The Ghost of Genny Castle

John Escott

About the author
John Escott started out writing children’s books and stories for children’s comics, and nowadays, he writes and adapts books for students of all ages. He especially enjoys writing crime and mystery thrillers, which inspired him to become a member of the British Crime Writers’ Association.

Escott was born in Somerset, which is located in the south-west of England, and at present he lives on the south coast in Bournemouth. When he isn’t writing, he enjoys taking long walks along empty beaches, watching old Hollywood movies on video and searching for long-forgotten books in tiny backstreet bookshops. He also likes travelling, especially in the United States and Canada. He is married, with two grown-up children and three grandchildren.

Summary
One Christmas holiday, fifteen-year-old Claire goes to stay with her aunt in the country. Just outside the village of Little Genny, near her aunt’s house, there is a ruined castle called Genny Castle. The villagers tell many ghost stories about the castle. When Claire arrives at her aunt’s house, she is fascinated by the castle, but her aunt tells her to stay away from the place. However, her aunt’s warning only makes Claire more curious about the castle, and she secretly goes to explore it.

It is very cold near the castle, and there are no birds or animals in the area. When Claire is about to start climbing the stairs of the tallest tower – Black Tower – she is nearly killed by a falling stone. She looks up and sees someone – or something – looking down from the top of the tower. The person – or thing – has fire-coloured hair. It quickly disappears. Claire is very frightened. She decides that her aunt is right about Genny Castle being dangerous, and she vows not to return to the place. The next day, she finds a book that tells a terrible story about the death of a witch in Genny Castle two hundred years earlier.

On their way back from the village one evening, Claire and her aunt have a car accident and must walk home in the snowy darkness. They finally reach the cottage where Walter Burge lives with his cat. Everyone believes that the old man is a little crazy. He isn’t in his house, and Claire realises that he must have gone to the castle. She is desperate to get help for her aunt, who is ill and tired. She goes to the castle, but she can’t find the old man. Then she sees a light at the top of Black Tower. She goes up the tower and finds the old man with his cat. An evil force seems to be at work, causing the stones of the tower to give way and sending the cat to its death – but was it really a cat? Or was it the ghost of Genny Castle?

Background and themes
Suspense: Like other books by John Escott, the story of The Ghost of Genny Castle is very suspenseful, which makes it easy to follow and exciting to read. Readers will want to read page after page in order to find out what happens to the characters at the end of the story. The Ghost of Genny Castle contains an element that is instantly appealing to children – the idea of ghosts and ghost stories. Children often talk about whether or not ghosts really exist, and they enjoy telling each other ghost stories when they are together without adults, in order to frighten each other.

Castles: The Ghost of Genny Castle has many of the characteristics typically found in ghost stories. For example, the story takes place in an old, remote castle. Castles are places with long, bloody histories. They were owned by rich noblemen who often treated their servants very badly. At Genny Castle, a servant (or witch) took revenge on the castle owner in an unhappy event that has remained in the memory of the people of Little Genny.

Female power: Often in ghost stories, the main victim of the ghost is a female on her own. In The Ghost of Genny Castle, Claire is the victim, but she is also the power for good that ultimately brings about the end of the ghost. In order to accomplish this difficult task, she has to go by herself at night to the dark, cold and very frightening castle in the final chapter of the book, and although she is afraid of the castle and its ghost, she doesn’t run away from the blood-chilling challenge. She is vulnerable, but she is also a heroine.
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Witches: The topic of witches is traditionally very popular with children. Even today, many people still think of evil powers when they hear the word "witch." However, the witches in The Ghost of Genny Castle aren't the wicked spell-makers that are found in many children's stories. Instead, they are actually typical of the victims of the terrible witch hunts that occurred in Europe between 1400 and 1700. During this time, hundreds of thousands – possibly even millions – of women were tortured, tied to stakes and burnt to death. These women were often natural healers, possessing the ability to cure illnesses, but they were persecuted because their powers weren't understood by everyday people. Whenever bad things, such as epidemics and droughts, took place in a community, these women were accused of causing them. In The Ghost of Genny Castle, the castle's new servant is suspected of causing the illness – and then she is asked to cure it.

Believing the unbelievable: Ghost stories share another intriguing aspect – should they or should they not be believed? Are there really things that can't be explained except by some ghostly cause? Or is it possible to find a practical explanation for even the most unbelievable occurrences? In The Ghost of Genny Castle, the reader may wonder if old Walter is really surrounded by fire, or if he is just a crazy old man, as the villagers claim. Is the cat with the same name as one of the witches really the woman's spirit reincarnated? Or is it just an ordinary stray cat? It is these kinds of questions that will provide a good basis for plenty of interesting discussions regarding The Ghost of Genny Castle.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1

Before reading

1 Discuss: Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. What can you see? Where do you think the story takes place? What time of year do you think the story takes place in? What do you think happens in the story?
2 Pair work: Teach the words believe and favourite to students. Then put them into pairs and get them to ask each other the following questions:
   Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not?
   Have you ever seen a ghost? If so, when and where did you see it? What did the ghost look like? What happened? How did you feel?
   Do you like ghost stories? Why or why not?
   What is your favourite ghost story?

3 Research: Ask students to bring pictures of castles to class and/or bring some pictures yourself. Circulate the pictures and discuss the following questions as a class:
   What do castles look like?
   How big are they?
   Who usually built castles?
   Why did people build castles?
   Why did many castles fall down?
   Have you ever visited a castle? If so, tell the class about the castle.
   Would you like to live in a castle? Why or why not?

After reading

4 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of the orange cat. Direct them to focus on the middle section on page 1. When they have finished, they should show their pictures to the rest of the class.
5 Role play: Put students into small groups and direct them to look at the picture on page 6. Teach them the words dialogue and scene. Tell them that the picture is a scene from a film. Get them to talk about what is happening in the picture. Then each student in the group should choose one of the characters in the picture and write at least one line of dialogue for the character. Finally, the group should memorise their lines and role play the scene in front of the class.
6 Discuss: Get students to talk about what winter is like. You can start the discussion by asking them the following questions:
   What is the weather like in the winter? Is it warm or cold?
   How long does winter usually last?
   What kind of clothing do people wear in the winter?
   What do people do in the winter?
   What is winter like in your country?

Chapter 2

Before reading

7 Guess: Ask students to predict what Claire will do in Chapter 2. Will she go to the castle? If so, who or what will she see there? What will happen to her?
8 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 9. Who can you see in the picture? What are the people doing? What is happening in the picture? Why is it happening?

After reading

9 Check: Review students' predictions about what Claire would do in Chapter 2. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
10 Read carefully: Get students to read the excerpt from The Story of Genny Castle (page 14) as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence out loud until the entire section has been read.
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11 Artwork: Teach students the word *witch*. Get them to draw a picture of a witch. When they have finished, they should show their pictures to the rest of the class.

12 Pair work: Ask students to work in pairs and role play the conversation between Claire and her aunt at the bottom of page 10 and the top of page 12.

Chapter 3
Before reading
13 Discuss: Get students to look at the map in the Introduction of the book (page vi). Then ask them to point out where the car accident takes place. After they have identified the location of the car accident, they should compare their answers with other students.

14 Guess: Get students to predict what Walter Burge’s cat will do after leaving the cottage. *Will it go to the castle? Why or why not? Why does it leave the cottage?*

After reading
15 Write: Write the following sentences on the board and explain to students that they are said by the villagers: *‘The castle is a bad place. Pull it down!’* Then get students to write a paragraph to explain why the villagers want to pull down the castle.

Chapter 4
Before reading
16 Guess: Get students to predict what will happen to Claire, Aunt Min, Walter Burge and Alexa at the end of the story. *Will Claire find Walter Burge? Will Walter Burge find Alexa? Will the ghost fight with Claire? Will Walter Burge save her?*

After reading
17 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 30. *How do you think Claire is feeling? How do you know this?*

18 Pair work: Get students to work in pairs. Student A believes in ghosts. He or she should tell Student B that the ghost of Genny Castle is real. He or she should also talk about the strange things that happen at the castle. Student B doesn’t believe in ghosts. He or she should tell Student A that the ghost of Genny Castle isn’t real. He or she should also provide normal explanations for the strange things that happen at the castle.

19 Discuss: At the end of the book, Claire is no longer afraid of Genny Castle. Ask students to explain why Claire’s fear of the castle has gone away.

20 Pair work: Put students into pairs and ask them to look at the pictures in the book. Each pair should choose one picture and then write a short paragraph about it on a piece of paper. The pairs should then swap pieces of paper and try to guess which pictures are being described.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.