestant living under Mary Tudor or a Catholic living under James I, and write some short diary entries about what life is like for you – what you are allowed/not allowed to do, how people treat you and how you feel about this.

2. Rich and Poor

A ball of anger tore through Tom. He understood alright. A palace filled with gold and silver and a whole army of servants, but still they wouldn't lift a finger to save Father. (Page 75)

The world of *Black Powder* is divided by religious differences, but also by differences in wealth and privilege too. Tom and Cressida are both Catholics. But while Tom and his family don't have much money, Cressida is a Montague and a member of one of the most influential families in the land. Although her father is a Catholic, he attends the King's court and has one of the largest houses in the country, and a London townhouse too.

Working as a class, based on what you know from reading *Black Powder*, identify the differences in lifestyle



between the Garnetts and the Montagues. For example, the clothes they wear, the houses they live in, their education. Why do you think the Montagues are so powerful and influential at a time when other people of their faith are being persecuted? Is Tom right to feel cross about it? Give reasons for your answer.

Then, working on your own, either a) imagine you are Tom coming to Cowdray for the first time and write a short account of your first impressions of the place and your new-found relatives, or b) imagine you are Cressida and describe what it is like to be taken away from your home and forced to live as a prisoner in an attic room. What sort of things would they each miss and wish they had with them?

3. *I Spy with My Little Eye ...*

'With quick wits like that, Master Spy, you may yet live to fight another day. But ... if your story does not please me, be warned.' He sliced a finger across his throat. *'For I shall show you no mercy.'* (Page 103)

Spies play a key part in the story of *Black Powder*. They were vital to uncovering the real-life Gunpowder Plot. The King's chief minister, Robert Cecil, was also his spymaster. A brilliant and clever statesman, he was prepared to go to sometimes extreme lengths to create political stability in England. One of the tools that helped him was the network of spies and informers he controlled. He posted spies, or 'intelligencers' as they were called, across the country and abroad to gather evidence of intrigues, plots and assassination attempts on the King.

As a class, create a spider diagram of all the possible tools and techniques a spy might typically use to find out as much as they could about someone, or to uncover a secret or a plot. Then, in pairs, research some of the actual techniques that Cecil and his men used (you might find some clues to what these were in *Black Powder*).

Codes and ciphers are a common tool of the spy's trade - today and at the time of the Gunpowder Plot too. Using a simple alphabet code - you should be able to find some on the internet - imagine that you are either Tom or Cressida and write a short, one or two sentence message from yourself to your cousin about the activities of one of the other characters in the story you have your suspicions about. Ask your neighbour to see if they can



decipher it. You may need to give them the key to your code to help.

Now, imagine you are Robert Cecil. Write and design a wanted poster for either Tom or the Falcon. Some of the things to include might be: key physical features; roughly how old they are; when they were last seen; whether you think they are dangerous; what sort of reward might be offered for information about them/their capture. And don't forget to say what they are wanted for too.

4. Getting the Message

The Falcon snatched the letter from him and scanned the words. 'Where did you get the tools to write it?' 'I mixed the ink from soot and water and made a quill from a crow's feather ...' (Page 180)

A letter played a very important role in helping Robert Cecil uncover the Gunpowder Plot. It is known today as the Monteagle letter, after the name of the Catholic lord it was sent to. The letter, which historians believe was written by one of the plotters, advised Lord Monteagle to stay away from the opening of parliament on 5 November 1605 and warned of a 'terrible blow' set to strike those who attended. Cecil knew from his spies that a plot against King James I was brewing, but he didn't know what form it would take. The letter gave him both the place and the method. It was on this evidence that he ordered a search of the cellar beneath the House of Lords around midnight on 4th November - and found a tall, red-haired stranger with a lantern lurking near 36 barrels of gunpowder and a stack of wood.

Letters play an important role in *Black Powder* too. As a class, identify the places in the story where a letter appears and what its importance is to the plot. *Clue: there is one letter in the middle of the story and two near the end.*

Now, working on your own, imagine you are one of the following characters and write a short letter of 100-200 words on the topics suggested below:

- **Tom Garnett** - writing a letter to his mother to tell her he is safe in London with the Falcon and how he is planning to try and rescue his father.



- **Solomon Wiseman** – writing a letter to Robert Cecil to explain how he managed to capture Guy Fawkes.
- **Cressida Montague** – writing a letter to Tom in France to tell him what has been happening to her since he left England.
- Or think of your own idea for a letter between two of the characters in the story.

There was no postal service in those days. How might each of the letter writers arrange to get their letter to its final destination?

Find out more: You can find a copy of the original Montague letter and read what it says [here](#).

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Courage and Cowardice*

'Make courage your watchword, Soldier. It will serve you well when all else fails ...' (Page 281)

Courage and cowardice feature strongly in the story and are often displayed by the same person at different stages. Do you think Tom becomes more courageous as the story progresses? Why? If you don't agree, explain why not. What about Cressida, the Falcon, Viscountess Montague and Mister Mandrake?

What's the bravest thing you've ever done? And – if you're prepared to confess it – what's the most cowardly? If you had your chance again, would you do things differently? Why – or why not?

2. *Difficult Choices*

What are some of the crucial decisions characters have to make in the story? For example, Tom, Cressida, the Falcon and Tom's father, Mr Garnett? What motivates them to make the decisions they do?

Towards the end of the story, Tom has to make the most difficult decision of his life. What is this? Do you think



he makes the right decision? Give reasons for your answer. What lengths would you go to in order to protect someone you love? Could you make a story out of this?

3. Heroes and Villains

Tom's father frowned. 'And was he an honourable man?' Tom shrugged. 'I don't know. He did bad things, but some good ones too.' (Page 299)

What is your definition of a hero? And a villain?

Pick two heroes and two villains in Ally's story from this list: Tom, Constable Skinner, Cressida, Mister Mandrake, Harry Browne, Jago. What traits make them a hero or a villain? What about the Falcon?

Look up the meaning of the word 'anti-hero.' Do you think this fits any of the characters mentioned above? If so, who and why? If you were Tom, knowing what you know by the end of the story about the Falcon, would you have asked him to take you to London? Say why, or why not.

Make up your own hero, villain or anti-hero and write a pen portrait of them. To help, ask yourself these questions: What do they look like? What clothes do they wear? What skills do they have? What annoying habits? What do they want most in the world? Who is their mortal enemy?

