

## Study Guide

for

# The Witch of Blackbird Pond

by Elizabeth George Speare



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## Meet Elizabeth George Speare



*No, writing is not lonely. It is a profession crowded with life and sound and color. I feel privileged to have had a share in it.*

—Elizabeth George Speare

**1** People often say that writing is a lonely career, but Elizabeth George Speare never thought so. She simply imagined her characters' world and made the characters her friends. As she developed her stories, she felt that the characters' lives unfolded almost as if they were the lives of real people, standing in the room with her.

Speare felt that her writing was strongly influenced by her childhood. Born in 1908, she grew up surrounded by a large extended family in Massachusetts. Each member of the family provided a different model of character for her fertile writer's imagination.

Speare began writing for fun when she was eight. She joyfully remembered how a favorite cousin and she would hide themselves in a corner to share their most recent writings.

Speare did not, however, begin her career as a writer until relatively late in life. First,

she became a teacher; a career she found both challenging and rewarding. Following her marriage to Alden Speare, she moved to Connecticut, eventually settling in Wethersfield, the setting of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. The Speares had two children.

**2** When Speare finally began writing in earnest, she described her own experiences. Her first published piece was about family ski trips. Later, she discovered that she wanted to write about places and times that she did not know firsthand. Speare got the idea for her first novel, *Calico Captive*, after reading the diary of a real girl who lived in Connecticut during the eighteenth century. After three tries, Speare found a publisher for *Calico Captive*, and the novel quickly became a success.

*The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Speare's second novel, is grounded in New England history. Speare had read stories about English children sent from Barbados to New England for schooling. She researched Connecticut history, especially that of her adopted town of Wethersfield, to add accurate historical details to the story. She also based one of the characters in the novel on her real-life aunt, who was physically impaired.

In 1959 she won the Newbery Medal for *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Every member of the Newbery Medal committee voted to award the yearly prize to the novel. Such complete support for one book is rare. In her Newbery acceptance speech, Speare described the philosophy that has guided both her writing and her life:

*I do not believe a historical novel should gloss over the pain and ugliness. But I do believe that the hero . . . should on the last page . . . still be standing, with the strength to go to whatever the future may hold.*

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# Introducing the Novel

Spence was once inspired by a writer who said, "History is people." This "personal approach" to history is apparent in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*.

The main character, Kit Tyler, is orphaned when her much-loved grandfather dies. Kit travels from the island of Barbados in the Caribbean Sea to Wethersfield, Connecticut. She hopes to find a home there with her aunt and uncle, settlers from England. Kit finds her new world to be very different from the one she left behind, and she must struggle long and hard to fit in. Her relatives are Puritans who have come to America to live according to their religious beliefs. The novel itself takes place when Wethersfield is still a fairly new settlement and survival is a challenging task. The place where Kit was raised in Barbados was a more established community with different ideas about religion and social behavior.

In reading the novel, you will also "meet" many other people from the seventeenth century. Some, like "the witch of Blackbird Pond," become Kit's friends and help her to adjust. Others fear Kit because she is different from them. Many critics have praised the novel for its portrayal of colonists. One critic says:

*The strength of this book lies in its . . . well-drawn characters. They are neither wholly good nor wholly bad but a very human mixture.*

Other critics speak glowingly of the vividness of the novel's historical setting. Spence spent over a year researching the novel to make it realistic and historically accurate. Wethersfield is a real place in Connecticut, founded by Puritans in the 1600s. Other events in the story, such as the colonists' efforts to preserve their charter, really did occur. Some of the characters in the story are based on real people as well.

For many readers, however, the most interesting part of this novel is its themes.

They include the ideas of loyalty and justice. As Kit bravely tries to understand her adopted community, she must often ask herself, Whom must I be loyal to? What is the right, or just, action to take?

## THE TIME AND PLACE

*The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is set in Wethersfield, Connecticut, in 1687. The town of Wethersfield was, and still is, located on the banks of the Connecticut River. It sits about forty-seven miles north of the river mouth. In 1687 the town was a small and fairly new English settlement. It was founded in 1634 by Puritans from Massachusetts.

The first Puritans had come to Massachusetts from England in 1620. In England at that time, people were strongly discouraged from practicing any religion other than that of the Church of England. Some English people, however, did not wholly agree with the Church of England. These Puritans, as they were called, decided to leave England to build a community where they could worship God in their own way.

During the 1600s, the Puritans were concerned by the many political changes taking place in England. From 1642 to 1648, King Charles I of England battled with some of his subjects for control of the government. He and his supporters wanted all English subjects to follow the laws of the Church of England and support the monarchy. His opponents wanted rule by a Parliament, or group of rulers, and more religious freedom. The Parliamentary forces won, and Charles I was removed as king and executed in 1649. The Puritans sided with Parliament and therefore gained power during the Civil War in England.

In 1660, however, Charles II brought back the monarchy, and the Puritans lost some of their power. At the time of *The Witch*

*of Blackbird Pond*, the Puritans' power was in even greater danger because James II, a Catholic, had become king in 1685.

The Puritan settlers who sought religious freedom in the Wethersfield area were at first welcomed by Native Americans. In fact, the leader of the Sequin invited Massachusetts colonists to settle Connecticut. He hoped for help in fighting his enemies, the Pequots. Some of Wethersfield's early settlers did help fight and defeat the Pequots in 1637. As more and more settlers arrived looking for land, local Native American groups were gradually pushed out.

In 1636 the three river towns of Hartford, Windsor, and Wethersfield joined together to establish the Connecticut Colony. A separate colony, Old Saybrook, was settled in 1635 but did not join the Connecticut Colony until 1644.

## Did You Know?

Not all English settlers went to mainland America. Some went to the islands of the Caribbean Sea, found south of what is now Florida. These early island settlers shared goals similar to the New England settlers. However, the island settlements were quite different from the settlements to the north. This was partly because of the Caribbean settlers' success at growing sugarcane. Sugar, which was easily produced in the warm tropical climate, was in great demand and made the

In 1639 the colony agreed on a set of laws called the Fundamental Orders. These laws were quite unusual for their time because they said that lawmakers had to get the people's agreement on their decisions. The colony also adopted a law requiring schools in towns of a certain size. In 1662 the colony received a charter from King Charles II. This document established the colony's boundaries, defined the colonists' rights, and granted the colonists a measure of self-government.

By 1687, when Kit Tyler arrived in Wethersfield, the community was well established. However, a threat was brewing in England. King James wanted to increase his power in the colonies by joining Massachusetts and Connecticut. Residents of Wethersfield had many different reactions to King James's efforts, especially his attempt to revoke the colony's charter.

Island settlers quite wealthy. Their riches, however, were largely acquired through the work of servants working off the price of their fare from England and enslaved people brought over from Africa. Barbados, the island from which Kit Tyler comes, was England's prize Caribbean possession. It made the most money and had the wealthiest community. Sugar planters lived in fine houses, and some were even given titles by the British government.

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