

Genre: The Drum series, a mix of fiction and non-fiction

Readership: Upper Primary to mid-Secondary

Shakespeare: the most famous land in London

By Tony Thompson

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1. About the Book

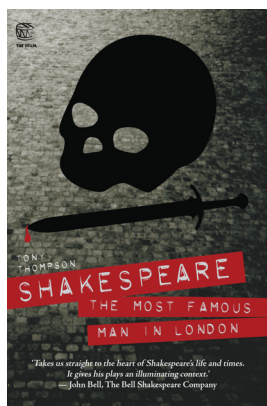
William Shakespeare is the most famous writer in history. His best-known plays include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*.

Shakespeare's plays have been performed all over the world in many languages. At any given moment it is likely that, somewhere on earth, a Shakespeare play is being performed.

But who was this man? He was born in 1563 and died in 1616. Other than his plays, he is survived only by his signature on some legal documents. There are no diaries, letters or detailed memoirs by those that knew him. This hasn't stopped hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people from writing biographies of Shakespeare.

This book is divided into fiction and non-fiction sections. The non-fiction combines what is known about the period with what is known about Shakespeare. The fiction sections use similar material along with stories suggested by his plays, and take the form of a series of interviews between the Queen's chief Interrogator and various individuals who knew Shakespeare.

The book focuses on the period from the late 1580s when Shakespeare moved to London, until the time he moved back to Stratford sometime around 1611 or 1612. London was a vibrant city in Shakespeare's time. England was beginning to build the empire that would make it the most powerful nation on earth in the



nineteenth century. It was also a city of intrigue and crime. Shakespeare could not have helped but be affected by the bustling atmosphere of the neighbourhoods where he lived while he wrote his plays.

There are many characters in this book and some vocabulary that may be unfamiliar. Therefore the book includes a cast of characters, biographies and explanations of historical events and concepts.

2. Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Cony-Catcher

Shakespeare's London was a rough and ready place. The entertainment was brutal and sport was dangerous. Most of the citizens were drunk. It is no wonder that Shakespeare's plays are so violent.

Chapter 2: Violent Delights

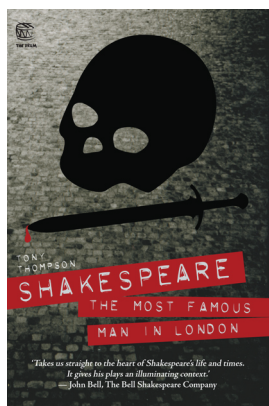
William Shakespeare came from the town of Stratford. His father was a glovemaker and local politician. His mother was a literate woman from an old family in the area. Shakespeare probably attended the local grammar school. When he was eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway. This chapter looks at his life before he arrived in London and the mysterious 'lost years'.

Chapter 3: The Upstart Crow

Shakespeare reappears in history in 1592 when he was attacked in print by another writer named Robert Greene. Greene was a member of a group of writers known as the University Wits. This group included Christopher Marlowe, the playwright Shakespeare would soon rival. Greene's attack was based on the fact that Shakespeare had not attended university.

Chapter 4: A Great Reckoning in a Small Room

In 1594, Christopher Marlowe was killed in pub in Deptford. He had been drinking all day with three companions and apparently became involved in an argument over the bill. That was the official story. The truth is less clear. Marlowe had worked



as a spy and his companions all had connections with the intelligence community. The death of Shakespeare's nearest rival remains a tantalising mystery for historians.

Chapter 5: Sorrows in Battalions

In 1596, Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died in Stratford. How this affected the playwright is not known but it is not hard to imagine. At the same time, his friend and fellow playwright Ben Jonson ended up in prison after writing a play that made fun of the Queen. He had only been out a year when he was involved in a fight that ended with the death of an actor named Gabriel Spencer. It seemed that Ben Jonson would lose his head but his knowledge of Latin saved his life.

Chapter 6: The Nine Day Wonder

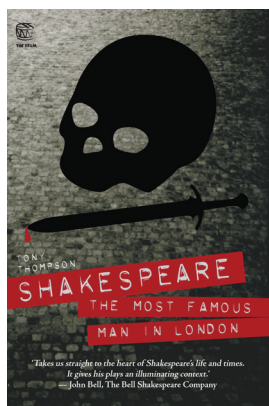
In 1599, Shakespeare's clown, William Kempe, quit the theatre company and danced across England. Shakespeare's plays began to change with the arrival of Robert Armin, Kempe's replacement. The importance of clowns in Shakespeare's work cannot be underestimated.

Chapter 7: The Distracted Globe

Early in 1599, Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was forced to find a new theatre. The lease on the venue known as The Theatre, where many of Shakespeare's early plays were performed, was not renewed. They found a spot on the other side of the river but had no money or materials for a new theatre. The solution was to transport The Theatre across the river. A complicated procedure today, it would have been nearly impossible in 1599. Somehow it worked and the Globe Theatre opened later that year.

Chapter 8: Know Ye not that I am Richard?

In 1601, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were drawn into the ill-fated Essex rebellion. They were paid to play an early Shakespeare play, Richard II, on the night before the rebellion was to take place. The play is about a king who is deposed by a rival. Shakespeare and his colleagues did not lose their heads but the Queen was not amused.



Chapter 9: The Conscience of a King

When James VI of Scotland became James I of England, Shakespeare's theatre company became the King's Men. Shakespeare wrote the 'Scottish Play', *Macbeth*, for the new King. James was fascinated and somewhat frightened by witches, so Shakespeare included his famous three witches in the play. This was also the period of the Gunpowder Plot which is referenced in *Macbeth* several times.

Epilogue

Shakespeare's last years in London saw him collaborating with other writers, and writing his final masterpiece, *The Tempest*. His Globe Theatre burned down in 1613 and he seems to have more or less retired afterwards. When he died, he left his second-best bed to his wife and enough mysteries to keep scholars guessing for the next 400 years.

3. Learning Activities

Introducing the book

Aim: To introduce and create interest in the book.

Materials: text

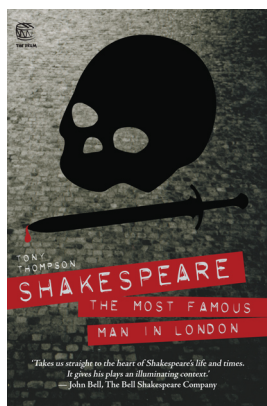
Chapter: Introduction

1. Pre-text task: Brainstorming session.

- In small groups the students write down everything they know about Shakespeare — names of plays, famous lines, etc.
- Put responses on the board. Ask why someone who lived so long ago is still so famous.

2. Examination of the book cover.

- What is the title and subtitle?
- Who is the author?
- What does the cover art suggest about the book?



3. Have class read the blurb on back cover.

- What approach has the writer taken with Shakespeare?
- What kind of story will this be?
- What questions does the blurb raise?

4. The Introduction.

Read the Introduction.

- Why does the writer like Shakespeare?
- What does he mean when he says that the plays 'remind us what odd creatures we are'?
- Think of a writer that you enjoy and write a similar introduction.

Elizabethan London

Aim: To familiarise students with the historical context of the book.

Materials: library, Internet, text

Chapter: 1 and 2

In small groups research the following topics and report back to the class.

1. Queen Elizabeth I
2. The City of London 1550–1625
3. Religion in Elizabethan England
4. Entertainment in Elizabethan London
5. Sports in Elizabethan London

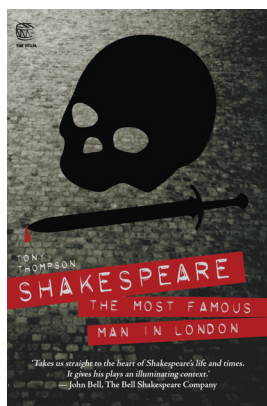
History as a Story

Aim: To consider the process of writing history.

Materials: text

In groups, answer the following questions:

1. Where do historians find information? Think of as many sources as possible.
2. What do historians do when they find a gap in a story, or when they cannot find sources for a particular event? Think of several possibilities.
3. Is it okay for historians to make up stories? Why or why not?



All biographers of Shakespeare are forced to deal with a period called the 'lost years'. In 1585, Shakespeare signed the baptism certificate of his twins. In 1592, he reappeared when a writer called Robert Greene called him an 'upstart crow' and warned other writers to watch out for this new playwright. There is no record of what Shakespeare did during the seven years in between. What historians and biographers know is that in 1585 Shakespeare was a young father living in Stratford. When he reappears, he is a playwright on the rise in London.

Activity:

What did Shakespeare do during the 'lost years'? You are the historian. Come up with a theory. Think about what you know about his life as a playwright. Are there any clues in his plays? A theory must be supported with facts. Write up your ideas and present them to the class. Put the various theories on a chart. Which one is most credible? What is Tony Thompson's theory? Do you agree?

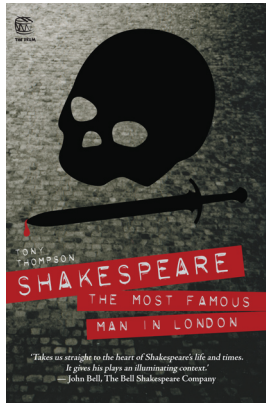
Christopher Marlowe

Aim: To familiarise students with one of Shakespeare's contemporaries

Materials: library, Internet, text

Chapter: 3

1. Research Christopher Marlowe and write a short profile. Remember that a profile has to focus on what is important. There are plenty of facts about Marlowe. What is important? The names of his plays and poems? His university career? His childhood? His activities as a spy? His death?
2. There is no evidence as to the nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and Marlowe. There are references to Marlowe's death in *As You Like It* and possibly in the sonnets. Tony Thompson believes that Shakespeare was profoundly affected by Marlowe's death. What effect does he believe that Marlowe's murder in 1593 had on Shakespeare?
3. Write a letter from Shakespeare to his wife, Anne Hathaway, in Stratford, dated



1593. Include Marlowe's death and his feelings about this event along with any other information that you think she might find interesting.

Ben Jonson

Aim: To put the events surrounding Ben Jonson's arrest and subsequent release in a modern context

Materials: text

Chapter: 5

Group activity:

You are the team responsible for putting together a story on a popular current affairs program on London TV, 1598. Ben Jonson has just been released from prison. Everyone is talking about him and the producer of the show wants a story now!

Steps:

1. Brainstorm some possible sequences that you could have in the report. Think about what you see in contemporary current affairs reports — interviews, background information, etc.
2. Write a script and decide who will play the various roles.
3. Perform the report for the rest of the class.

Clowns

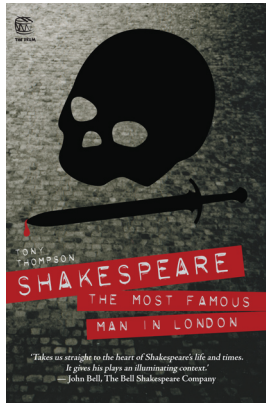
Aim: To learn about the history and tradition of clowns

Materials: library, Internet, text

Chapter: 6

Choose one of the following to research and present to the class:

- Clowns in the Middle Ages
- Clowning traditions — choose one tradition to focus on
- Shakespeare's clowns
- Court jesters
- A famous clown (pre-1950)



- A famous contemporary clown
- Clowns and circuses
- Clowns and the cinema

The Globe Theatre

Aim: To consider the Globe Theatre as a commercial venture in the contemporary sense.

Materials: poster paper, markers, text

Chapter: 7

Group Activity:

You work for an advertising agency and have just been given the Globe Theatre account. The owners, Richard Burbage and William Shakespeare, are very keen that the theatre gets off to a good start. They have taken a big risk and gone into debt to get their theatre up and running. The advertising campaign must be good!

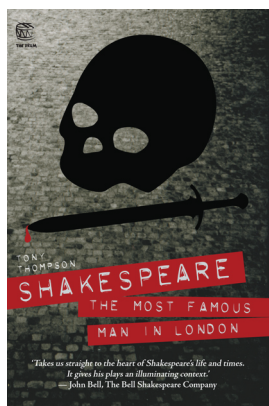
They will need:

- A slogan or a catchy phrase that defines the theatre
- A logo
- Theme music (from any era)
- A TV ad campaign

Before you begin to design these items, you will need to discuss the following:

- The 'brand' — what kind of a place is the Globe Theatre?
- The audience — who is going to attend the Globe Theatre?

The campaign can be offbeat, traditional, wild or sombre. You must decide what will work best.



The Dark Lady

Aim: To introduce a famous historical mystery

Materials: the sonnets, library, Internet, text

Chapter: 8

1. Read Shakespeare's sonnets 127 and 128. Discuss the woman described. What does Shakespeare say about her? What can we guess? Why are historians and biographers so fascinated by this person?
2. Using the Internet, find at least three theories on her identity. Present your findings to the class.
3. Read the fiction section of Chapter 8 in the book. Who is Tony Thompson's candidate? How does he support his claim?

Activity:

You are a gossip columnist in the 1590s. Write a short piece on Shakespeare's Dark Lady using the style of gossip columnists.

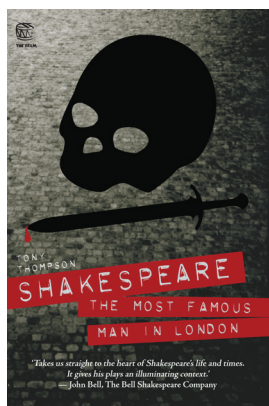
The Witches

Aim: To introduce *Macbeth* and the witches

Materials: *Macbeth* — Act One, Scene 1, Act Four, Scene 1 Lines 1-43, library, Internet, text

Chapter: 9

1. In small groups, read the witches scene aloud. Decide how you want to present it and rehearse it. Present it to the class.
2. As a class, discuss the enduring appeal of witches. Why are people so interested in witches?
3. Read Chapter Nine and choose one of the following topics to research. Present your findings to the class:
 - Witchcraft in Elizabethan and Jacobean England
 - Doctor John Dee
 - King James I and witchcraft
 - The curse of *Macbeth*



Shakespeare's Plays

Aim: To become familiar with the titles of Shakespeare's plays

Materials: pens, paper, text

Chapter: Appendix

Activity:

Choose a title of one of Shakespeare's plays. This will be the title of a short story you are going to write. You can use ideas from the play or you can make up something completely new. When you submit or read your story aloud, include a few sentences about how you were inspired by the title of the play.

About the Author

Tony Thompson is a Melbourne-based writer and teacher. He writes for *The Age* and *The Australian* and has taught English in several Melbourne high schools. He is originally from Toronto, Canada, but has lived in Australia for more than fifteen years. After finishing his undergraduate degree at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, he left for a short backpacking tour of Ireland. This trip led to years of aimless but interesting rambles in Europe, North America and Asia. In 1992 he took a job teaching English conversation in Tokyo. An evening of karaoke led to a long-term relationship and marriage to an Australian who was also teaching English in Japan. In 1994, he and his wife moved to a small flat in Carlton, which seemed quite large after living in Tokyo. He began his teaching career at Ivanhoe Grammar's Plenty Campus where he taught for four years before moving to Princes Hill Secondary College. In 2002 he relocated to Borneo where, amid the monkeys, feral dogs and students who doubled as smugglers, he taught English. For the first and final time, he also taught Beginner Guitar. Wearying of the long boat-ride to work, he returned to Australia where he continues to teach and write. He lives in the Western Suburbs with his wife and son.