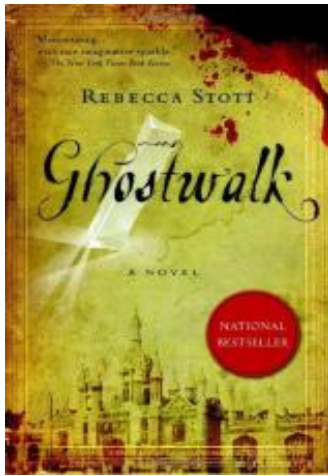


# Ghostwalk

by Rebecca Stott

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## About the Book

A Cambridge historian, Elizabeth Vogelsang, is found drowned, clutching a glass prism in her hand. The book she was writing about Isaac Newton's involvement with alchemy—the culmination of her lifelong obsession with the seventeenth century—remains unfinished. When her son, Cameron, asks his former lover, Lydia Brooke, to ghostwrite the missing final chapters of his mother's book, Lydia agrees and moves into Elizabeth's house—a studio in an orchard where the light moves restlessly across the walls. Soon Lydia discovers that the shadow of violence that has fallen across present-day Cambridge, which escalates to a series of murders, may have its origins in the troubling evidence that Elizabeth's research has unearthed. As Lydia becomes ensnared in a dangerous conspiracy that reawakens ghosts of the past, the seventeenth century slowly seeps into the twenty-first, with the city of Cambridge the bridge between them.

Filled with evocative descriptions of Cambridge, past and present, of seventeenth-century glassmaking, alchemy, the Great Plague, and Newton's scientific innovations, **Ghostwalk** centers around a real historical mystery that Rebecca Stott has uncovered involving Newton's alchemy. In it, time and relationships are entangled—the present with the seventeenth century, and figures from the past with the love-torn twenty-first century woman who is trying to discover their secrets. A stunningly original display of scholarship and imagination, and a gripping story of desire and obsession, *Ghostwalk* is a rare debut that will change the way most of us think about scientific innovation, the force of history, and time itself.

## Discussion Guide

1. Before her death, Elizabeth tells Lydia, "Cambridge is just a *palimpsest*?" a word meaning a parchment that has been written on, scraped off, and used again. What does she mean by this? How does that metaphor figure in the construction of the novel? Could the metaphor of the palimpsest represent anything else in the novel other than the city?
2. At Elizabeth's memorial service, Cameron reads lines from the Wallace Stevens poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at

a Blackbird?:

When the blackbird flew out of sight  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

How are these lines relevant to Elizabeth's death? What edges of circles, or intersecting lives and stories, does Elizabeth now mark even though she has disappeared from sight?

3. Fiction is regarded as a story invented by the imagination, whereas nonfiction is an account based on facts. Both types of literature are found in **Ghostwalk**, and yet the book is a novel. How do the two forms work together in **Ghostwalk**? Does one enhance the other or detract from it? How effective, in your opinion, is fiction in conveying history? How reliable are historical accounts?

4. The novel suggests that obsession is a dangerous preoccupation that can yield fruitful or disastrous results. What are examples of both outcomes in the novel?

5. Discuss the role of betrayal in the novel. Who betrays whom and why?

6. The narrator is originally skeptical of the supernatural, insisting that she "knew where reason ended and irrationality began, even if Elizabeth had forgotten how to find that edge." Does Lydia eventually forget how to find that edge of reason despite all her protestations to the contrary? Do you sympathize with her resistance to embrace irrationality and accept the unexplainable? How did you respond to the ghosts in the novel? Did the scientific theories in the novel change your ideas about what we think of as supernatural or beyond the rational?

7. "Glass, alchemy, and politics. You couldn't separate them out in the 1660s." Discuss how these elements were intertwined in the 1660s. What parallels can you draw from the 21st century?

8. What was the turning point in the novel where Lydia began believing in the supernatural? When did you first believe that events were more than coincidences? What is the first instance of the past encroaching on the present? How does it proceed from there?

9. Language often contains ambiguities and multiple meanings. Stott engages with the loaded meaning of the verb "to lie" in a number of instances throughout the novel: "You learned about lying on the river when you were working as a punt chauffeur. To lie on, to lie under, to lie close, to lie in wait for." "Lying to you. Lying with you. Lying for you. Can I remember the difference?" How do the plays of language affect your understanding of the nature of Lydia and Cameron's relationship? If they had been more forthcoming with each other, do you think events would have unraveled differently?

10. "You couldn't work in isolation or be independent." Discuss how Lydia's statement could apply to all of the principal characters in **Ghostwalk**. What do they learn or gain from each other? Does that interconnectedness ever work at cross purposes?

11. In Cameron's explanation of entanglement theory to Lydia, he describes Einstein's word for the concept as *spukhafte Fernwirkungen*

, or spooky action at a distance, which seems especially appropriate given the supernatural events that occur. How might entanglement theory explain and complicate Elizabeth's drowning? The series of deaths in Newton's time and murders in present-day Cambridge? Lydia and Cameron's relationship?

**12.** Many of the characters in the novel lead double lives. In which characters is this especially apparent, and how?

**13.** The narrator states, "There was something ancient and pagan about the animal-liberation campaigns." What is it about the modern political agenda of animal rights that stirs up the notion of paganism? What is Will's explanation for the campaigns, the role of NABED, and the Syndicate, and how does it diametrically oppose Cameron's version of events? What do you think the author's goal was in presenting these two oppositional viewpoints?

**14.** Lydia comments after she agrees to finish Elizabeth's book that writing is a kind of haunting. Do you agree with her sentiment? Do you think it resonates in other forms of art? Which ones? Who or what else haunts Lydia as she struggles to complete the book? Does Lydia finally manage to shrug off her ghosts?

**15.** At the end of **Ghostwalk**, Lydia dreams she is in a literal and psychological maze chasing an elusive red figure, a dream that leaves her bewildered and unable to discern reality. Discuss the significance of this dream. What are other instances in **Ghostwalk** where dreams loom larger than life? How does Stott use dreams as vehicles of discovery and revelation for her characters?

**16.** How did reading the actual excerpts from Newton's diary and his recipes for alchemical formulas affect your understanding of him as a character in the story and as a historical and real person? Are there any inferences you can draw from this new understanding of Newton that would alter your perceptions of other important historical figures?

**17.** "It wasn't a benign kind of curiosity. It was something dark and ravenous?ravens scavenging over a corpse?dark, urgent, and visceral." In what way is curiosity shown to have violent consequences in this novel? What does the book seem to have to say about the nature of curiosity?

**18.** At one point Lydia slightly misquotes a line of Robert Browning's to Cameron: "My interest's in the dangerous edge of things. The honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist." How do these lines embody the preoccupations of the novel as a whole?

## Author Bio

Rebecca Stott is emeritus professor of English literature and creative writing at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. She is the author of **DARWIN'S GHOSTS** and **DARWIN AND THE BARNACLE**; the novels **THE CORAL THIEF**, the national bestseller **GHOSTWALK**, and **DARK EARTH**; and the award-winning memoir **IN THE DAYS OF RAIN**. She is a regular contributor to BBC Radio and lives in Norwich.

## Critical Praise

?A hypnotic brew of speculation, intrigue and murder?It?s outlandish and devilishly plausible?. You?ll be enthralled? By the final chapter, Stott?s elegant subtlety has been transmuted into a violent swirl of reversals and revelations that would defy Newton?s calculus. You can?t help but feel swept away.?

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