A Reading Group Guide to
THE BLACKTHORN KEY
By Kevin Sands

BOOK DESCRIPTION
In 1665 London, Master Benedict, a kind apothecary, takes Christopher Rowe on as an apprentice, rescuing him from orphanage life. Christopher loves his work of concocting medicines and deciphering codes. But when his safe life is shattered by a string of murders, Christopher must use his new knowledge to track down the dangerous Cult of the Archangel. Except for his friend Tom, it’s hard to tell who’s an ally and who’s an enemy. As Christopher races to uncover secret passages and hidden crypts, and tries to solve urgent puzzles, the future of England is at stake—and so is Christopher’s life.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS
What does it mean to have a home? What does it mean to “bring aid” to others?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

SETTING
1. London provides an exciting backdrop for the story. Find places where the author conveys the sounds, smells, and sights of the city. What words and phrases appeal to the reader’s senses to bring the setting alive?

2. Why is the apothecaries’ motto “I am called throughout the world the bringer of aid”? Describe the work of an apothecary. How is the job related to medicine and science? How is it related to cooking?

3. A lot of the action takes place in Master Blackthorn’s shop and workshop. Describe the shop, workshop, and tools, pointing to specific passages in the text. How are the shop and workshop similar to places, including businesses, in the modern world?

THEMES
4. Christopher returns again and again to the importance of home in his life. Discuss why it matters to him and what role his home with Master Benedict plays in the story. How does the idea of home matter at the conclusion of the book?

5. As the story progresses, we learn that Master Benedict and his friends are pursuing powerful knowledge. What is their ultimate goal? How do they try to reach that goal? Do you consider it a worthy goal?

6. Loyalty and disloyalty are themes explored in terms of relationships, professions, and country. Discuss the main characters, their loyalties, and how they show them. What role does disloyalty play in the plot? Is it always wrong to be disloyal to one’s government?

CHARACTER
7. In a short amount of time, Christopher’s courage and ingenuity are tested by a series of unexpected
events. Give examples of obstacles he faces and how he deals with them. What do his actions and choices show about his character? Do you admire Christopher?

8. Tom is a tried-and-true friend to Christopher from beginning to end. Describe his personality, his home life, and how he interacts with Christopher. Compare and contrast their characters. Cite scenes in the book where Tom shows his friendship and courage.

9. How does Master Benedict change Christopher’s life? Talk about what you consider the three most important things that he does for Christopher. Describe what kind of person Master Benedict is.

10. Why was Christopher chosen to be an apothecary’s apprentice? Describe his work for Master Benedict, and how Benedict tests him. What character traits make Christopher good at his work?

11. It takes Christopher time to figure out who the real villains are. Describe characters who seem like they might be the wrongdoers and those who really are. What would the story be like without villains?

PLOT AND STRUCTURE

12. Reread “A Warning,” which opens the book and the one page after the first section title. What do they foreshadow about the story? How do they set the tone? Discuss why the author chose to include them before the first chapter.

13. The chapters are divided into large sections. Discuss how those sections are labeled and how each label relates to the chapters that follow. How many days does the main action take? What happens in the “Spring’s End” section? Why does the author structure the chapters this way?

14. While Christopher is trying to uncover the truth of what’s happening, a lot of people are hunting for him. How does Christopher use his skills as an apothecary to evade capture? How does he use them to fight the villains? How do those skills help him find Master Benedict’s secret and understand its purpose?

15. Codes and symbols appear throughout the book. Christopher declares that when he has his own shop, “I’m putting everything in code.” Why does Master Benedict use codes? Give examples where codes and symbols are important in the plot.

16. Christopher’s feelings are hurt in Chapter 8 when Master Benedict hits him, calls him “useless,” and sends him on an errand. What does Christopher realize later about those actions?

LANGUAGE AND POINT OF VIEW

17. What impact does it have on the reader that Christopher tells his own story? How would the story have been different with a third-person narrator? Discuss the effect on the reader when Christopher asks questions in the text.

18. Similes make actions and objects more vivid through imagery. Analyze the comparisons used in the similes below and others from the book. Which ones draw from the time and place of the story? Which are more general?

• like a sack of wheat
• like being a prisoner in the Tower dungeon
• as if it were Excalibur
• recoiled like he’d been shot with a musket
• like a thunderclap
• twisted like a map of Hell
• to speak Latin like Julius Caesar
• echoed like a hammer
• louder than carriage wheels on cobbles
• grew like trees
• like a dog herding sheep
• keening like a banshee
ACTIVITIES

TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SAILOR

Many jobs besides apothecary appear in *The Blackthorn Key*. Some are listed below. Have pairs of students research one of the jobs and create a description and poster for it. If the job still exists today, the description should emphasize aspects of it associated with the past such as how books were printed then. Hold an Old-Time Job Fair where students display their posters and answer questions about the job.

- Actor
- Baker
- Bargeman
- Bookseller
- Coachman
- Confectioner
- Cook
- Fishmonger
- Glassblower
- Ironmonger
- Jeweler
- Merchant
- Physician
- Publican
- Rag-and-bone man
- Soldier
- Tailor
- Writer

SECRET MESSAGES

Have students write two sentences about the book, one that describes it briefly and one with their opinion of it. Have them use the code from *The Blackthorn Key* to turn their two sentences into a secret message. They can then trade coded messages with a fellow student and each decode the sentences, checking their answers against the originals. For a more advanced activity, have students try to create their own code, based on the general principle in *The Blackthorn Key*. For example, use P03 instead of M08, or have the numbers run backward instead of forward. Encourage your students to be creative!

THE KING AND THE PURITANS

The political situation of the Puritans turns out to be significant to events in the novel. Have students research England in the mid-1600s, especially the 1660s, to better understand the story. Working in pairs or individually, students should use at least one print and one Internet resource to write a short paper that explains the Restoration, Oliver Cromwell, the Puritans, and Oak Apple Day, and briefly addresses how they are part of the plot. As a class, have students share what they have learned.

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a former school librarian and Chair of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She gives professional development workshops on books for young people and is the author of *Great Books for Girls* and *Great Books about Things Kids Love*.

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