

PREQUEL TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING *CODE NAME VERITY*



# THE PEARL THIEF

Elizabeth Wein

*This guide presents discussion questions and writing activities that align with Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for grades 9–10.*

*Use the materials as part of whole-class or small-group novel study for rich discussion around a wide range of issues, including class, identity, sexuality, racism, discrimination, friendship, family, and family history. The book and these materials also offer opportunities for exploration and research in a geography or history classroom.*

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Having just finished her boarding-school term, Julie plans to spend the summer of her sixteenth birthday helping her mother and grandmother deal with closing the estate of her late grandfather, the Earl of Strathfearn, which is being converted into a school.

But before Julie can begin to be helpful, she lands in the hospital, victim of a bash on the head by an unknown assailant, and with no memory of how she got hurt or of the Scottish Travellers who brought her to the hospital. When she meets Euan and Ellen McEwen, the brother and sister Travellers who helped rescue her, she's quick to befriend and defend them—and soon begins to confront her own biases as she gets a taste of some of the prejudice, injustice, and intolerance the Travellers regularly experience.

As Julie tries to piece together what happened to her, more mysteries arise. Dr. Housman, who's supposed to be cataloging Strathfearn's archeological collection, is missing. And Julie feels certain that the collection should include the Scottish river pearls she remembers playing with as a little girl, but no one else has noticed their absence.

Julie finds herself exploring thrilling new experiences that have nothing to do with missing pearls or a missing professor. She tests class, age, and gender roles and deals with her awakening sexuality by launching a deliberate flirtation with the school renovation contractor Frank Dunbar, while also exploring her crush on Ellen.

When a body is discovered in the river, Julie fears the McEwens will be blamed. Though she's begun to remember fragments of the day she was attacked, Julie is sure that her attack, the missing professor, and the missing pearls are all connected. She, Ellen, Euan, and her brother Jamie, work together to find both the pearls and the pearl thief. But Julie alone must deal with her attacker.

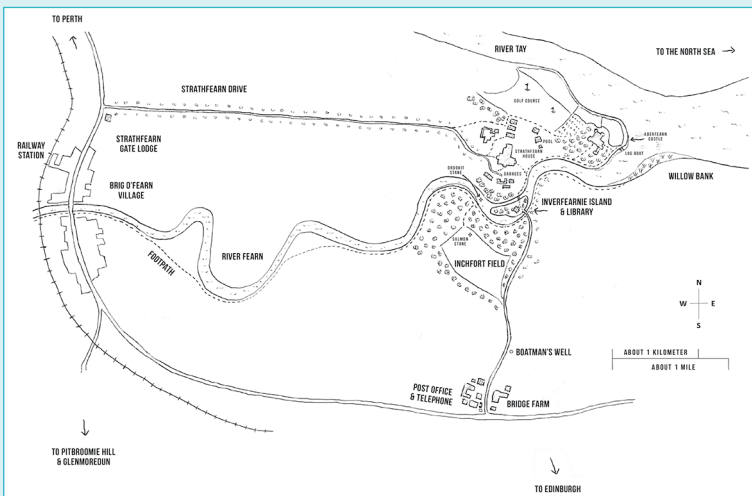
# BEFORE READING

## READING ROAD MAP

*The Pearl Thief* takes place in Scotland, a country rich in history, culture, and traditions. Though Elizabeth Wein’s Strathfearn is fictional, she has situated the estate in the very real region of Perthshire, giving the reader, as she explains in her author’s note, “a sort of artist’s impression of the Earn valley.”

Help students get a sense of the geography and geology of Scotland. Start by making sure they can find Scotland on a world map. Then offer them a physical map of Scotland, having them take note of the many rivers and lakes and brainstorming a list of their many important uses. While students may have been aware of Scotland’s well-known lakes (known as lochs), did they know about its rivers, its highlands and islands, and its major cities? Ask students: Other than Loch Ness and its famous monster, what comes to mind when you think of Scotland? Where do your ideas and knowledge come from? Where are good places to look for information that goes beyond stereotypes and offers details that help you get to know Scotland? Have students list what they know (or think they know) and explore books, maps, video, websites, and other resources to confirm their knowledge and add to it.

Correlates to *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1*; *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1*



## SCOTS WHA HAE

Another way for students to get to know Scotland is through a great voice of its people—the poet Robert Burns. Start with his poem “A Red, Red Rose,” which is the epigraph of *The Pearl Thief*. Get students to read the poem and discuss its themes of love, nature, and the passage of time. Then have them do some research about the life and times of Robert Burns and the role his work plays in Scottish cultural identity.

### Resources:

- The Poetry Foundation: Robert Burns  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/robert-burns](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/robert-burns)
- Scottish Poetry Library: Robert Burns  
[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/robert-burns](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/robert-burns)
- Burns Country: The Complete Works of Robert Burns  
[www.robertburns.org/works](http://www.robertburns.org/works)

Have them take what they discover about Burns and his work and articulate hypotheses for why the author included “A Red, Red Rose” as an epigraph. Ask them to consider what Wein’s use of Burns suggests and what it inspires them to look for as they read. Let students know that after they read *The Pearl Thief*, you’ll be asking them to write a few paragraphs to answer one of the following questions:

- How did knowing more about Robert Burns enhance your reading of the book?
- Given your research about Burns, what ideas and themes in the book drew your attention, and what connections did you make?

Have students share their ideas during class or small-group discussions of the book.

*Correlates to* CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2; RL.9-10.4; RI.9-10.7;  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions below can be used for class or small-group discussion or offered to students as reflective writing prompts.

- 1 Remembering and understanding history is at the heart of the novel. What has happened in the past that people seem to have forgotten? Why are these things important? How does knowing about the past—especially Julie’s family’s past—contribute to Julie’s identity? Is family history something that is a part of every person’s identity? How is or isn’t it part of your own?
- 2 What do you think motivates Julie’s flirtatious behavior? What reason—or reasons—does she have for kissing Frank Dunbar, Florrie, Le Sphinx, Angus Henderson, Ellen, and Euan?
- 3 How is *The Pearl Thief* a story of Julie’s coming of age?
- 4 What did you learn about the status of women during the time period of the book? What are some of the ways the female characters deal with societal restrictions and social pressures? Do any of the women in this novel embody feminist ideals? Discuss how opportunities for women have evolved since the 1930s and what prejudices and roadblocks remain. What advice would you give someone who is treated differently or unfairly because of gender or class?
- 5 Julie says to Ellen, “It’s *hard* to have your happiness tangled up in things you can’t keep.” How does Ellen feel about giving, receiving, and keeping things? How does Julie’s perspective change? Does Ellen’s change as well? How?
- 6 Though *The Pearl Thief* takes place in 1938, in what ways are its issues of prejudice and discrimination relevant to us today? How has this novel changed the way you think about privilege and persecution? What actions could you take to change the minds of others?
- 7 Consider the power of place in Julie’s life. How do places—and her experiences in those places—affect her life? Compare and contrast Julie’s relationship to Strathfearn with Ellen’s.

- 8 What views of gender roles and of “male” and “female” behavior does the novel offer? Where does Julie get her ideas of what “male” and “female” are, and where does she find models of how to behave? Why do you think she enjoys playing at both “being a girl” and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* character Davie Balfour?
- 9 How does Julie’s memory of her grandfather and the capture of an incompetent pearl hunter set the tone for how she deals with other acts of violation and defilement against people, the river and landscape, and historic artifacts?
- 10 Julie saves Ellen from sexual assault at the hands of the abusive Sergeant Henderson. Why do you think Julie reacted in the manner that she did? What other options did she—and Ellen—have? How do you think you would have dealt with the situation?
- 11 What do you think about Julie’s choice of what to do with the recovered pearls? If you had been in Julie’s situation, what would you have done?
- 12 Is this a book that would have been written for young people in 1938, the time in which it is set? How might the characters have been different if it had been written then? Is there anything about the way the story is told that would make you think the novel was written in the twenty-first century? Explain.

*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1; RL.9-10.3; RL.9-10.5; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1; W.9-10.9; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1; SL.9-10.3; SL.9-10.4*



## ACTIVITIES AND CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

### SENSE OF IDENTITY

Throughout the book, Julie enjoys trying on different identities—from posing as a male Traveller to playing the coquette. When Euan catches her concentrating on starting the car, Julie wonders, “What could I possibly look like when I was just being me?” Most people have two identities: one the outside world sees and one that’s internal. Ask students to explore Julie’s identity and consider:

- How Julie sees herself
- How she wants to be seen
- How others see her
- Influences in Julie’s life

Have students list and describe factors that have likely contributed to shaping Julie’s identity, such as race, gender, nationality, class, education, culture, interests, skills, life experiences, history, and so forth. Students can write an essay that offers evidence from the book for how the top factors on their lists have shaped Julie’s identity and affected her actions and activities. Or they can create an identity box for Julie:

An identity box reveals both prescribed and internal identities. Have students cover the outside of a shoe box (or any box of a similar size) with pictures, words, symbols, and drawings that represent how others perceive Julie. Students should include judgments other characters have made about her based on her speech, appearance, and behavior. On the inside of the box, students should use decorations and include objects that represent how Julie describes herself. The inside of the box should reflect the parts of Julie that few people, if any, see. Have students present their boxes in small groups and reflect together on how personal identities develop in both fiction and real life.

Remind students that when they look into what makes a character tick, they can also learn a little more about themselves. Ask: What did you learn about yourself from Julie? Encourage students to create identity boxes for themselves, too.

*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1; RL.9-10.3; RL.9-10.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1; W.9-10.4; W.9-10.9; CCSS.ELA Literacy.SL.9-10.4*

## HOW TO EXPLAIN

“Respect for a river and its creations goes unwritten,” says Julie’s grandfather when he and Julie catch the poacher. Both are aghast at the man’s ignorance of the appropriate way to treat the river and collect freshwater mussels. Have students use the text to create a piece of procedural writing that would educate novice pearl fishers. As Scotland made pearl fishing illegal in 1998, the how-to should be for an audience of potential fishers from the 1930s—before the freshwater pearl mussel became one of the most endangered species in the world.

The various descriptions of pearl fishing in the book and the author’s note are good starting points for gathering information. Since students won’t have the expertise that the McEwens or Julie’s grandfather had, they’ll also need to conduct research.

### Resources:

- British Pathé: Pearl Fishing (1961), Perth, Scotland: [youtu.be/cBr4XR6uoPY](https://youtu.be/cBr4XR6uoPY)
- National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive: Holiday Scotland (1966), Pearl Fishing on the Tay (8:16): [movingimage.nls.uk/film/2631](https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/2631)
- Pearls in Peril: [www.pearlsinperil.org.uk](http://www.pearlsinperil.org.uk)
- “Scotland’s One-Man Pearl Fishing Industry” by Nan Gillespie, *The Rotarian*, July 1975: <https://goo.gl/5EBG2c>

To address students’ interests, offer additional prompts for how-to writing related to *The Pearl Thief*:

- How to participate in an archeological dig
- How to deal with unwanted sexual advances
- How to make the best of a “tragic” haircut
- How to confront prejudice
- How to drive a stick shift



Students can create a slide show, video, article, or list. Have them present and discuss which formats of procedural texts are most helpful and effective. If students are unfamiliar with procedural writing or need a warm-up exercise, have them start with a how-to piece from their own experience—how to make pancakes, how to apply eye makeup, how to choose the perfect running shoes, etc.

*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2; WHST.9-10.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4; SL.9-10.5*

## SCOTTISH GALLERY WALK

Create a classroom gallery walk that helps present new or unfamiliar material found in *The Pearl Thief*. Have small groups research and select texts (definitions, quotations, images, historical documents, etc.) to display on tables or hang on walls about these topics or other subjects of interest:

- Mary Queen of Scots
- *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson
- Treacher Collins syndrome
- Language in Scotland
- The Black Watch, the Royal Regiment of Scotland
- The Bronze Age
- The Iron Age
- Reliquaries

Make sure there's plenty of space between displays so students have room to access the materials. Instruct them to take informal notes as they view the gallery exhibits, giving them time to make connections to their reading of *The Pearl Thief*. Debrief the experience as a class by asking students to share the ways in which information in the gallery enhanced their understanding of what they read, clarified their thinking, revealed new ideas, or generated additional questions.

*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.7; WHST.9-10.9*

## THE TRAVELLERS' WAY OF LIFE

Have students create an editorial cartoon to make a point about the prejudice, discrimination, and bullying Travellers face in *The Pearl Thief*—and still face today. Students should allude to an incident or incidents in the book and can also take time to research and include more about the history of Highland Travellers. Have students discuss their drawings with the class.

*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2; W.9-10.9*

Julie derides and questions Ellen's knowledge of history as "old Travellers' tales passed down from Aunt Bessie?" but the oral traditions of Scottish Travellers have preserved folklore, stories, and songs and oral traditions of Scottish Travellers have greatly contributed to the Scots' song tradition and storytelling heritage. Have students explore classic Scottish ballads and make sure they understand the way a ballad typically tells a story. Then have them write—and perform—their own ballads about Julie's adventures. (Students who have read *Code Name Verity* may wish to include more of Julie's story in their ballads.)

### Resources:

- Scots Language Centre: Types of Scots Song: Travellers Songs  
[www.scotslanguage.com/Scots\\_Song\\_uid65/Types\\_of\\_Scots\\_Song/Travellers\\_Songs](http://www.scotslanguage.com/Scots_Song_uid65/Types_of_Scots_Song/Travellers_Songs)
- Scots Language Centre: Types of Scots Song: Ballads, or the Muckle Sangs  
[www.scotslanguage.com/Scots\\_Song\\_uid65/Types\\_of\\_Scots\\_Song/Ballads%2C\\_or\\_the\\_Muckle\\_Sangs](http://www.scotslanguage.com/Scots_Song_uid65/Types_of_Scots_Song/Ballads%2C_or_the_Muckle_Sangs)
- Poetry Out Loud: Lesson Plan: The Tabloid Ballad  
[www.poetryoutloud.org/uploads/documents/POL\\_The\\_Tabloid\\_Ballad.pdf](http://www.poetryoutloud.org/uploads/documents/POL_The_Tabloid_Ballad.pdf)

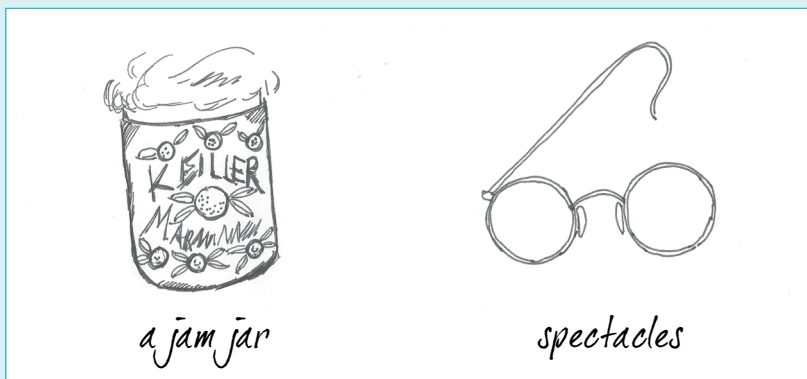
*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2; RL.9-10.3;  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4*

Encourage students to take advantage of historic photographs available online to learn more about the lives of Scottish Travellers. Have them select a photo and write a descriptive journal entry about it from the perspective of one of the characters in *The Pearl Thief*. Students should share the photos they select and read their writing aloud without identifying which character they chose. Through character analysis, the class should discuss and determine which character wrote the entry, connecting details from the book to their inference.

### Resources:

- Am Baile: Travelling People  
[www.ambaile.org.uk/?service=category&action=show\\_content\\_page&language=en&category=62](http://www.ambaile.org.uk/?service=category&action=show_content_page&language=en&category=62)
- Scottish Traveller Education Programme: Scottish Gypsy Travellers in the Past  
[www.gavintest.hss.ed.ac.uk/gypsy-travellers/gypsy\\_travellers\\_past.php](http://www.gavintest.hss.ed.ac.uk/gypsy-travellers/gypsy_travellers_past.php)
- Tour Scotland Photographs: Old Photographs of Gypsies In Scotland  
<https://youtu.be/CEWERBeUdPA>

Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3



## MYSTERIES OF THE BOG

Discuss with students what bogs and peat are and investigate how conditions in these wetland environments have preserved the past. How do buried clues help archeologists and anthropologists answer questions about life long ago? Have students brainstorm questions that they might ask to learn more about the body found on the River Fearn, along with the best ways to get answers (both in 1938 and now). Have them identify some of the past and present tools and processes that might be used to find answers to their questions.

With thoughts stirred about what's possibly buried in the peat, ask students to write a short mystery story that features something found in a bog—a body, a weapon, or a treasure. Have students share their stories with the class.

### Resources:

- Smithsonian: Europe's Famed Bog Bodies Are Starting to Reveal Their Secrets  
[www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/europe-bog-bodies-reveal-secrets-180962770/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/europe-bog-bodies-reveal-secrets-180962770/)
- NOVA: The Perfect Corpse  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bog/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bog/)
- Archeology Magazine Archive: Bodies of the Bogs  
<http://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/bog/>

*Correlates to CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3; W.9-10.4*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ELIZABETH WEIN** ([elizabethwein.com](http://elizabethwein.com)) was born in New York City, grew up abroad, and currently lives in Scotland with her husband and two children. She is an avid flyer of small planes and is the editor of the Scottish Aero Club's newsletter. She also holds a PhD in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania.



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## ACCLAIM FOR ELIZABETH WEIN



### THE PEARL THIEF

- ★ “Each thread of this novel is exquisitely woven.”  
—*Publishers Weekly* [starred review]
- ★ “Another ripping yarn from a brilliant author.”  
—*Kirkus Reviews* [starred review]
- ★ “A finely crafted book that brings one girl’s coming-of-age story to life.”  
—*Booklist* [starred review]

### CODE NAME VERITY

- ★ “This novel positively soars.”—*The Horn Book* [starred review]
- ★ “A precisely written tour de force.”—*Kirkus Reviews* [starred review]
- ★ “Hugely inspirational.”—*Booklist* [starred review]
- ★ “Readers will be left gasping for the finish.”  
—*School Library Journal* [starred review]
- ★ “A well-researched and expertly crafted adventure.”  
—*Publishers Weekly* [starred review]

### ROSE UNDER FIRE

- ★ “Another indelible story.”—*Publishers Weekly* [starred review]
- ★ “Incandescent integrity.”—*Kirkus Reviews* [starred review]
- ★ “Tells a very different World War II story.”  
—*School Library Journal* [starred review]
- ★ “A great, page-turning read.”—*The Horn Book* [starred review]

### BLACK DOVE, WHITE RAVEN

- ★ “Wein brings this fascinating period in history to life.”  
—*Publishers Weekly* [starred review]
- ★ “Wein truly demonstrates her masterful hand.”—*Booklist* [starred review]
- ★ “VERDICT: Highly recommended.”—*School Library Journal* [starred review]

Rachael Walker ([belleofthebook.com](http://belleofthebook.com)) created this guide. She works in a middle school library in Arlington, Virginia, consults on a wide variety of educational programs and multimedia projects, and develops educational materials and reading resources for children, parents, and teachers.

Many more discussion guides can be found on the Disney • Hyperion website at [disneybooks.com](http://disneybooks.com)

## BOOKS BY ELIZABETH WEIN

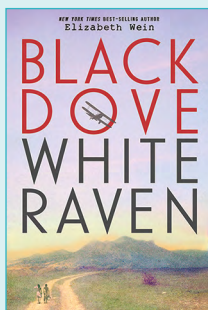


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