

READING GROUP GUIDE



THE SECRET OF SPLINT HALL

by Katie Cotton

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

The Secret of Splint Hall, Katie Cotton's mysterious novel, is packed full of all the hallmarks of classic historical fantasy. World War II is over, but the devastating loss and aftermath it left behind is all too real for sisters Isobel and Flora and their mother. Forced back to their ancestral home, Splint Hall, they must forge a new life, but post-war life under the strict rule of their aunt's husband is increasingly difficult. When the sisters discover strange things happening at night, and a mysterious boy is spotted in the grounds, they start to wonder if Splint Hall is everything it seems to be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Katie Cotton studied English Literature at Oxford University before becoming an author and editor of children's books. Her books *Counting Lions* and *The Road Home* were both published internationally and received starred reviews in the US. When she's not writing, you'll find her hiking up a hill or eating cake.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

While a historical fantasy, there are many themes and topics to discuss in *The Secret of Splint Hall* that relate to the real world, and may reflect the lived experience of members of the discussion group. It is also an excellent way to tie back to, and explore, common topics such as World War II, and the lesser discussed implications of rebuilding post-war. Care should be taken that group members feel supported, particularly where themes like parental loss, displacement, war and losing one's home may have particular resonance with members.

GETTING STARTED:

To begin, ask what group members liked about the book. What did they enjoy? How did the book make them feel? Would anyone like to expand on their feelings? Why did the book make them feel that way? Was it a specific moment, or a reaction to the writing?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Fantasy

‘Mum said that the War was over, but Isobel thought that it was not.’ -p.3

At the start of the novel, who thought that *The Secret of Splint Hall* was going to be a fantasy story, involving dragons and monsters? Why does the author wait before the reader finds out about these elements? How does the author set the scene for the novel? Is it just a fantasy? How else could anyone describe the novel?

2. Isobel and Flora

‘There were lots of nevers that were becoming nows. Maybe that was what growing up was.’ -p.5

Why is the novel often seen from Isobel’s perspective? How does knowing how Isobel feels change the way anyone thought about the story? For example, what did group members think of Flora, at first? Or Aunt Bea? How is the relationship between the two sisters portrayed?

3. Post-war Britain

‘...they had a glass of milk and a small (too small) slice of bread with marge’ -p.11

What did group members think, reading the description of Britain once the war was over? Was it really ‘over’? What might life have been like for the communities like those in the novel? What does anyone think it would be like to live on rations, or in towns where whole buildings had been destroyed, or even with the threat of unexploded bombs?

4. Mr Godfrey

‘He was thin, with watery blue eyes and a ginger moustache. His long neck stuck out from his stiff white collar, in which a paisley tie was nestling.’ - p.12

Look at the description of Mr Godfrey on page 12. How does the author create a sense of his character? Why does anyone think Mr Godfrey acts the way he does? Did anyone have any sympathy for Mr Godfrey? Did readers believe that he was trying to save Splint Hall? If not, why not? By the end of the novel, what has changed? Is it Mr Godfrey, or is it how others see him? What happens to the power he holds?

5. Splint Hall

‘Flora and Isobel had been told to explore the house, with very strict instructions to be quiet...’ -p.23

What impression did readers have of Splint Hall, as it once was and as it is in the time of the novel? How does the author create this impression? Who likes the idea of living in a big stately home like this? Who doesn’t? Why?

6. Class wars

“You can’t have any more. Even if you’re the Burlingtons” -p.69

How does the issue of social class affect the novel? (It may be worth having some context of the times to hand, to explore in more detail.) How do the villagers respond to Isobel and Flora? Do readers think this is about class? What about the history of how their grandpa got on with other locals?



7. Simon and Pat

‘Isobel realised he looked almost exactly the same as Simon, except a few years older.’ -p.187

Did anyone spot any similarities between Pat and Simon’s relationship and Flora and Isobel’s? Or ways in which they aren’t similar? What does it mean to Simon and Pat to be ‘keepers’? What is the importance of the generations of the two families and the history between them?

8. Splints

‘At the end of its long, skeletal arms, its hands were hung with claws.’ -p.138

Look at the description of splints on page 138, again, together. What did readers think when they first read about the splints? Why does anyone think the hall is named after these creatures? What else might they have named the hall? Was anyone reminded of any other creatures or monsters from anything else they’ve read or seen?

9. Dragons

‘Dragons were make-believe. They belonged in storybooks. Or they had done...’ -p.136

How does the author hint at the idea of dragons before the reader knows they’re real, or what’s happening at Splint Hall? How does she build suspense before we meet them? Discuss ways in which the dragons in *The Secret of Splint Hall* compare to dragons readers have read about or seen in other stories.

10. The Journey

‘The darkness of underground was like nothing she had experienced before.’ - p.195

The novel is divided into two parts – what did readers think of the difference between these? Were they expecting the sisters to go on an underground quest or adventure? Does the author portray part two differently from part one? If so, how?

11. Fear

“His hands aren’t shaking because he’s angry. They’re shaking because he’s scared.” -p.271

Lots of the novel deals with the idea of fear. Who is scared in the book? What of? Does everyone overcome their fears? What helps them all to get past this fear? Discuss the idea of bravery – what does it mean to be brave?

12. Good and Evil

‘At that moment Isobel knew that Pat was right. There was no kindness, forgiveness or compassion. There was only the desire to hurt, to destroy. There was only evil.’ -p.275

If the splints represent evil, then what is the force for good in the novel? Who represents good? Is it the dragons, or their keepers, or everyday people, trying to rebuild their lives? Are there other examples of ‘evil’ in the book? Discuss the idea of what it means to be ‘good’.

