

This reading group guide for **The Night Ship** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Jess Kidd**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

## Introduction

Based on a real-life event, *The Night Ship* is an epic historical novel from the award-winning author of *Things in Jars* that illuminates the lives of two characters: a girl shipwrecked on an island off Western Australia and, three hundred years later, a boy finding a home with his grandfather on the very same island.

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Jess Kidd evokes both being aboard the *Batavia* and life among the seasonal fishing community on Beacon Island through all five senses. What descriptions made these settings come alive for you? Were there any parts of Kidd's sea voyage that felt familiar, or some that felt new?
2. How does Kidd mirror Mayken and Gil's separate journeys in chapters 1 and 2? As the story progresses, do you find Gil's outsider identity important to the novel? How does his 'otherness' reflect Mayken's experience?
3. How would you characterize the tone of the story? How does the language contribute to the tone? What else contributes to it?
4. Discuss the differences and similarities between Mayken and Gil. Despite their being more than three hundred years apart, what are some of their shared experiences?
5. As tensions rise during the *Batavia*'s voyage and after the shipwreck, what role does the Bullebak play in the novel? How is this reflected in the use of the Bunyip in Gil's time?
6. Storytelling is woven into *The Night Ship* in various ways, including through folklore and family histories. What do you think the author is trying to achieve with these layers of storytelling?
7. Each child has parental figures who step in at different times in their journeys (for examples, Imke, Holdfast, Dutch, and Silvia). How would you describe these stand-in parents? In what ways were these adults important for Mayken and Gil?
8. Loss is central to both Mayken and Gil's experience; for starters, each child has lost their mother. Discuss some of their major (and minor) losses throughout the novel and how these may have shaped them as characters.
9. Each character brings something different to the story. Did you relate to any of them in particular? If so, please explain who and why.
10. As we reach the conclusion of the novel, the chapters become shorter. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Do these quicker chapters add to the urgency of the conclusion?
11. Given that this book is based on real-life events that took place during the voyage of the *Batavia* (as we are reminded in the epilogue), what do you think we should take away from Mayken's story?

12. Jess Kidd's novels cross genres, blending light and darkness, whimsy and mystery, the real and the supernatural. If you had to sum up this book in one line, how would you describe it?

### Enhance Your Book Club

1. The Bullebak is a creature of Dutch folklore. Research a bit more about its history, or take a look at other folktales from the Netherlands. Is there a common thread throughout the folktales?

2. *The Night Ship* is based on actual events surrounding the *Batavia*'s shipwreck near the Abrolhos Islands off the coast of Australia. To see more about Kidd's research, including photos from the Abrolhos Islands today, check out <http://jesskidd.com/night-ship-gallery/>

3. If your reading group has not yet read Jess Kidd's other novels, *Things in Jars*, *Himself*, or *Mr. Flood's Last Resort*, choose one of them and discuss it at your next gathering. What similarities do they share with *The Night Ship*? What differences? What themes do you think interest Jess Kidd as a writer?

### A Conversation with Jess Kidd

**Q: What interested you about the *Batavia*? Why did you decide to set a novel around this famous shipwreck?**

A: I was searching for a story and a friend came to me and said, "You have to write about the *Batavia*." I had never heard of the ship, but as soon as I started researching, I was hooked. I was both daunted and reassured to find that there hadn't been a great deal of fiction written about the *Batavia*. I had previously written historical novels, but this would be the first time I would take real people and their lives for the basis of a story.

**Q: What research was involved in your writing process?**

A: A great deal of research went into the writing of this book, not least because I was telling the story of people who really lived and died on this ship or the island. It felt like a very big responsibility to not just get the facts right but also to build a vivid picture of what life would have been like on board and how the survivors would experience life on the bleak little island they found themselves on. My obsession with gathering information led me to Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Lelystad in the Netherlands to trace the start of the *Batavia*'s journey and to find out more about the way the ship was constructed and the people who sailed on her. I spent time on replica ships, which was invaluable as it gave me a real sense of life on board. I visited museums in Western Australia to see the *Batavia* artifacts retrieved from sea and land, along with the remains of the great ship herself, which was a very poignant experience for me.

**Q: What was the most surprising thing you learned from your research?**

A: I flew by light aircraft over the scarred site of the wreck to the Abrolhos Islands. It was there that I really got a sense of the isolation and terror that must have struck the survivors, even without the terrible events that followed the shipwreck. At this point, the research became very personal to me and I wanted to tell this story in the best way I could. Other surprising highlights included meeting Patrick Baker, a marine photographer who catalogued the wreck after it was discovered and brought up from the seabed in the 1960s. I also met some people who sail historical ships, and they gave me wonderful insights into life on board a ship.

**Q: The novel moves back and forth in time between Mayken and Gil. Why did you choose to tell these stories through the eyes of children?**

A: Initially I intended to focus just on Mayken, but I realized that the *Batavia*'s story didn't end with the death of her survivors. Archaeologists were still uncovering her secrets on land and sea. I became fascinated by the cray fishers who made Beacon Island their seasonal base and the families who would join them there at certain times of the year. I hoped that the dual narratives could show how much the *Batavia* story continues to have resonance today, how the past can inform the present. One of the major difficulties for me was how to frame a violent real-life story. Taking a child's eye view allowed me to weave in an element of curiosity and playfulness. I wanted to show that in both times, the use of the imagination can be an act of survival for these children who find themselves in the gritty reality of an adult world.

**Q: You created such a varied cast of characters. Was there one character who was your favorite to write about? If so, why?**

A: So hard to choose! The characters in Mayken's time are a mix of fictional characters and actual people who sailed on the *Batavia*. For example, Mayken's best friend Holdfast is based on a real-life sailor noted in contemporary sources. Holdfast is a storytelling character (who finds an echo in Gil's time with the character named Dutch), and I particularly love writing stories within stories!

**Q: This novel is a fantastic blend of genres with many mythological and literary allusions. Were there any books of mythology or novels that particularly influenced *The Night Ship*?**

A: *The Epic of Gilgamesh* inspired Gil's name and also the name of his best friend on the island. This felt apt, as it's a nod to big themes of mortality, bravery, and friendship. I also bring in both Dutch and Indigenous Australian folklore in the forms of the bullebak and the bunyip, both water monsters. This is just one imaginative link between the times and the children. I was fascinated to find the existence of similar entities in such different cultures. Two epic sea tales also influenced the writing of this book, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. From these I think I got a sense of the strangeness and relentlessness of the sea, and how small and frail we are to pit ourselves against it.

**Q: As a writer, what do you hope readers take away from this story?**

A: I hope that readers will feel that I've brought the story alive and created an immersive world for them. This is what I love to get from a book when I read. I'm also hoping that they will go on to discover the *Batavia*'s incredible story for themselves, as there are so many fascinating resources out there.

**Q: Do you have a next project in mind? And, if so, can you tell us a little about it?**

A: I'm embarking on two projects! A novel from the world of myth and a cozy (but twisted) crime tale. Two very different worlds, but I'm loving meeting my new casts of characters.