

## A Reading Group Guide to

### *Blackthorn Key #4: Call of the Wraith*

By Kevin Sands



### **About the Book**

When a wild storm shipwrecks Christopher Rowe and he washes up alone on the shores of England, he can't remember anything. He doesn't know who he is or that he's just completed a secret mission in Paris for the British king. He's dressed as a nobleman, which feels wrong, and carrying a sash of herbs and medicines, which feels right. Despite his state, Christopher agrees when the farmer who rescues him asks him to find some missing children. Locals believe a ghost has taken them, but Christopher's scientific mind searches for other solutions. His new mission reunites him with friends he doesn't remember and leads them all into danger against the brutal winter, witch-hunters, and pirates.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why does the first section open with a page featuring nothing but a question mark? Does this help you make any predictions about the story? Why do you think the author labels the following sections with a day and date? Analyze the italic letters under each day and date, and what they might mean.
2. How and when does Christopher show his leadership skills in this story? Are you surprised by any of his actions? How does he show his loyalty and his willingness to help others? What are some of his other characteristics? How do they help him in his quest?
3. Why is Christopher disguised as a nobleman? How do people treat him differently because they think he has a title? How does he act differently? Describe his feelings about his disguise. Have you ever treated someone differently or been treated differently because of your appearance? How did it make you feel?
4. Sally is presenting herself as Lady Grace. Why is she in disguise? At what points in the story is she vital to helping Christopher and even keeping him alive? How do you think she and Christopher feel about each other? Give evidence for your answers.
5. Describe the friendship between Christopher and Tom. Find examples of how Tom is a steadfast friend. Why does he sometimes get exasperated with Christopher? How are

the two of them similar and how are they different? What qualities do you value in a friendship?

6. Who is Moppet and how did she end up in England? Why does it take everyone so long to understand who she is? Why does she like Tom so much even when she is afraid of everyone else? What happens to her at the story's end? What does she add to the story?

7. When the book opens, Christopher is lost without his memories and doesn't even know who he is. What does he suspect caused the loss? How does it feel for him not to remember his friends when they find him? Describe when he starts to get his memories back and what might have caused the change. Did Christopher's predicament make you recognize anything about the importance of your own memories? Do you think Christopher could have learned to adapt without his memories?

8. Why are Robert Dryden and Wise so kind to Christopher? What does Dryden's wife believe about Christopher, and why? How do the two men help Christopher at the beginning and again later on?

9. Summarize what Sir Edmund told Christopher about his role as a witch-hunter. What did Christopher find out that proved Sir Edmund lied in the past and was lying to Christopher now? How did Christopher figure out the truth?

10. What do the local people believe about Sybil? Why does Robert Dryden defend her? What do Christopher and his friends learn about Sybil's real history and abilities? How is she killed, and why?

11. Describe Sir Edmund's scheme to kidnap the children. Why do the pirates want the children? How does Sir Edmund use local folklore to make people believe the disappearance was magical? Why did he do it? How could making different choices have changed the outcome of the story?

12. Why do the local people believe the White Lady took the children? How does Christopher figure out that their belief is wrong? Why do you think the local people were so willing to believe that?

13. What does Julian do to help his father? Why does he do it? Describe Julian's personality and what you think his life was like with his father, giving specifics to back up your answers. What happens to him in the end?

14. Christopher's pigeon, Bridget, proves to be important in more than one situation. Describe times in the story that she helped Christopher and his friends, and how. How is she especially useful to Moppet?

15. The story takes place in December during an unusually snowy time. When is the weather an important factor in the plot? How might the story change if it took place in the summer?

16. Why do you think the author chose to have the voice of Master Benedict speak in Christopher's head? Find examples of how the voice helps Christopher.

17. Near the end, Christopher thinks, "Fear had ruled these hills—had ruled me, too." Analyze his statement, explaining how fear had ruled the hills and how it had ruled him. What did he learn about fear during his adventures? Why do you think fear is such a powerful motivator? Do you think having no fear can also be a problem?

18. Christopher goes on to say to the Raven, "You are nothing but a dream." Why does he say that? Discuss whether you think he truly believes it.

19. Sir Edmund's needle is engraved with Latin words from the Bible that translate as "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." How does this quote relate to the book's plot? Describe times when Christopher learns a truth after believing something else, and how it sets him free. How do you decide who and what to believe in your own life?

20. What does the word *wraith* mean? Analyze the book's title and why you think the author chose it. How does it relate to the story? Talk about the book cover and how it reflects the story.

### **Extension Activities**

1. Robert Dryden's wife is worried that Christopher's pigeon, Bridget, is a familiar, which is explained as "a demon spirit that took animal form. They were said to be companions of witches." Talk to students about where this conception may have come from, and why people believed it. Ask them if they think connections with animals are dangerous or just misunderstood. Then invite students to think about what kind of animal they'd like as a magical companion if they could have one. Each student should make a poster of the animal, including a picture and explanations of its magical abilities, why they chose that animal, and what kind of relationship they'd hope to have with it.

2. Witch trials have taken place in Europe and North America, including Salem, Massachusetts. Have students research the history of witch trials using print and digital sources. Each student should write down ten interesting facts from their research and share them with the class. As a group, discuss how the facts relate to the book.

3. Ask students to work in small groups to devise a board game themed around *Call of*

*the Wraith*. Each group should brainstorm challenging questions and answers about the book, and put them on cards. The board should have a path of squares for players to travel forward if they get the right answer, and backward if they don't. Have students decorate the cards and board, and share them with their classmates. Read more about making board games at this PBS page: <https://to.pbs.org/2j0dOLf>

4. This novel uses unusual words connected to beliefs in magic and to Christopher's work as an apothecary. Have each student find unfamiliar words in the novel such as *geas* and *vitriol*. They should create a small booklet with a different word on each page, along with a quote from the book, a definition, and a drawing or decoration to illustrate the concept.

5. Perhaps after the friends return to London, there will be time for quiet conversations by the fire. Have students imagine such a conversation between Sally and Tom in which they discuss their adventures in the book and talk candidly about how they think and feel about Christopher. Students should work in pairs to write a dialogue, and then perform for small groups.

*Guide written in 2018 by Kathleen Odean, a youth librarian for seventeen years, who chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She now gives all-day workshops on new books for children and teens. She tweets at @kathleenodean.*

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