

Reading Guide for *The Pirate's Daughter* by Margaret Cezair-Thompson

About the Book

Novelist Margaret Cezair-Thompson has found fertile material in Errol Flynn's real-life passion for the Caribbean. In his later years he lived and played in Jamaica, and that is the springboard for a daring what-if tale about how the accidents and incidents of history and popular culture shape the lives of two women.

When Errol Flynn's misdirected boat washes up on the shore of Jamaica in 1946, in *The Pirate's Daughter*, it is like a message in a bottle tossed randomly from one world to another. And the fading film star deciphers a fresh paradise where he can practice his aging rakishness. While Eli Joseph, the area's justice of the peace, reads friendship in the foreign man's attentions, his teenage daughter Ida reads more. The past-tense matinee idol and the just-past-puberty girl produce a daughter, May, who comes to embody the recklessness and ambiguity of her parents' brief affair.

As decades pass, two powerful forces menace and enhance by the lives of Ida and May—their connections to Flynn and Jamaica. The island is the book's most beautiful character. Cezair-Thompson's portrayal of the West Indies relays its tropical sweetness with images of lush green hills and deep blue harbors. The homey, accented chatter of its native people orient the reader to the sounds of a different world.

Yet the deep sense of community and the deep divisions in Jamaica's cultural caldron act as two opposing magnets. Ida, in her youth, and May, in hers, are drawn away and drawn back again to the island. Dangerous unrest wells up as May stumbles over the threshold of adulthood. It is not the first time that the

women have been visited by physical peril. But in their world danger is part of the adventure of living. So is love.

Cezair-Thompson's generously nuanced book embraces matters personal, political, and historical in the destinies of earthy but smartly complex characters. And for readers taking in ***The Pirate's Daughter*** will be like living an extra life.

About the Author

At 19, Margaret Cezair-Thompson first hit American shores to hit the books. And after she received a B.A. in English at Barnard, she gained a Ph.D. at City of New York University Graduate Center. By then her sights had broadened beyond academics to encompass friendships and literary ambitions. "I'd made good friends and acquaintances in New York City," she says. "I wanted to practice my craft as a writer and to write, that was foremost in my mind, and staying seemed the best choice." So she traded one coast for another. Instead of returning to her beautiful island home of Jamaica, she adopted the United States. And other reasons pressed her: "At the time things had become politically distressing in Jamaica. There was a great deal of violence in the late 70's and early 80's, some of which had directly affected me and my family."

Her critically acclaimed debut novel *The True History of Paradise*, published in 1999, focused on a heroine desperately fleeing the West Indies. That same year her son Ben was born. And currently, she is an associate professor of English at Wellesley College, where she has taught since 1990.

Her roots have been replanted in the US, yet her work continues to reside in Jamaica. Her latest book ***The Pirate's Daughter*** looks at that nation through the lens of an affair between an aging film star and a head-strong island girl. It gives

readers yet another excellent product of the author's permanent spiritual connection to her idyllic and deadly homeland.

Interview with Author

Why did you want to write about Errol Flynn?

It wasn't so much that I wanted to write about Errol Flynn but rather that once I came upon the setting and early images, he presented himself as a person who had been there at that time. Then a number of things fell into place in my mind: stories I'd heard about him when I was growing up in Jamaica, all that he symbolized, and the challenge of recreating him, not only as Hollywood icon but as a human with human weaknesses and hopes.

How did you research Flynn's life? What sources did you use?

I read one or two books about him and also his own autobiography. I spoke to people who had known him and/or who remembered the time he lived in Jamaica. I watched his films countless times including the film he made that was set partly in Jamaica (*Cruise of the Zaca*).

What do you make of Errol Flynn? In your opinion, what sort of person do you imagine he was?

It will sound strange but I feel like I've gotten to know him, that I've lived close to him these past few years. My son has, in a sense, grown up with Errol Flynn in our home – his pictures, his movies – pirates, sea captains, Robin Hood. What I've come to know is a man who made mistakes, who was not easy to live with or to love, and who had an enormous thirst for life.

Was he really up on statutory rape charges?

Yes, that's a matter of public record.

If so, did that help fuel your imagination?

Not really. I personally do not know what to make of those charges of which he was acquitted. I mean, he's not the first movie idol or prominent man to get himself in trouble this way or to be accused of this sort of thing. Flynn's seductive side, his sex appeal is of course undeniable. But there's a vulnerable side to almost everyone: he had the power to seduce but I wanted to explore the ways in which he was open or vulnerable to seduction – not only by a young woman, by all her youth represented to him, but most of all by a beautiful country. I see his relation to the island as part of a historical attraction white Western males have had for the so called unspoiled Tropics – Gauguin, Hemingway, Kipling, the Buccaneers, European explorers, the list goes on. The history of colonization and imperialism has a complex and I think dynamic sexual aspect: rape is certainly part of it and must be acknowledged but it is not the whole story. Let me put it this way: my intention was not to write about a powerful white man who takes advantage of a vulnerable island girl; that story has been told again and again and typically undermines the voice and identity of the native woman and her nation. I wanted the woman and her country to be center stage.

Yet you do refer to rape in another scenario. How did you decide to handle it the way you did?

It isn't easy to write about sexual violence. I try to give a truthful and realistic sense of what occurs or might occur without violating the reader's sensibilities.

It seems that there are political undercurrents in the story. If so, how did you come to be interested in the part of history and foreign policy?

There's the whole colonial history of exploration and conquest that I touched on earlier. And yes, the political undercurrents are an important concern for me. Having grown up in Jamaica and having a first-hand view of our postcolonial difficulties, the recent political history of the Caribbean is an integral part of the setting. I came of age so to speak as Jamaica emerged from colony to independent nation, so part of my deep interest comes from that. I also care deeply for Jamaica and its future.

When people read a fascinating book like *The Pirate's Daughter*, often, they want to know where the author fits in. Are any character's based on your own personality or experiences? If so, please tell us about that.

This is always a hard question to answer. My characters are often composites of various people I've known. And sometimes I have a bit of myself in them. Of all the characters I probably have most in common with May especially in terms of her literary nature and her feelings for Jamaica. I empathize with the struggle to find her own voice, her sense of belonging and not belonging, loving a country and not being sure where she quite fits in.

How much of your cultural background is tied to Jamaica as opposed to the United States?

My heritage is primarily Jamaican. I was born there and grew up there and still have ties there. As May discovers when she leaves Jamaica for Europe, that early Jamaican background is the wide part of the funnel.

What sort of high school did you go to in Jamaica--private, public, religious?

I went to one of the larger well-known high schools for girls—St. Andrews High School for Girls. It's one of the long-established schools, government-subsidized (semi-public); many of our prominent female doctors, lawyers, artists, musicians, etc. have gone there. I also spent one year at a Roman Catholic boarding school in the countryside called Servite Convent of the Assumption School for Girls—this was a private and quite exclusive Catholic school (with a few local day students) and was a bit like the school I describe Ida as attending in the novel. I got expelled from this school after one year and returned (to my delight) to my former school St. Andrews in Kingston. However, I did meet some wonderful girls at Servite (the catholic boarding school) and enjoyed being in the country. So I don't regret having been sent there. It closed down very soon after I left.

What other elements of your background appear in the novel?

Probably the multi-racial aspect—and that is true of many Jamaicans.

What are some of your favorite books and authors?

My favorite writers and books are of the 19th and early twentieth century: Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, and all Thomas Hardy's and Edith Wharton's novels. *Les Miserables* is probably one of the greatest novels I ever read, also I like a terrific novel by Giuseppe di Lampedusa, translated from the Italian, called *The Leopard*. Of more contemporary writers, I have the utmost regard and take delight in the writings of Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri (both Nigerian) and the Egyptian novelist who died recently Naguib Mahfouz (*The Cairo Trilogy*).

Discussion Questions

1. Is this the story of a pirate's daughter? Why or why not? Is there more than one pirate in the novel?
2. How does Cezair-Thompson use the concept of pirates to tell the larger political story of Jamaica's path to independence? What does this book say about Colonialism?
3. Is this a novel about race? Is it a novel about class?
4. Passions run deep in this novel, both love and hate. Do you consider this a love story? Is it a love story between couples, or a love song for Jamaica, or both? What various kinds of love fuel the plot? What kinds of hatred drive the narrative?
5. Strong mothers abound in this book, even the mothers we read about only in passing who leave Jamaica for New York to earn a living for their children. Do you think Ida is a good mother? Do you think that is a fair question, given the challenges she faced? How important are fathers, and father figures?
6. Maps play a significant role in this novel. The greatest mysteries, though, are finding ways to understand hearts and histories. What guides May in her journey toward self-discovery? How does Nigel find peace?
7. How does the story of Errol Flynn and Hollywood add to the novel?
8. How do the interplay of fact and fiction enliven the story?
9. Place is critical in this novel. How does Cezair-Thompson use different settings to advance her tale?
10. What notions of beauty shape this story?
11. Much of the novel is about seduction, but not always the literal kind. What seduces different characters, and why?
12. Movies are important to the story, but in the end May is most influenced by words and books. Why does she seem more interested in one form of media over the other?
13. How important to the novel is the theme of forgiveness?
14. Is Jamaica a character in this novel?

Recommended Books

The True History of Paradise by Margaret Cezair-Thompson

Book of Jamaica by Russell Banks

The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal by Mavis Christine Campbell

My Wicked, Wicked Ways by Errol Flynn

One People by Guy Kennaway

Caribbean by James Michener

Walk Good: Travels to Negril, Jamaica by Roland Thomas Reimer

Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson

Can't Stop the Carnival by Herman Wouk