

The Shakespeare Stealer Short Guide

The Shakespeare Stealer by Gary L. Blackwood

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Overview

Widge's quest to steal Hamlet is not a simple one. The indentured orphan, who can write a secret code as fast as a man can speak, must attend a performance and write down the complete play so that his master's troupe of actors can perform the new play.

If he succeeds, he will be rewarded handsomely, but failure would bring the threat of death. His master's servant, Falconer, who accompanies Widge to London, has already killed one man for merely calling him a name; surely he would not hesitate to kill a lowly apprentice.

Widge watches the play and writes the dialogue in the code, but when a pickpocket lifts his secret scribbles, Widge decides he must steal the play book from the Globe Theatre. Caught inside, he pretends that he wants to be an actor and is taken in by the troupe. Widge has never belonged to a group before. His opinion has never been asked and never mattered. Now he is treated as a real person, not as an indentured servant, and he likes it.

Should he betray his new friends and his new life as one of Shakespeare's actors, let fear dictate his life, and steal a copy of Hamlet? Or can he escape the long reach of his master and become his own person?

Unused to making decisions, Widge vacillates but finally makes a choice that changes his life.

About the Author

Gary Blackwood was born October 23, 1945, in Meadville, Pennsylvania, the son of Roy and Susie (Stallsmith) Blackwood.

He grew up in the small town of Cochranton, Pennsylvania, dreaming of becoming a writer and studying with that in mind. He graduated with a B.A. in English from Grove City College in Pennsylvania. While a college student, Blackwood published his first short story, "Cliffs of Gold," in *Twelve/ Fifteen* magazine. He quickly learned that writing alone would not support him and turned to other sources for income. His work experience varies from copy-writing, teaching, creating advertising art, and managing a book store, to working in a cannery, loading meat trucks, and carpentry.

Blackwood's first book, an adult historical novel, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, was self-published in 1982, but it was not until the publication of *Wild Timothy* five years later that his writing career really gained momentum. His works since that time include six plays that have been produced on stage and a series of novels that were all written for a young adult audience. Additionally, Blackwood has written nonfiction for young adult, middle-grade, and young readers.

Blackwood has a particular interest in Elizabethan England and originally wrote a novel that centered on an adult main character who attempts to steal the script of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by using a shorthand code to copy the dialogue. Years later Blackwood decided the book would work much better if a young apprentice—whom he called "Widge"—used the secret shorthand to steal Shakespeare's play. Keeping the basic idea of his adult version, he changed the plot to allow his former adult main character to become a minor character in the young adult book.

The Shakespeare Stealer has been translated into three languages and has been recorded for the audio market. The novel has also received numerous awards, including being named to several 1998 honor lists, including Children's Books to Read and Own by the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Library, School Library Journal's Best Books, ALA Notable Book, ALA Best Books for Young Adults, and the Smithsonian Notable Children's Books. The volume was also named as a Junior Library Guild Selection and was a Selector's Choice on the National Council for Social Studies and Children's Book Council list.

Blackwood lives in the Missouri Ozarks with his wife, Jean, and their two children.

He is currently working on a sequel to *The Shakespeare Stealer*, a novel with the working title of *The Gypsy Players*.



Setting

Blackwood sets his tale of theatrical intrigue against the backdrop of Elizabethan London in 1601. With careful attention to details of the time, the author re-creates a swashbuckling world where men duel with swords if their honor is questioned, where females disguise themselves as males if they want a life on the theater stage, and where servants do not question the word of their masters.

The Globe Theatre is described from its whitewashed thatched roof to the backstage wings. The property room, where props are kept, and the tiring-room, where actors change clothes, provide the locations for action in this fast-paced novel.

Blackwood draws a complex word-picture (complete with sights, sounds, and smells) of London, from the street vendors to dimly lit taverns to the wherry-boats on the Thames River. He includes a panoramic view of the city from the tower of St. Paul's Cathedral and describes this world through the awed perspective of Widge, a country lad who has lived his first fourteen years in rural Yorkshire.



Social Sensitivity

An accurate portrayal of the life of an apprentice adds psychological depth to Blackwood's historical novel. Widge has been treated as a slave, a person to be owned by the master and to do his bidding, no matter what. Widge has had no ethical upbringing. He has had no positive role models to teach him what is right and what is wrong. What saves him is his own ability to consider and assess a situation and to act accordingly.

The role of women in Shakespeare's theatrical world is shown through Julia's quest to be a performer. It was believed at the time in England that the stage would corrupt a woman, so men played women's parts. Julia had to cross the Channel to France for an opportunity in the theater.

Literary Qualities

Blackwood employs Widge as the narrator of the tale, a device that allows the main character and the reader (who like Widge has probably just been introduced to Elizabethan London) to look at the city through fresh, eager eyes. Sensory details abound, including the voices on the streets, the dankness of misty days, and the stench in the air.

Widge speaks in a Yorkshire accent. His words such as "a" for "he" and "wis" for "think" might be off-putting for young readers. Some readers might find the dialect as challenging to break as the character code that Widge has learned. The Yorkshire words are defined in the text, so the careful reader should have no trouble figuring out what Widge is saying.

Blackwood places historical figures in his novel as well. Appearances by William Shakespeare and actors Richard Burbage, John Heminges, and others add authenticity to the theater world. Heminges even speaks with his trademark stutter. The language of the theater is bandied about, and the reader will figure out these terms along with Widge, who is also a newcomer to the theater world.

Blackwood utilizes elements of style that mimic Shakespeare at his best: wordplay, witty repartee, and wry humor. Cliffhanging chapter endings make this volume a page-turner.



Themes and Characters

The main character in Blackwood's novel, Widge begins life in the country. During his first seven years, he bunks with a group of boys in an orphanage, and then he is apprenticed to Dr. Bright, a parson and physician who has devised a shorthand code that he calls charactery. He teaches it to Widge and sends him to a different church each Sunday to copy the minister's sermon.

Widge then transcribes the charactery into regular English, and two weeks later Dr.

Bright delivers that same sermon to his own congregation. When Widge discovers what Dr. Bright is doing, he asks if he can stop copying the sermons. He does not care if it is right or wrong, but he fears getting caught. Dr. Bright tells him that he is his boy and that he must continue to do as he is told. The notion that he is owned by someone else is drilled into Widge's mind.

When Widge is fourteen, his apprenticeship is sold to Simon Bass for ten pounds sterling. His new master's servant, Falconer, a terse man who wears his black hooded cloak as if it is a shield, takes Widge to his new home. Here Widge is instructed to go to London, attend a performance of William Shakespeare's Hamlet, copy down word for word the entire play, and transcribe it into English. Simon Bass intends for his own theater company to perform the stolen play.

The fearsome Falconer takes Widge to London. Although he attends the play, Widge gets so caught up in the story that he does not write much of the dialogue in the secret code. He does much better on his second viewing of the play, but his tablebook with his charactery transcription of Hamlet is stolen. His only hope now to satisfy his master is to steal the play book.

Caught inside the theater, Widge lies and says that he is smitten with acting and wants to be a performer. The men in the theater company vote and decide that he can become an acting apprentice.

Sander is another apprentice at the theater. He shares his room with Widge at the house of Mr. Pope, one of the players with the Chamberlain's Men. Sander teaches Widge the various jobs of an apprentice, including sweeping the stage of soggy rushes and replacing them with fresh rushes, whitewashing the thatched roof of the theater, practicing sword fights, and memorizing lines.

Julian is another apprentice who harbors a secret just as damaging as Widge's. If the players learn that Widge is there to steal the play book, he will be banned from the theater. If the players learn Julian's true identity, he also will be banned.

Nick is the oldest of the apprentices and, because of his deepening voice, graduates from the female roles of an apprentice to being a regular player and taking on male parts. His fondness for drink and carousing with actors from lesser acting companies



begins his downward spiral. He shows up late for performances and in no physical state to go on stage. He is quarrelsome, vindictive, and responsible for unveiling Julian's secret. He is an easy touch for Falconer when the corrupt servant approaches him and hires him to steal the play book of Hamlet.

Widge has never thought of what is right and what is wrong. As an apprentice, he is expected to do whatever his master requires. Nor has he ever had a clear sense of home and belonging to a family. While with his first master, Widge slept in a corner of the apothecary. While staying at a London inn with Falconer, Widge slept in the stable. Once he joins the players, he shares a room with Sander. Now Widge has someone to talk with, although he dare not confide his dark secret. For the first time in his life he has a friend, yet he is unsure what is required in a friendship.

As his responsibilities within the company increase, including acting the part of Ophelia in Hamlet when it is presented to Queen Elizabeth's court, Widge's sense of belonging to a family develops. He even feels loyalty to Nick, who has done nothing to endear himself to Widge, and he saves Nick's life by giving emergency first aid when he is injured in a sword fight. Widge naively believes that Nick would do the same for him, but he ultimately discovers that he must be a more discerning judge of character.

By relying on his innate sense of survival, Widge manages to avoid Falconer, who turns up time and again as he tracks the runaway apprentice. Relying on his instinctive code of honor and ethics, Widge wrestles with a whole new thought process and learns to respect others for who they are and learns to respect himself.

Topics for Discussion

1. How did the main character get his name? What could it have been?
2. What is character? How many people had mastered it?
3. What landmark was the center of London? Is it still there?
4. Describe the audience at the Globe Theater. Why did people act as they did at the theater? How does this differ from how theater-goers act today?
5. Why did Falconer wear a disguise? 6. What part does the Thames River play in Widge's story? Relate the various times he crosses that river via wherryboats and bridges.
7. What type of costumes did players wear in Shakespeare's plays? Why were they put together in this fashion?
8. Which characters in this story are historical? What do historical characters add to the atmosphere of the book?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What sort of life could orphans expect in England in 1601? Was Widge's experience with masters unusual?
2. Research Shakespeare's life and write a short profile of the playwright.
3. Why were women not allowed to be actresses in Shakespeare's time? Are there jobs in present-day England that are not open to women?
4. Write a descriptive essay of a walk down the street in Shakespeare's London. What features would set London apart from other cities of this period?
5. This book is set near the end of Queen Elizabeth's long reign. Recount her accomplishments as a monarch.
6. Describe the publishing world in England in 1601. Why did playwrights not immediately publish their plays?
7. Swordplay is important in Shakespeare's plays and in the adventure in Blackwood's novel. Describe the different moves that Widge must learn for the play. What different moves did Nick and Mr. Armin use in real sword fights?
8. How important are role models for young people? Who were Widge's role models and how did they affect his ideas of right and wrong?

For Further Reference

Brabander, Jennifer M. Review. Horn Book Magazine (July/August, 1998): 483. The reviewer compares Blackwood's narrative to Shakespeare's style.

Margolis, Sally. Review. School Library Journal (June, 1998): 140. This reviewer calls Blackwood's work a "fast-moving historical novel that introduces an important era with casual familiarity."

Phelan, Carolyn. Review. Booklist (June 1 & 15, 1998): 1763. This reviewer believes the main character "makes a wonderful guide to London and the Globe, since everything is remarkable to his unjaded eyes."

Review. The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (June, 1998): 353. This reviewer notes Blackwood's careful use of Elizabethan and theatrical details.

Telgen, Diane. Something about the Author.

Volume 72. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993.

An interview with Blackwood is presented in which he discusses how characters and situation allow theme to surface in novels and plays.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Several of Blackwood's books depict a theme similar to *The Shakespeare Stealer*: a boy set down in unfamiliar territory who must learn to fend for himself. In *Wild Timothy*, a boy who prefers books to outdoor life is lost in the woods and must survive for several weeks on his own. The high school senior in *The Dying Sun*, used to warmth and the crowded city life of the year 2050, must undertake a journey to the frozen state of Missouri where winter is a way of life. In *Beyond the Door*, the main character discovers a parallel world and is placed in a life-or-death situation.

Although Blackwood relies on survival as a plot device, his main characters are always well developed, and they learn more about themselves and their abilities by overcoming physical threats.

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