



## *The Last Balfour*

By Cait Duggan

### Summary

Iona Balfour's life is turned upside down when her beloved aunt Grizel is executed for the crime of witchcraft. Before she dies, Grizel appoints Iona as guardian of a precious family bloodstone and tells her she must flee their village and deliver the stone to the mysterious Guild of the Green Lion.

Accompanied by a new friend, Cal, Iona soon realises that she's awakened the powers of the bloodstone. But it promises to be a perilous journey. The wolf month is no time to be on the road. And there's a witch hunter on Iona's trail, who has a strange obsession with the stone.

When a devastating betrayal throws her into the hands of her enemies, Iona soon finds herself in the fight of her life. Will she suffer the same fate as her aunt, or will she escape the witch hunter and fulfil her destiny?

### Key Learning Outcomes (Year 9 English)

ACELA1550, ACELT1633, ACELT1637, ACELT1771, ACELY1746

### Themes

Betrayal, loss, legacy, destiny, freedom, feminism and the representation of women

Recommended Ages: 13+

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## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Before Reading

#### Context and setting

*The Last Balfour* is set in Scotland during the first Scottish Reformation.

- In small groups, students research the ten most significant social changes that took place during the Scottish Reformation in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- Why did witches and 'witch hunting' become such a concern during this period?
- What kind of women were most commonly accused of being witches?

#### Fire as a symbol and a metaphor

Fire is used in *The Last Balfour* as both a symbol and a metaphor. A fire can represent comfort, such as the warmth of a fire, passion, such as a fire burning within you and in some cases can represent what happens when a person steps through their fears and into their future.

- As a class, brainstorm all the different ways that fire can be used as a symbol or a metaphor. Collate the ideas as a list either in a wiki or other document that is easily accessible by the class.
  - As you read the text, annotate the list with examples from the text.

#### Historical representations of women

- As a class, discuss the historical representations of powerful women.
  - Discuss and evaluate the ways women with power and freedom have been represented.
  - Compare traditional representations of women with modern representations of women. Has the way in which powerful/strong women are represented changed? If so, how?

### During Reading

#### Visual summary

Ask students to create a verbal/visual summary as they read the text. To create the summary:

- Place the title of the chapter at the top of the page/start of the document;
- Create a visual representation of the key action, characters, character development and any other important information;
- Annotate the visual representations with key words and phrases from the text;
- Write a list of any new words (other than those specific to the Scottish dialect – this will be looked at in the next task) and define each of these words;
- For words that are specific to the dialect of Scotland (the vernacular), or that relate to the setting or the characters – for example, bairn, nae and laird – explain how the use of these words contributes to the sense of time and place in the novel.

### Exploring language

Standard Australian English is a living, changing language that draws on many influences, including the Scottish dialect and idiom. Australian English is heavily influenced by the language and dialect of the first British settlers in Australia. The language evolves and develops both as new migrants to Australia bring their language and dialect, as well as the development of new words through technology and changing language use.

Using the new & Scottish words collected in the visual summary, ask students to complete the following tasks:

- Define the word;
- Use the word in a sentence;
- Identify the closest word in Standard Australian English either through dialect or idiom;
- Discuss how the word may have influenced the development of Standard Australian English.

Example:

In the Scottish dialect, 'nae' is the equivalent of 'no' in Standard Australian English. However, in common Australian English, the word 'nah' is more commonly used than 'no'. 'Nae' and 'nah' sound very similar. It could be possible that 'nae' influenced the pronunciation of 'no' in Australia.

### After Reading

#### Exploring historical settings

Go back to the research you did on the first Scottish Reformation before reading *The Last Balfour*.

- How does the setting of the novel represent the values and culture of Scottish society during this period?
- Which significant changes during the Scottish Reformation does the novel portray?
- Why do you think the author has focused on these changes?
- After addressing these questions, compare your findings with the values and culture of your own community. Share these points with the class as a five-minute verbal presentation.

#### Essay/short answer questions

1. Discuss why you think Cait Duggan chose to set *The Last Balfour* during the Scottish Reformation rather than contemporary Australia.
2. Evaluate the following statement: 'As a character, Iona's development as a witch is just as important as her development as a free-thinking woman.'
3. Discuss and evaluate the following statement: 'If Dalziel had not betrayed Iona, she would never have reached her full potential as a witch and healer.'
4. 'People are not meant to be by themselves. Without our family and friends, we cannot achieve great things.' Evaluate this statement in relation to Iona, Cal and one other character in *The Last Balfour*.
5. 'With great loss comes great reward.' How is this idea portrayed in *The Last Balfour*?

6. Fire is a bringer of death, but it is also a bringer of life. Discuss the importance of fire as a symbol and a metaphor in *The Last Balfour*.

### Extension

#### Literature comparison

*Macbeth* has been described as the struggle between fate/destiny and free will, with the witches representing fate, and Macbeth and Banquo representing the challenges of free will. In *The Last Balfour*, Iona and Cal also struggle between fate/destiny and free will.

- Compare and contrast the character development of Macbeth and Banquo, and Iona and Cal to address the following question: 'The characters in *Macbeth* and *The Last Balfour* prove that our fate is laid out before us and we cannot change the path our lives will take.'

#### Representations of women as witches

Using *The Last Balfour* and two or three other texts of students' own choosing, compare and evaluate the ways witches are represented in texts.

- Using this evaluation to guide their writing, students create a short story, set in a period of major historical change, where a witch is the protagonist.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cait Duggan has spent the best part of twenty years working in commercial law, while harbouring a secret ambition to become a writer. This led her to undertake a number of writing courses, studying at the Writers' Studio and Faber Writing Academy. As she loves history and is obsessed with magic, Cait writes fantasy and magical realism for children and young adults. *The Last Balfour* is her first novel.

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