

## The Reading Guide

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### Reading Group 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?

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### About the Book

Jamaica, 1946. Errol Flynn washes up on the island in the Zaca, his storm-wrecked yacht. Ida Joseph, the teenage daughter of a Port Antonio Justice of the Peace, is intrigued to know that the 'World's Handsomest Man' is on the island, and makes it her business to meet him. For the jaded swashbuckler, Jamaica is a tropical paradise that offers the tang of adventure and the promise of personal salvation: a freshness that Ida, unfazed as she is by his celebrity, seems to share. Soon Flynn has made a home for himself on Navy Island where he entertains the cream of Hollywood – and Ida has her heart set on this charismatic older man.

Ida's child, May, will meet her famous father only once. Spanning thirty years of Jamaican history, *The Pirate's Daughter* is a tale of passion and recklessness, of two generations of women and their battles for love and survival, and of a nation struggling to rise to the challenge of hard-won independence. Margaret Cezair-Thompson has fashioned a novel at once provocative, refreshingly original and as spellbinding as even the richest haul of pirate treasure.

### Interview with the 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 –

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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.

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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, where you now live?**

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 favourite 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,

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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*).

### Reviews

'Magical tale' *Woman & Home*

'Magical, disturbing and yet utterly compelling' *thelondonpaper*

'Dream-like' *The Times*

'Cezair-Thompson has spun a book-club-ready saga with two gorgeous women at its center...[the book has] a knockout ending that reveals treasure buried beneath sand-encrusted secrets' *People Magazine, Critic's Choice*

'[The Pirate's Daughter] makes for an unabashedly frangipani-scented - and wholly satisfying - armchair holiday of a read' *Vogue*

'[Cezair-Thompson] explores questions about identity and racism without being heavy-handed about it. She's best at juxtaposing Flynn's imported glamour with the realities of Jamaica and at suggesting there's more than one kind of buried treasure... THE PIRATE'S DAUGHTER offers plenty of serious passion and escape' *USA Today*

'The novel never stops for breath once...[it] just buzzes along, with years flying by between chapters, and dozens of characters entering and exiting, saying interesting things and doing outrageous ones. These characters range from aristocratic Europeans to desperately poor Jamaicans, and they are constantly pairing off in the most surprising ways' *O Magazine*

'Cezair-Thompson...brings a smart, lilting voice and a sharp, quirky perspective to a tried-and-true literary formula, the sweeping historical epic. By taking the classic question familiar to all storytellers - "What if?" - and marrying it to the classic advice of fiction-writing teachers - "Write what you know" - Cezair-Thompson unravels a surprising yarn that is rich, salty and ultimately satisfying...[Her] deft evocation of the beauty and unpredictability of Jamaica, its topography and its people, raises THE PIRATE'S DAUGHTER to a level far above the bodice-ripping historic epic'

*The Washington Post*

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'Cezair-Thompson promises her readers a 'tropical adventure.' She evokes spectacular shipwrecks and deserted islands, infamous buccaneers and glamorous celebrities. And the story that follows makes good on these promises'

***The New York Times Book Review***

'A mélange of family saga, love story and political historical fiction served up in a tropical setting...covers a vast swathe of narrative territory with page-turning panache'

***Boston Globe***

'This is an entertaining, spell-binding tale, which would make a perfect holiday read'

***Michelle Moore***

### About the author

Margaret Cezair-Thompson was born and raised in Jamaica, West Indies. At 19, she moved to New York to study, and upon completing her PhD, decided to remain in America. Staying in America seemed the best way for her to focus on writing, and the situation in Jamaica had become difficult, "There was a great deal of violence in the late 70s and early 80s, some of which had directly affected me and my family". In 1987-89, Margaret studied in London, and also spent time "exploring museums, seeing a lot of plays, and discovering all the good Jamaican eateries in Brixton".

Margaret's critically acclaimed debut novel, *The True History of Paradise*, published in 1999, focused on a heroine desperately fleeing the West Indies and was shortlisted for the prestigious IMPAC award. That same year her son Ben was born. Her other publications include short fiction, essays, and articles in *Callaloo*, the *Washington Post*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Graham House Review*, and *Elle*. She is currently an associate professor of English at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, where she has taught since 1990. .