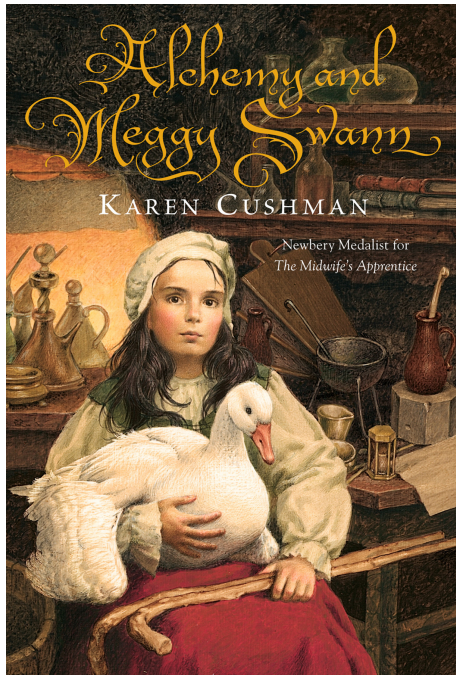


# Alchemy and Meggy Swann

## A Guide for Group Discussion and Classroom Use



### About the Book

Young Margret Swann (“Meggy” to a select few) is a stubborn, tough-as-nails, determined girl whose fragile appearance belies her indomitable spirit. Born with a debilitating hip condition, Meggy is unable to walk without the use of crutches, her “sticks,” which she uses to slowly and painfully travel along with a swaying gait she calls “wabbling.” Born into the complex, bursting-with-ideas world of Elizabethan England, Meggy lives in a time of flux—the Renaissance brings enlightenment, but many people have yet to completely let go of old prejudices and outdated ideas about witchcraft and devilry. Meggy must endure ignorant taunts from strangers who call her “ugglesome crookleg” and believe her affliction

is the devil’s work. Meggy responds as she has for all of her young life: by bristling ferociously and making it hard for all, even those with kind intentions, to make their way into her heart.

Two years after her beloved Gran’s death, Meggy’s inattentive and sharp-tongued alewife mother sends her from her village alone but for Louise, her lame-winged pet goose, to the grimy crowds of London, because the father she’s never known has sent for her. Meggy is dismayed to find that she is not wanted yet again. Her father, a distracted and single-minded alchemist, seeks to discover how to transform base metals into gold and how to create the magical “elixir of life” that will purify and immortalize all who come in contact with it. Disappointed that she’s not the son he hoped for as an assistant, he all but ignores Meggy. Meggy must learn to forge her own way through London’s twisted streets. She must learn as well to trust the kindness of people who enter her life— Roger, the floppy-haired young man whose dearest ambition is to be an actor, or “player,” and who affably stands up to Meggy’s defensiveness; the neighbor cooper, or barrel-maker; his young son, Nicholas; and a host of others. As Meggy struggles to make her way in this new life and to stand up to those who would do a great wrong, we see that along with the metals her father seeks to transform to gold, she herself is transformed in ways she never would have imagined.

## **Author Interview**

### **1. How did you prepare for writing *Alchemy* and *Meggy Swann*? How did you go about your research, and how did you use what you learned to create Meggy's world?**

Once I decided that the story I wanted to tell was best set in the Elizabethan period, I read a lot of books—nonfiction and fiction, for adults and children—about the place and times. I haunted bookstores and the Internet for information about Elizabethan language, customs, clothing. I pored over old maps and journals. I learned as much as I could about the period and then put it all away and started to write. While writing, I refer to my notes, but there always comes a time when what is known is not enough and I have to use my imagination to make the best possible guess.

### **2. You write lots of historical fiction—what do you like about writing in that genre?**

The question I am asked most often—aside from “What does *Corpus Bones* mean?”—is “Why historical fiction?” I write historical fiction because those are the stories that take me over. Rosemary Sutcliff, writer of gorgeous historical novels for young people, said: “Historians and teachers, you and your kind can produce the bare bones; I and my kind breathe life into them.” That’s what I’m interested in—the life in those bones.

### **3. Would you like to have lived in Meggy's time? If you could choose one time period in history to live through, what would it be?**

Absolutely not—I would not have liked to live in Meggy's time. Too dangerous, too dirty, too difficult—people did not live very long for those reasons. I love visiting long enough to research and write a book, but otherwise I'm happy right here where I am.

## **Pre-reading**

The characters in *Alchemy* and *Meggy Swann* experience many kinds of transformation. We are always each evolving and changing—how do you see your own transformation taking place?

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Karen Cushman begins *Alchemy* and *Meggy Swann* with a quote by the revered thinker and psychologist Carl Jung: “The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances; if there is any reaction, both are transformed.” Master Ambrose seeks to transform and purify chemical substances.

How is Meggy transformed by her relationships with Roger, her father, and others she comes in contact with?

2. The slang of Elizabethan England sounds strange and old-fashioned to us in the twenty-first century. “Ye toads and vipers!” says Meggy, and “Fie upon them!” Karen Cushman brings out Meggy’s tough personality with the use of such slang, and its inclusion also helps to create the world of London in 1573. What other examples of slang can you find in *Alchemy and Meggy Swann*? What expressions do you and your friends use today that mean the same things as Meggy’s slang?

3. Karen Cushman brings her characters and scenes to life with beautiful, fresh similes and metaphors—for example on page 7, Meggy’s “tears left shining tracks like spider threads on her cheeks.” Can you find other places in the book where Cushman’s similes or metaphors bring Meggy’s world to life?

4. Meggy and her goose, Louise, are quite a pair—her only true friend, Meggy calls Louise. Why do you think Meggy lets herself love Louise when she steers clear of people? Why do you think she believes (as she says on page 16) that everyone but Louise fears her?

5. Meggy dreams often of the heads she saw on the London Bridge as she came into London for the first time. Find some examples of her dreams in the book. What do you make of them? What do they reveal of her hopes and fears?

6. Meggy’s beloved Gran told her, “Do not greet the world with fists up, sweeting. Give folk a chance.” Why do you suppose Meggy needed this advice from her Gran? Why does she greet the world “with fists up”?

7. When Meggy meets Roger, she greets him “with fists up,” as usual. How does his reaction surprise and disarm her?

8. How are Meggy and her father, Master Ambrose, alike? How are they different?

9. Many people on the streets yell insults at Meggy, throw things, or react out of fear. Why do they do this? Do people react the same way to people with disabilities today? How has our understanding about people with disabilities changed since Meggy’s time? Can you think of any similarities in the way people react to others with disabilities today?

10. Why does Meggy insist on calling Roger Oldham “Oldmeat”? Why does he let her do it (at least at first)? She seems bent on driving him away from her—sometimes especially, it seems, when he is nice to her. Why is this so?

11. Alchemy was the study of transformation. How is alchemy a metaphor for other types of transformation that occur in *Alchemy and Meggy Swann*? Meggy’s transformation, for example?

12. The roles of men and women were quite different in Elizabethan England. No women were allowed to be “players,” for example. What other ways were men’s and women’s roles different then? How have things changed?

13. One of the ways we begin to see Meggy warming up is through her relationships with the children in the story—the cooper’s son, Nicholas, the printer’s daughter, Gilly, the Grimm’s’ busy brood . . . Cushman writes of the Grimm girls, “Meggy let the little girls snuggle up against her, which eased her spirit just as the drink had eased her bones” (page 61). And also, “Meggy found she took pleasure in making children smile” (page 100). What do you notice about Meggy’s relationship with children in the book?

14. What do you make of the fact that Master Ambrose never calls Meggy by her name, just “err . . . Mistress”?

15. Why does Master Ambrose want to create the “elixir of life,” a “substance so pure it can purify other matter” (page 74)? He seems to crave purity, yet his own morals are not very pure, considering the poison business he runs on the side. He seems to care more for ideas than for people or the business of living. He certainly doesn’t seem to care much for his daughter—yet Meggy tries to protect him anyway. DO you think he is “all bad”? Discuss the contradictions in his character.

16. How does Master Ambrose rationalize selling poison? How is Meggy’s response different? What do you think about it?

17. Karen Cushman’s characters are complicated—just like real people, they are not always how they appear on the outside. Master Grimm looks jolly but is “churlish and spleeny.” Meggy looks weak but is fierce, tenacious, and strong. Are there other characters in the book for whom this idea fits? Can you think of any people in your life whose external appearances don’t seem to match the way they are on the inside?

18. Meggy’s last name is Swann. Master Merryman says she is “well-named.” Why does he say this? Do you agree?

19. In what ways is Roger’s treatment of Meggy different from the way she is used to being treated? Why do you think she begins to open up to him?

20. Instead of buying things she sorely needs with her pennies from Master Alleyn, Meggy chooses to buy a little wooden horse for the cooper’s son, Nicholas. She discovers that giving gives her pleasure. When have you enjoyed the pleasure of giving?

21. Meggy tries hard, in her mind, to make her father into something he is not. When she realizes that he has abandoned her, she changes her mind. She thinks to herself, “You get no warmth from an empty fireplace.” What does she mean?

22. As Meggy begins to realize that London is home, and that she has people who care for her there, she begins to notice that while some people are still unkind to her on the street, some are friendly. Do you think people have changed, or has Meggy's perception changed? Explain.

23. As Meggy and Roger end their quarrel, he tells her, "You no longer be the solitary, sorrowful girl who first came," and Meggy begins to realize that he is right. She wonders, "Just when had that happened, and how?" (page 172). How do you see Meggy's transformation? What factors, experiences, or relationships brought it about?

## **Projects**

### **Reading**

One way that Karen Cushman surrounds us with the world of Elizabethan England as we read is to stock her prose with old-fashioned words such as gallimaufry, begrimed, and ugglesome. Search through the book and make a list of the words you find that were in use during Meggy's time that are no longer used (at least not often) today. Before researching what these words might mean, use both the context in which they are used and what you know about words to see if you can define them. Write your own definitions of them, and then compare your definitions with a friend's before you look them up in a dictionary or on the Internet to check your ideas.

### **Language Arts**

Karen Cushman beautifully describes the street scenes of London in the mid-1500s—she creates a living, breathing city by describing the smells and sounds of the vendors and beggars and passersby. Describe in this same kind of detail a street in your city or town.

Meggy and Roger both are gifted in the art of the insult—they call each other names such as "mewling, flap-mouthed wench" and "gleeking swag-bellied maggot" (page 63). As you read, notice these creative and often hilarious names. Come up with a list of your own creative, playful insults.

At the end of *Alchemy* and Meggy Swann, Meggy finds the sovereign her father has left her and realizes that for all of his flaws, he did care for her in his own meager way—which prompts her to think about how much she has gained from all of the people in her life, such as warmth and gentleness from her Gran, curiosity and stubbornness from her father. What have you gained from the people in your life? Write about it.

In Meggy's time, there were no newspapers, television, and Internet to disseminate information—people found out what was happening through word of mouth, or through

ballads, or through “broadsides” of the type that John Allevyn printed in his shop. Write your own ballad describing a current event and type it up into a broadside.

### **History**

Today alchemy seems far away from the science we know. We are taught as young people the science behind the transformation of liquids into gasses and solids—but those types of events were magical and mysterious puzzles then. Do some more research about alchemy. What, if anything, did alchemy contribute to today’s sciences?

Using Karen Cushman’s author’s note as a jumping-off place, research daily life in the Elizabethan era and present it either as a written report or in some other format—a skit, a model, a poem, etc. You may choose to focus on one aspect of daily life—clothing, food, street life, the roles of men and women, or the lives of children.

### **About the Author**

Karen Cushman was born in Chicago, Illinois. She received an M.A. in human behavior and another in museum studies and was an assistant director of the Museum Studies Department at the John F. Kennedy University in San Francisco Bay area.

She is the author of six novels published by Clarion including the Newbery Medal winner *The Midwife’s Apprentice* and the Newbery Honor Book, *Catherine, Called Birdy*.

Karen and her husband live on Vashon Island, Washington. They have a grown daughter. Visit Karen on her website: [www. Karencushmanbooks.com](http://www.Karencushmanbooks.com)