

# The Ravenmaster's Secret

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## Discussion Guide to

**The Ravenmaster's Secret:  
Escape from the Tower of London**  
by Elvira Woodruff

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Ages 8–12 192 pages 0-439-28133-4 \$15.95  
.... including an alternative ending to the book — see below!

## About the book

Friendship in a Time of War!

They were eleven years old. The year was 1735. She was the enemy, a young Scottish prisoner. He was her jailer, the Ravenmaster's son. Together they met deep in the confines of England's most fortified castle, the Tower of London, a place where terror ruled the day...a place where their friendship could cost them their lives!

*The Ravenmaster's Secret* is an adventure story about friendship and war, love and hate, weakness and courage. It's about a young boy who grows up in the middle of the Tower of London in 1735, and passes the ultimate test of courage and friendship.

In this study guide, we will talk about themes in the book. We will suggest lots of fun activities that go with the book. And we will talk about the author and some choices she made. We hope these discussions and activities will help readers get the most out of their reading experience. Enjoy!

## Discussion themes

### ***Bullies***

How did Forrest deal with the bullies? Was his father's advice useful? How do you think people are hurt by bullies? Why do you think people become bullies? How can you protect yourself from bullies? Write about a bully you know (don't use real names) and imagine why they are acting the way they are.

### ***Big problems and little problems***

Forrest's problems with the bullies seemed big to him. But soon he had bigger problems. When he must help Maddie escape to save her life, suddenly the bullies seemed very small. Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever had a big problem that suddenly looked small in comparison to something else?

### ***Which gives you more courage, love or hate?***

Discuss the scene where Maddy tells Forrest about her father. "T'isn't killing that makes him brave...He loves as fierce as some would hate. T'is love that gives you courage not hate."

### ***How does one become a hero?***

Discuss the scene where Forrest asks his father how Henry, the smaller raven, can act so brave with some of the bigger birds. What makes a hero? How was Maddy a hero? How was Ned a Hero? What made Forrest a hero?

### ***Face Up To Your Destiny; Dree yer ain wierd***

What does that mean? What was Forrest's destiny? What was Maddy's? What was Ned's? What is the hardest thing about living up to your own destiny? What do you imagine your destiny will be? Create a destiny for yourself. Imagine your life ten years from now. What will you be doing? Where will you be living? Add pictures.

### ***Home and family***

How important was Forrest's family to him? Discuss why he chose to stay with them in the Tower. Discuss Maddy and what her family meant to her. How did her grandfather influence her life? What were her best memories? What was it like for Ned to have no family?

Do a report on children who were orphans in the 1700's. Write about your best family memories.

### ***Titles***

Notice how each chapter has a title. But we don't know what the title means until we get to the end of each chapter. The same is true with the title of the book. We don't know what it means until the end of the book! The book is called *The Ravenmaster's Secret*. What was the secret? Talk about the theme of secrets throughout the book.

### ***Work***

Forrest had a job to do. And so did Ned. Investigate child labor in England in the 1700's.

What kinds of work did boys and girls do? Compare the work done by the children of different classes. Did poor children have harder jobs than rich children? Do a report on chimney sweeps. Who was the famous English writer who worked to outlaw using children as sweeps in England in the 1800's?

### ***War***

What kinds of things fuel a war? What was the War between the Scottish and the English at the time of the book? What was it about?

Discuss the stories that Forrest has heard and spread himself about the Scots. Discuss the line that his mother delivers when she hears him talking about them "foaming at the mouth". "Best not to believe all you hear for people will say anything to inflame men's hearts in a time of war."

What kinds of inflammatory things did you hear during the war in Iraq? How do we sometimes put the face of evil on someone we have never met? Talk about the meaning of the word "stereotype".

### ***What happens when you disagree with your King or country?***

Discuss how Forrest struggled with the problem of disobeying his King and helping Maddy.

### ***Boys and girls; men and women***

Discuss how Forrest felt he had to prove himself. Do you think Mary or Maddy would have the same problems? How were boys treated differently than girls then and now?

Why weren't any of the guards at the Tower women? And why wasn't there such a thing as a Ravenmistress? How are women treated differently today?

### ***The consequences of war***

What else is lost beside human life? Explore all that the Scots lost because of the English occupation: customs, homes, livestock, and land. What happened to the Highlanders? Investigate their history and write a report.

### ***Castles***

Imagine that you live with your family in a castle. Write a report on what it was like. How would you, your family, and your pets cope? Be sure to include pictures.

Here are things to talk about:

*Housing*

*Cleanliness: the mud, the dung, the moat, bathing, doing laundry, etc.*

*Food*

*Entertainment*

*Chores*

*Play: games, toys, etc.*

What do you like better about living in a castle long ago, than where you are living now?  
What don't you like about it?

### ***Imagine a different ending for the book. What if Forrest left with Ned and Maddy?***

Write about where Forrest would have ended up and what his life might have been like if he'd left the Tower.

### ***Executions***

How were people executed then? (See notes in the back of the book.) Find out what kinds of offenses people were being executed for in the 1700's. Discuss the balladeers and the entertainment aspect. How have we replaced that dramatic, violent, entertainment in our modern society? How are people executed or punished in modern times?

### ***Activities***

#### ***Turn your classroom into the Tower of London for a day***

Go to the Tower of London's website and take the Virtual Tour for Kids at [www.toweroflondontour.com/kids/](http://www.toweroflondontour.com/kids/)

Make a drawbridge from chains and cardboard as an entrance to your room. Make flags like the ones flying from the White Tower.

Divide up the class into groups and let the kids pick which group they want to be in.

One group will create an armory, making shields, swords, and crossbows. One group will create the Crown Jewels, making crowns, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. One group will create the Tower Zoo, bringing in stuffed animals and making others. Record some animal sounds for your zoo! Use the bibliography in

*The Ravenmaster's Secret* to find books that have pictures of the armory, jewels, and lists of the animals in the zoo.

Have students pick names out of a hat and come dressed as the character they choose: Forrest, Maddy, the Ravenmaster, etc. When you run out of people, the rest can be ravens or prisoners or people from the town.

Turn off the lights and use battery operated Christmas Candles to recreate the rush lamps and candles used in the story.

Find out how Ducks and Drakes (a game from that time) was played, and research other games from the time period. Forrest mentions his clay marbles. Make these along with other toys.

Have a wall hung with shelf paper and use real charcoal (or black markers) to let kids draw battle scenes the way Forrest and Ned did in the book.

Have shelf paper on the floor and let kids draw designs of rowan berries the way Maddy did in her cell.

Invite another class or family to come visit your Tower. You can make play money for them to use to pay to see the jewels, the armory, etc... Let the kids do the math.

Serve ginger snaps or gingerbread cookies (the ginger biscuits that Mary made in the story) and oatmeal squares or cookies (oat cakes) along with apple cider or tea. Here is a delicious recipe for Ginger Biscuits:

Sift into a big bowl and mix:

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour	1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon baking powder	1 1/2 teaspoons ground ginger
1/4 teaspoon baking soda	1 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 teaspoon salt	1/4 teaspoon ground allspice

Beat together in another bowl:

1 egg	2/3 cup dark molasses
1 cup firmly packed dark-brown sugar	6 tablespoons of softened butter

Cover and refrigerate for one hour.

Preheat oven to 350° F.

Generously flour your board and your rolling pin as you work. Roll out a portion of dough 1/4 inch thick. Cut out your ginger biscuit circles with the top edge of a 2" floured drinking glass. Or, with floured hands, roll dough into a ball and press with the back of a floured glass. Decorate with raisins. Place 1 inch apart on a buttered cookie sheet.

Bake 8 minutes, or until slightly firm to the touch. Cool on wire rack. This will make about 50 two-inch cookies.

### ***Research and writing***

What famous American was a prisoner in the Tower? (Check the Tower Notes at the back of the book for

the answer.) Write a report on this famous American and what happened to him after he left the Tower.

Research other escapes from the Tower and do a report on one. Some are mentioned in the Tower Notes. (Use the bibliography to find books to help you.)

Imagine yourself as a prisoner in the Tower. How would you escape? Who would help you? Why were you a prisoner in the first place and to where would you escape?

### **Art**

Draw a picture of the battles that Ned and Forrest were drawing on the shed wall.

Choose a chapter and illustrate it.

### **Maps and Mapmaking**

Read the book and follow the map as you read the story.

Following the map in the book, make a 3-D diorama of the White Tower, the Bloody Tower, Tower Green etc. etc. be sure to add the moat! When making arrow slits in some of the towers, be sure to measure so that the slits are in the center of the tower's wall.

Study the map in the book and create a game called Escape From The Tower. Make cardboard figures, Forrest, Maddy, Ned, Tuck, Simon Frick, The Ravenmaster...come up with a good game plan to move the figures around the board. The loser falls into the moat!

Study the map and make a map of your own castle... give it a name and name your towers as well. Add a dragon if you must!

Imagine that you are a prisoner in a castle with a moat. Illustrate an escape plan.

### **From the author's desk**

#### ***In the Author's Own Words***

"I am very conscious of the words I choose to use to tell my stories. Before I even began *The Ravenmaster's Secret* I read books and books full of English and Gallic words and phrases from the 1700's. And every time I found one that worked, like *tattie boggle*, I would feel a rush of excitement! It just sounded so right for my story and for my Maddy to say.

But sometimes phrases can come out of the clear blue, when I'm not even hunting for them. I was in the middle of writing the book, when I went out one night to a fancy restaurant. The waiter came to the table and proceeded to tell us the evening's specials, "Tonight," he announced. "We have rabbit, torn from the bone, served over a bed of rice."

After hearing "torn from the bone," none of us at the table could bear to order the meat! It just sounded so gruesome. But it was music to my ears, because I had the perfectly gruesome phrase to put in my villain, Simon Frick's mouth, when he asks Forrest if he's "ever tasted raven, torn from the bone?"

#### ***How important were the word choices to this story?***

Which words or phrases did you like the most? Try to write a paragraph using some of the words or phrases in the glossary. Listen for the common phrases that your family and friends use and try incorporating them into a paragraph.

## **Research**

To research the Ravenmaster's Secret the author visited the Tower of London. She walked down Water Lane and climbed the steps in the Bloody Tower. Visiting historical sites often inspires her to write a story.

What historical site have you visited? Write a short story using your visit as an inspiration.

The most helpful interview in researching this book was with the Tower's Ravenmaster. If you could interview the Tower's Ravenmaster what kinds of questions would you ask him? Write an interview with questions and answers.

The author read many books about life in the 1700s. "I read everything from history books, to diaries and books of letters, novels, and even cookbooks. Even if I only come away with one interesting fact from an entire book, I'm happy."

Try to write a story set in the past. Choose a time period and a place, then go to your library to find some books that will give you the information that will help you write your story.

## **The Original Last Chapter**

The book ends with Forrest as a grown up, opening a letter from Ned which contains the telescope they played with when they were young. We also meet Forrest's daughter, who is named Maddy. Without the author telling us, we are in on a big secret. What is the secret?

Do you like that ending? Well, that wasn't always the end of the story. The following was originally the last chapter of the story. But it was taken out. Read this Epilogue to see how the story almost ended...

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## **Epilogue: The Ring is Returned**

A Windy Spring Day on Tower Green, in the Year 2003

"Watch your step and mind the ravens," the warder warned, as digital cameras clicked and children giggled. "Don't try to pet the birds or feed them, please. They've been known to turn nasty with tourists and we wouldn't want to lose any fingers."

All the children in the group instantly inched back, fearful of the large, black-winged birds that strutted beside them on the grass. All the children that is, but one. For as the group moved forward, following the warder through the portcullis onto Water Lane, one girl stayed behind. She loved birds and so was not afraid of the ravens.

As her classmates hurried off to the gift shop, one of the magnificent birds stepped up to the girl, lowered his head, and murmured softly, "*Keck, keck, keck*".

The girl's blue eyes brightened as she smiled and lowered her head.

"*Keck, keck, keck*," she repeated.

She watched as the bird hopped along, a low stonewall, turning around every few feet to look at her.

"Do you want me to follow you?" the girl called. She took a few steps towards the raven and when he finally stopped she was surprised to see him digging with his beak beside the wall. *What could he be searching for?* The girl wondered.

It wasn't long before she had an answer, for as the raven hopped back over to her, she could plainly see that he was carrying something in his beak. When he spread his wings and flew up to a nearby bench, the

girl walked over and sat down beside him.

"What have you got there?" she whispered. And as if in answer to her question, the raven opened his beak and a round object fell out, onto the bench. The girl reached over and picked it up. She could see at once that it was a ring, a very dirty ring! It was covered in mold, and crusted with mud. She tried rubbing it clean on her backpack. Some of the dirt fell away and though the stone was still cloudy, she could see that it was red.

The girl smiled. Red was her favorite color. When she heard her teacher calling her name, she slipped the ring into the pocket of her backpack and sprang from the bench. The rest of the day she was too busy seeing all the 'sights' at the Tower to think much more about her find.

It wasn't until the next afternoon, as she sat on the train out of King's Cross to Edinburgh, that the girl remembered the ring as she reached into her back- pack to look for some gum.

"What's that?" her friend, who was sitting beside her, asked.

"Some old ring that I found," the girl told her, as she held it up to the train's window. She wet her fingers and tried to clean off more of the dirt.

"Probably not real gold," her friend said.

The girl shrugged. "Probably not."

She was about to put it back into her backpack when something caught her eye.

"Look," she whispered. "There are words written inside, around the band."

"What do they say?" her friend asked.

"*Dree yer ain wierd*," the girl read aloud.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know," the girl said.

"Maybe it's a secret code," the friend suggested.

The girl smiled. She loved secrets. So she slipped the ring onto her thumb and wore it for the rest of the trip, home to Scotland. And as she looked out the train's window, she could see the familiar castles, rising beside shimmering lakes, and fields of buttercups dotting the Scottish hillside.

"I wonder what it was really like," she said, as she tapped the old ring against the windowpane.

"What?" her friend asked.

"That old Tower of London. I wonder what it must have been like to have lived there long ago."

"Without TV?" Her friend made a face. "It was probably boring as could be."

"Aye, maybe," the girl whispered. But as a beam of sunlight lit up the ruby on her finger, she smiled and closed her eyes. "Or maybe not."

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This epilogue was a fun and delightful ending of the book. But people reading it couldn't agree if it belonged in the story. Some people felt that speeding forward in time took them out of the mood. Others

loved it. It makes the point that life goes on. You can be in a place in 1735, and have an amazing experience. Then, two hundred and sixty-eight years later, things change so radically that you can't believe how people could come and not understand what it once was. The reader has had the experience, so they are in on it. We finally decided, after much going back and forth, that we would end the book while we were still in the past. But we did want to share this chapter with you.

Can you imagine if Maddy and Forrest were to meet this young girl from 2003? Write your own story about what it would be like if Forrest and Maddy came to visit you in your neighborhood...

***Which ending do you prefer?***

Do you like the current ending? Or do you like this ending that ends in 2003? Drop us a line and let us know! Or, just let us know how you like the book!

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