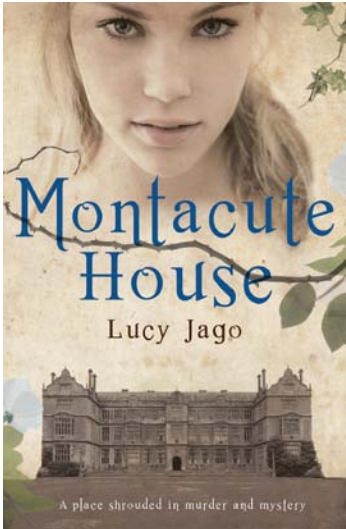


BLOOMSBURY

Teachers' Guide for *Montacute House* by Lucy Jago



In Brief

A brilliant tale of Elizabethan mystery and romance from the acclaimed biographer and historian Lucy Jago. A chilling conspiracy of religious bigots and disaffected nobles is plotting to kill Good Queen Bess and usurp her throne. All that stands in the way is Cess Perryn, an illegitimate poultrymaid with powers she is only just beginning to understand.

In Detail

It is May 1596 and Queen Elizabeth is preparing to visit Montacute House, the newly built home of her spymaster Sir Edward Mortain. Toiling in the House's poultry yard is the put-upon village outcast, Cess Perryn. Suddenly, rumours sweep Montacute that the corpse of a boy has been discovered, blackened and blistered as if the Devil had danced on his body, and the rumours say this boy is not the first. When her best friend William Barlow disappears, Cess realises that he is in terrible danger. Against all opposition, she finds her way to nearby Yeovil on market day to follow William's trail. Her quest sets in train an extraordinary sequence of events which will culminate in an astonishing climax in which only Cess will be able to save the kingdom. Along the way she will discover the true nature of witches and of her own mysterious powers. She will face the forces of religious bigotry, she will be betrayed by her friends and family, she will find allies in the strangest places and she will come face to face with the shocking secret of her own birth.

About the Author



Lucy Jago is an exciting new voice in historical fiction for young adults. Her book is set in Montacute House, a real Elizabethan estate in Somerset, whose history and geography she researched with the passionate care she lavished on her two highly praised non-fiction books for adults, *The Regency House Party* and *The Northern Lights*. She lives in London with her family.

Learn more at www.lucyjago.com

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Discussion

1. "It's my birthday today" (p.3). Her thirteenth birthday marks the start of Cess's journey into self-knowledge and magic. JK Rowling started Harry Potter's story with Harry's eleventh birthday. What similarities and differences are there between the stories?

2. "Her premonitions were always right, but she had learnt to keep quiet about them ..."
(p.5).

"She shivered as she imagined the pendant transforming her inch by inch from grimy, illegitimate poultry girl into a noblewoman" (p.7).

Why is Cess an outsider and what does she want? Is it because she has special powers, or is it because she is a bastard? How successfully does Lucy Jago describe Elizabethan society and Cess's place in it?

3. "Perhaps, thought Ignatius, the dead boy provided the perfect excuse for a new hunt. He, of course, would lead it. This time the witch might be caught, and anyway the exercise would provide valuable lessons on sin that the villagers needed to hear ..."
(p.20).

"Edith had escaped alive, just, but the episode had shown Cess how normal people could turn overnight into a screaming, murderous mob and hunt down someone they had respected, even relied upon, the day before" (p.27).

What do you think Lucy Jago is saying about witch-hunts? Does it make you think of anything in today's world?

4. Why do you think Lucy Jago chooses to make her characters speak in a (more or less) present-day fashion, but using historical vocabulary?

5. "Although Amelia smiled sweetly at her May Day beau, it was clear to Cess, even at a distance, that her cousin did not consider the barrel maker a fitting companion and that she would shake him off as soon as possible" (p.25). Amelia wants to use her looks to move up the social scale. What do you think Jago is saying about looks? What is the difference between Amelia's preference for Drax over the barrel maker and Cess choosing Jasper over the club-footed outsider William?

6. "Sin was brought into the world by Eve, who ate the apple of Knowledge in Eden..."
(Ignatius, p.35).

"That which you seek is within you

The strength of the God and the Wisdom of the Goddess..." (Alathea and Edith, p.38).

These quotations identify women with knowledge and wisdom. How do they differ? What do you think is Jago saying about the Christian God?

7. "I know you are, Cess. You don't like to see an unjust thing; you have always been that way. It hurts me to say it, but we cannot afford such principles" (Anne Perryn, p.48).

'She felt desperate. If he left, she had no chance of finding William that night. Jasper needed to be persuaded ... "If you will not help, I cannot promise my silence"' (p.113).

Is Anne Perryn right? Is Cess right to blackmail Jasper into helping her? Later on, Cess makes the 'sensible', head-not-heart decision when she leaves William with the monks. Does the book present such decisions as black-and-white? What are the relative importance of morality and prudence?

8. "Witches do not involve themselves in such practices. They work only for good" (Edith, p.60). What is the difference between Edith and the witches on one side and Paget and Drax on the other? Why are the latter pair not witches?

9. Magic exists in Jago's version of Tudor England. What do you think this adds to the story? How is it used?

10. "These men hold extreme views, I have heard of them. They are trained on the Continent and smuggled into England. The majority of Catholics in this country are law-abiding people, wanting only to practise their faith without persecution. They are as much afraid of the radicals as everyone else, if not more so, for their murderous plots make all Catholics appear to be enemies of the Queen. It is a sad state of affairs" (Edith, pp.141-2). What do you think Jago is saying about modern Britain? How exact are the parallels?

11. Sir Edward Mortain is a spymaster. How does Jago bring alive the world of Elizabethan court intrigue? How successful is she in shifting between the very personal situation faced by Cess and its huge implications?

12. 'Something happened one night that made his father banish him to a tutor in London. But he did not wish to think about that. That was the old Drax that did stupid, violent things fired by alcohol and emotion. The old Drax was gone' (p.175). Are alcohol and emotion equivalent? Which was more to blame? After all, the old Drax raped Anne Perryn.

13. '... but [Jasper] grudgingly admitted that she was, at least, interesting' (p.195).

(William is speaking) "When I saw the ribbon, I nearly gave up. I know you did it so I would remember that you had been there, but I would never have parted with something that you gave me ... When I saw you with that boy, the pain was as bad as anything the monks did"' (p.234).

How realistic are Cess's relationships with William and Jasper? How do relations between the sexes in Jago's book differ from those today and how are they similar?

14. How does Jago deal with the issue of sex? Amelia and Cess are thirteen – did that mean something different in this period to what it means today? When Jasper calls Cess a 'wench' on p. 211, how do you feel about it?

15. “‘I have information about Cecily that will deliver her to you,” said Amelia, with a triumphant smile’ (p. 202). Is Amelia evil, selfish or just stupid? Or a more complicated combination of the three? What is the difference between her betrayal and William’s?

16. ‘Was this girl, as Paget believed, his most invincible foe? He had noticed something about her from the moment he first saw her. He felt drawn to her, but it was not sexual desire. It was puzzling’ (p.230).

“You have a connection with him which none of us shares” (Alathea, p. 237).

“I am your father” (p.257).

When did you realise that Drax was Cess’s father? How does Jago give clues to this? Is there any interesting comparison between this story and others in which a protagonist doesn’t realise who their parent is (*Oedipus*, *Star Wars*)?

17. Drax doesn’t kill Cess because she is his daughter. Edward was harsh to the younger Drax, but he also wants to give his son the benefit of the doubt even though he has evidence of Drax’s treachery. Anne tries to protect Cess. Amelia’s parents foolishly send her to Drax. How does Jago deal with different relationships between parents and children?

18. How does Jago deal with the issue of evil? Are some characters simply evil, or is it rather that characters make bad decisions for understandable reasons? Drax had a very difficult childhood, but how far does that justify rape and child-murder? How far is he redeemed by not killing Cess?

19. ‘He had named her his heir as soon as she had recovered from the explosion’ (p.273). How important are blood ties in Montacute House? Magical power can be inherited, for instance, and the Elizabethan hierarchy is determined by blood. Cess becomes rich and powerful not because of any particular virtue – though she has been, as it happens, very heroic – but because she is the granddaughter of Sir Edward. Is this fair?

Beyond the Book

Creative Writing Ideas - Historical Fiction

Setting and themes

- **When do you want to set your story?** Why? Is it because you find the period exciting, or are there themes or subjects you particularly want to write about? Or have you read about something – either a place or a historical event – that inspired you to write a story?
- **How much do you have to learn about this period to make your story realistic?** How detailed are you going to be? What are the important things you need to research? What did people wear? What were their daily lives like? How did they buy things? Are you going to be writing about peasants or kings, soldiers or factory workers? What did people want or expect out of life? How did they relate to each other?

- What was the **geography** like? What was the effect of weather when people didn't have modern houses or clothing? How did they get around without modern roads? Where did they get their food? What did they do when it got dark – how many people could afford candles?
- **How will your characters speak (1)?** If you write in Shakespearean English, for example, it might be more realistic, but will that put off modern readers? How will your characters speak in a way that is consistent and readable, but which doesn't make the characters seem too modern?
- **How will your characters speak (2)?** Dialogue is a great way of showing what a character is like – how we speak says very important things about us. How does a young person speak differently from an old person?
- Will you feature **real people** – Henry VIII and so on? If you do, how accurate will you be about their lives? Will you invent things about them that never happened, or stick solely to facts you have discovered about them? Will they be major characters or minor characters?

Plotting

- What is your **overall story**? And **how long is it**? Who are the main characters, what do they want and what do they have to do in order to get it? Do they get it or don't they? What problems will they face? Who helps them and who stands in their way?
- Think of how to **start your story**. What event triggers the action? Does one of the characters learn a secret they need to tell someone they would never normally speak to? Does a mysterious stranger arrive who changes everything? Is there a bigger social event like a war or a plague that affects the main characters?
- **Plan the action.** It is tempting to describe the period, but try to drop explanations into your story. This way, you keep the reader's attention. Action is not only running and fighting. It is anything that moves your story towards the end, so it also includes thoughts and conversations about relationships, decisions made over breakfast, dialogue in markets, and so on.
- **Be clear about your ending.** Your ending rewards the reader for paying attention. The action should lead to a resolution. The characters should either succeed or fail in getting what they want. We should know what they think about the events of the story. Are they happy about what's happened or not? Have they changed, or learned anything?

Elizabethan history

- Learn about the **real Montacute House**. The National Trust owns Montacute House, and you can see pictures, read about the house's history or even plan a visit to Somerset at www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-montacute
- For basic information about the **Elizabethan era**, visit www.elizabethan-era.org.uk. There are sections about the queen and her favourites, about great explorers such as

Sir Francis Drake, and also about more day-to-day subjects such as food and clothing. It also includes an excellent section on **witchcraft**.

- Broader guide to **Tudor England**, with timelines, links, suggested historical movies and museum guides: www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/guide16/
- Read the story of Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's real spymaster: www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/walsingham.htm

Further Reading

The Lady Grace Mysteries series by Grace Cavendish

The Lady in the Tower by Marie-Louise Jensen

At the House of the Magician by Mary Hooper

To Kill A Queen by Valerie Wilding

Tudor Stories for Girls by Alison Prince

Witch Child by Celia Rees

The Nostradamus Prophecy by Theresa Breslin