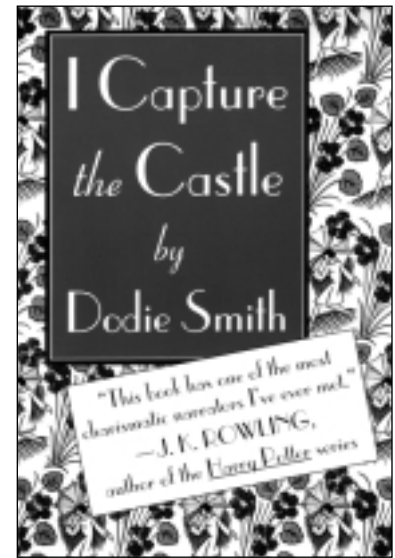




# I Capture the Castle

by **Dodie Smith**

*"This book has one of the most charismatic narrators I've ever met. Seventeen-year-old Cassandra Mortmain captures the castle in her insightful, witty journal entries."—J. K. Rowling*



352 pages • 0-312-20165-6

"This is a treasure that you will want to share."

—*Children's Literature*

## TO THE TEACHER

One of the most beloved coming-of-age novels of our time, *I Capture the Castle* is the classic tale, told in diary form, of six months in the life of Cassandra Mortmain, a perceptive young lady who lives with her poor, socially outcast family in a crumbling castle in the English countryside. Funny, candid, and very bright—and ever optimistic in spite of her bleak surroundings—Cassandra is a charming and instantly likable narrator. Her story is told entirely in the first-person voice of her journal entries, which offer lively portraits of a unique if quirky family.

"I am writing this journal," Cassandra explains on page 4, "to teach myself how to write a novel—I intend to capture all our characters and put in conversations." Her father is also a writer—indeed, his first and only book was deemed a masterpiece—but his long, acute case of writer's block has wrought financial hardship on the Mortmain family. As the novel begins, life in the castle is never dull but often difficult; even furniture and books are scarce. Alongside her brilliant yet mysterious father James, her beautiful sister Rose, her artistically off-beat stepmother Topaz, her brother Thomas, and the family's longtime gardner Stephen, Cassandra has little food to eat, few clothes to wear, and no electricity to read by. The story set down in her diary, then, is one of creativity and exuberance amid damp, candle-lit hardship.

Despite such challenges, both Rose and Cassandra discover—in ways gradual and immediate—that they have fallen in love with their newly arrived American neighbors, the Cotton brothers. Cassandra's heartfelt musings on this dual discovery define the endearing tenor and straightforward trajectory of this entertaining novel.

“*I Capture the Castle* is finally back in print. It should be welcomed with a bouquet of roses and a brass band. Ever since I was handed a tattered copy years ago with the recommendation ‘You’ll love it,’ it has been one of my favorite novels. Cassandra Mortmain is one hell of a narrator, offering sharp wit, piercing insight, and touching lyricism. She is a heroine we readers wish we could be, a young woman it is impossible not to adore.”—Susan Isaacs

“Dreamy and funny . . . an odd, shimmering timelessness clings to [this book’s] pages. A thousand and one cheers for its reissue. A+” —*Entertainment Weekly*

“It is an occasion worth celebrating when a sparkling novel, a work of wit, irony, and feeling is brought back into print after an absence of many years. So uncork the champagne for *I Capture the Castle*.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“[Beginning to read this novel], I was promptly enchanted. Finding Cassandra Mortmain . . . was like finding young Francie Nolan reading on that balcony in Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. . . . [She is a] kindred spirit. . . . Thanks to Cassandra’s lively voice and imagination, [this book] is an exciting read. . . . I’ve been thinking about Cassandra for years. I’m glad she’s back on my bookshelf.” —*The Chicago Tribune*

“It is difficult to believe that this classic, first published in 1948 by the author of *101 Dalmatians*, has ever gone out of print. Now, with this reissue, new generations of readers will discover the delightful world of Cassandra Mortmain and her down-on-their-luck family. . . . [Cassandra’s journal entries] evoke passion and feeling seldom observed this side of Jane Austen. . . . This is a treasure that you will want to share with loved ones.” —*Children’s Literature*

PREPARING TO READ

This guide is meant to aid and enhance your teaching of Dodie Smith’s *I Capture the Castle*. The guide’s first section, “Understanding the Story,” focuses chapter-by-chapter on reading comprehension. “Expanding Your Knowledge,” the second section, is meant to assist students in their consideration of the main themes of *I Capture the Castle*. A third, “Other Works to Consider,” concludes this guide by suggesting a few other paths down which you might wish to lead your students for purposes of comparison and contrast, further reflection and inquiry, or thematic continuation and deviation. Also, a useful “Reading Group Guide” appears at the end of the book itself; on page 344 of your edition of *I Capture the Castle* are several questions aptly suited for classroom use (especially as introductory topics or discussion-starter queries).

## I. THE SIXPENNY BOOK: March

### Chapter I (pp. 3–11)

Who is narrating *I Capture the Castle*? What do we learn about this person at the outset? How is the story being told? Describe the form and tone of this novel.

Identify the novel's primary setting and each of its main characters.

On page 10, Cassandra remarks, "I thank heaven there is no cheaper form of bread than bread." What does this mean? What sort of family life is described in the opening chapter? What are the differences between this family's past and present situation? How did this change come to pass? And, in spite of all this, why does Cassandra add, on page 11, "I think it worthy of note that I never felt happier in my life"?

### Chapter II (pp. 12–25)

What do we learn about Cassandra's close ties to her sister Rose? What do they share or have in common, not just physically but emotionally and intellectually? And how are these girls different from one another?

Who is Miss Blossom? What makes her different from the other characters we have met? Is she really a "character" in the way all the others are? Explain.

Describe the character of Miss Marcy. What does she do for a living? What is her background? What is the nature of her relationship with the Mortmain family? How is she helpful to them, in general and in this chapter specifically?

### Chapter III (pp. 26–38)

How did the Mortmain family acquire their castle?

On page 36, we learn that Mr. Mortmain's only remaining social companion is the Vicar. What is a vicar? Why do you suppose he is Mr. Mortmain's only friend? And why has Mr. Mortmain "dropped all his London friends" in the first place?

What did you learn about the history and design of medieval castles from this chapter? What is a "keep" (page 37)? Why did square castle towers give way to round ones?

### Chapter IV (pp. 39–53)

Why do the hands and arms of Topaz, Rose, and Cassandra turn green?

How do Stephen and Cassandra feel about one another? How long have they known each other? Describe their relationship. How does it seem to be changing—or becoming more complicated—of late?

Think back to the scene involving the statue situated high above the fireplace in the kitchen. What sort of “deal” does Rose make with the statue? Why does she make such a bargain? What is she afraid of, and what does she hope to gain?

### **Chapter V (pp. 54–67)**

Who are the Cottons of Scoatney Hall? How are Cassandra and her relatives, and we as readers, introduced to the Cotton brothers?

Why are the Mortmain and Cotton families so charmed by each other? What does each clan have that the other is keen on or fascinated by? What do the Cottons represent to the Mortmains, and what do the Mortmains mean to the Cottons?

On page 63, Cassandra admits: “I like seeing people when they can’t see me. I have often looked at our family through lighted windows and they seem quite different, a bit the way rooms seen in looking-glasses do. I can’t get the feeling into words—it slipped away when I tried to capture it.” How are the ideas expressed in this quotation amplified by the novel as a whole?

## **II. THE SHILLING BOOK: April and May**

### **Chapter VI (pp. 71–95)**

What did Cassandra overhear at the close of the preceding chapter? Why are the Cotton brothers now no longer calling on the Mortmains? Who is responsible for this breakup, and why?

Why are Cassandra and Rose called to London? Why are they so conspicuous for the duration of their visit? What do they acquire in London? Is it a blessing or burden? Explain.

How does Rose come to be mistaken for a circus bear while coming home from London? Who finally comes to “save” her when she runs away from the stopped train, and what is the truth behind this bizarre and comical episode?

### **Chapter VII (pp. 96–107)**

Describe Mrs. Cotton. What is her manner of speech, dress, and social formality? How does Cassandra perceive her? And how does she impress the other Mortmains?

Look again at the conversation on page 103 about being a gentleman. Cassandra's definition of a gentleman is very different from Stephen's; she even calls his notion "old-fashioned nonsense." Explain their opposing views, and how each view reflects the background, education, and sensibility of the one who holds it.

Reread the four "private thoughts" about Stephen that Cassandra lists in her journal near the end of this chapter. What do these newly "discovered" feelings for Stephen mean to her? Why does she conclude that she must "be brisk" with him from now on? What is she telling herself?

### **Chapter VIII (pp. 108–30)**

Who is invited to the dinner party at Scoatney Hall? Who shows up later? What important scenes and conversations transpire at dinner and afterward?

Who are Aubrey and Leda Fox-Cotton? What does each of them do professionally? What does Cassandra think of them? Why is Aubrey so taken with Topaz, and Leda with Stephen?

On page 121, the characters have a discussion in the gallery in which they assign painters to one another. What ideas and impressions do the characters seem to be communicating about each other, and themselves, here? What kinds of portraits are referred to?

### **Chapter IX (pp. 131–57)**

"Now that life has become so much more exciting," writes Cassandra on page 131, "I think of this journal as a story I am telling." How has her diary changed since we first began reading it? How has she herself changed?

On page 138, Cassandra writes: "Gradually I slid into imagining Rose married to Simon. . . ." Often we find our narrator describing her "imaginings" about herself and her family and friends; *I Capture the Castle* is rich with such diversions. On pages 106-7, for example, Cassandra is "feeling dizzy" as she daydreams about Stephen. Identify other instances wherein Cassandra lets her imagination wander, about anything or anyone. How do these thoughts affect the narrative of her diary? What would this book be like without such flights of fancy?

Near the middle of Chapter IX, Cassandra and Simon talk in some detail about her father and the famous book he wrote years ago. What is the name of this book? What else do we know about it? What have we learned of Mr. Mortmain up to this point—of his intelligence, behavior, personality, and ability as a writer? Why do you think he keeps making mysterious trips to London? And why does Simon find him interesting? Why does he often baffle Cassandra?

### **Chapter X (pp. 158–83)**

Why is Topaz so upset when she learns that Mr. Mortmain invited the Cottons for dinner at the castle? How does she manage to arrange for a dinner party without furniture, silverware, and china? Why does so much of the menu consist of ham?

Why does Cassandra ask Neil to go swimming with her? Where do they swim? To what extent does Cassandra set up Simon's marriage proposal to Rose? Do you think the proposal would have occurred without Cassandra's arrangements? Explain.

When Cassandra tells Neil of the engagement of Simon and Rose, Neil is not only disappointed but very angry. Why? What does Neil mean by calling Rose a "gold-digger"? Do you consider this criticism accurate or fair? Defend your answer.

### **III. THE TWO-GUINEA BOOK: June to October**

#### **Chapter XI (pp. 187–98)**

What is special about Cassandra's new journal? How did she acquire it?

Why have Rose and Topaz gone to London? Who are they staying with, and where are they staying? What is a "trousseau" and why is Rose due to receive one?

Reread the long letter Rose sends Cassandra. Is Rose happy in London? What does she like about it? What does she mean by writing, "Darling Cassandra, I promise you shall never make any more longing cat noises once I am a married woman"? Why do you think Rose is focused on money and material possessions? Does Cassandra envy her sister? Explain why or why not.

#### **Chapter XII (pp. 199–224)**

Why is Midsummer Day so important to Cassandra? What does it mean to her personally and emotionally? Who does she wind up practicing her beloved "Midsummer rites" with? Why does this encounter turn out to be so special?

What is "the Shape" Cassandra describes seeing on a Midsummer night many years ago? How does Simon interpret this phenomenon? What do their interpretations of the Shape—Simon's versus Cassandra's—tell us about these two characters?

"I feel asleep happier than I had ever been in my life." What do you make of this last sentence of Chapter XII? Why does Cassandra feel this way? What has happened to her? Specify your answers with references from the novel.

### **Chapter XIII (pp. 225–57)**

Why does Mr. Mortmain ask Cassandra if Rose is truly in love with Simon? How has Rose led him to doubt the sincerity of her feelings? And though she convinces her father that Rose is in love with Simon, is Cassandra herself convinced? Explore Cassandra's conflicting emotions in light of her own feelings for Simon.

Go back to the scene where Cassandra visits the Vicar. What do they talk about? How does he assist her, or is he even able to? What happens when, after this conversation, Cassandra sits alone in the church? The next day, Cassandra has an encounter with Miss Marcy. In what ways are these two women alike in their view of the world, and in what ways are they different? Why, finally, does Cassandra realize that her friend Miss Blossom is “gone for ever”?

What birthday presents does Cassandra receive from Stephen and Simon? Which gift does she prefer, and why? Why does she then ask Stephen to go for a walk? And why does she allow him to kiss her?

### **Chapter XIV (pp. 258–90)**

Why has Cassandra decided to visit Rose in London? Why is she so unhappy when she goes dancing after dinner with Rose, Simon, and Neil? On page 271, Cassandra admits some things to herself about Simon and her feelings for him: “But I knew, as I sat there amusing him while the band played ‘*Lover*,’ that many things which had felt natural to me before I first heard it would never feel natural again. It wasn't only the black dress that had made me grow up.” Discuss the realizations that Cassandra comes to at this part of story.

For what purpose has Stephen traveled with Cassandra to London? How does Leda Fox-Cotton treat both of these characters in Chapter XIV? Why does she treat them so differently?

What happens when Cassandra finally confronts Rose, after everyone else has gone to bed? Who, and what, are they arguing about? How do their perspectives on Rose's impending marriage differ—and how, if at all, are they similar?

### **Chapter XV (pp. 291–318)**

Who is Thomas? Describe his duties, interests, and personality traits, as well as his role within the Mortmain household. What are Cassandra's impressions of him, and how do they change over the course of *I Capture the Castle*?

Explain the trick that Cassandra and Thomas pull on their father. Does this “experiment” seem justified to you, or is it cruel or unfair? Defend your answer.

On page 303, Cassandra and her father talk briefly about her late mother, Mr. Mortmain's first wife. What do we learn about this woman over the course of the

novel? Describe Cassandra's thoughts and feelings about her. Why is it important that, for most of the narrative, Cassandra cannot fully remember her mother's face? What causes Cassandra to suddenly recollect that her mother had freckles?

### Chapter XVI (pp. 319–43)

On page 322, we read: “‘Give me the key,’ Topaz whispered to Thomas. ‘I want to face it alone.’” Why does Topaz insist on being the only one who rescues Mr. Mortmain? Next, reread pages 273–4, where Topaz confides to Cassandra what her “job in life” is—and always has been. Which description, if you had to pick one, would you assign to Topaz: supportive or possessive? Explain your stance with specific citations from the novel. How does Cassandra regard her stepmother—as her father's muse, his boss, or otherwise? Explain.

Who winds up with whom at the end of this love story? Were you surprised by how it ended? Explain why or why not. And were you satisfied with the ending, or disappointed? Again, explain your answer.

Finally, this book, which was first published in 1948, is widely considered a classic of its kind. Would you agree? Explain your view.

## EXPANDING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

### NARRATION AND STORYTELLING

Why are there three different notebooks in this novel? What makes each notebook special or distinct? More generally, what did you think of the way *I Capture the Castle* was told? Did it make the story easier or more fun to read—or otherwise more enjoyable? Explain. How did the form of this novel influence your impression of Cassandra? How did it affect your take on all the other characters?

As an independent project, keep a diary for two or three days, recording the actions and activities of your family or close friends. Pay special attention to your own thoughts and feelings, your own take on these actions and activities. Conclude by comparing your journal with Cassandra's, and by commenting on what you liked and disliked about this process. Did you learn anything about yourself or the others you were writing about? If so, what?

### ART AND CREATIVITY

This book has much to do with being creative, with thinking and living in the world like an artist. In the first paragraph, in fact, Cassandra confesses that she used to write poetry. Why did she give it up? What are some images or experiences she faces throughout the novel that remind her of poems she used to write, or make her



wish she could write new poems? Also, consider the role played in this novel by Cassandra's father, a writer compared to James Joyce. How is his inability to write a follow-up to his initial book caricatured—and how is it treated more seriously?

Think of the different types of art we encounter in this novel. What specific works of music, literature, and painting did you recognize? Were any of them familiar to you—and if so, how did they enhance your reading experience? What styles of art and literature are mentioned? Discuss why the appreciation of, or familiarity with, various artworks figures so prominently in the narrative.

### INTELLIGENCE AND SENSITIVITY

Most reviews of this book point out not only Cassandra's winning and endearing personality but also her wit. What is wit? How does it apply to our heroine? What about Cassandra strikes you as especially bright or clever? Refer to things she says and does in order to back-up your answer. Where and how does she employ wit, for example, in her depiction of her stepmother Topaz? Where else in the novel does Cassandra come across as particularly smart?

But Cassandra is more than clever: she is highly observant and sensitive. Near the end of the book, for instance, on page 343, she pauses her story to ask: "Why is summer mist romantic and autumn mist just sad?" What did you as a reader make of such asides? Did they bring you closer to Cassandra or her story? Did they make the novel more realistic to you, or more likable or enjoyable? Explain your responses. Given Cassandra's wish to someday write a novel, why do you think she is so keen on ideas, feelings, books, and paintings? Why is she always so interested in what other people are doing? And why, on page 339, does she tell Simon that she does not want to go to college?

### CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

As a work of fiction with an adolescent protagonist who both experiences and tries to understand the world around her, *I Capture the Castle* is a superb example of the coming-of-age novel. How much time actually passes from the start of this book to the finish? And how much growing-up does Cassandra experience within this same time frame? Do these two measurements of yours seem incongruent or surprising? Explain your answer. Why do you think this novel takes place at precisely the phase in Cassandra's life between childhood and adulthood?

As noted above, Cassandra is an exceptionally bright seventeen-year-old. On page 147, for instance, she remembers discovering at a young age that her father sometimes finds beauty saddening. "Once when I was quite little I asked father why this was and he explained that it was due to our knowledge of beauty's evanescence, which reminds us that we ourselves shall die. Then he said I was probably too young to understand him; but I understood perfectly." Identify other instances in the

novel (there are many) where any character underestimates or downplays Cassandra's intelligence because of her young age. In what other ways does Cassandra's age influence her experiences in *I Capture the Castle*? How especially is her relationship with Simon affected?

## LOVE AND FAMILY

*I Capture the Castle* is a love story—actually, it is a few different love stories. Stephen is in love with Cassandra, Cassandra is in love with Simon, Simon is in love with Rose, and there are even a few additional cases of infatuation involving secondary characters like Leda and Aubrey. Identify all of these background scenarios. How did they influence your reading of this novel? Were they as interesting, revealing, or important to you as were the love affairs of the main characters? Also, consider the many different kinds of love depicted in this book—adolescent, familial, unrequited, paternal, sisterly, and so on—and give concrete, textual examples of each.

If love is this novel's main concern, the stage on which this theme is played out is family life. But the novel is really about two families, the Mortmains and Cottons. How are these families geographically, socially, culturally, and circumstantially intertwined? How are they similar? And different? Identify a few scenes in the novel where we witness a contrast in the Mortmains' and Cottons' experiences or understandings of life and its rituals and routines.

## CUSTOMS AND CULTURES

On another level, *I Capture the Castle* is a story about how English people see Americans and how Americans see the English. What did you learn about these similar but different countries from reading this book?

Why do you think Cassandra so often reflects on the linguistic differences between British and American English? Amused at times, confused at others, she records in her diary the separate terms Britons and Americans have for the same things on several occasions. Look again at a few of these descriptions, and point out which words are being defined and why.

What did you learn about the English custom of afternoon tea from *I Capture the Castle*? Were there any other aspects of English culture that you encountered for the first time in these pages? Identify them, if so.

## HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

History and geography are prominent throughout this story, since Cassandra is clearly fascinated by both concepts. How does her love of the castle's history influence Cassandra's character and disposition? Give textual citations with your answer.

Reread Cassandra's account in Chapter III of how her father found and financed the castle. What special memories does Cassandra have of that day? How and why do these memories stay with her as the plot of *I Capture the Castle* progresses?

Finally, revisit the conversation Cassandra has with Neil (on pages 163–6) while riding home in the Cottons' car after their seaside picnic with Rose and Simon. Why is Cassandra so enchanted by Neil's description of California and the rest of America? Where else in the book is she struck by matters of geography? And where else does she describe the unique or vivid properties of the landscape she sees? As a final exercise, follow Cassandra's example: go outside, take a look around, and then write down a few aspects of the natural world that touch you personally or deeply. Lastly, convert these impressions into a short story or poem to share with your class.

#### OTHER RESOURCES

As a classic work of fiction, and as a masterful novel in the coming-of-age tradition, *I Capture the Castle* invites comparison with countless other books of this sort. Some of the novels of Judy Blume or S. E. Hinton, for example, might be considered contemporary extensions of Dodie Smith's mid-twentieth-century volume. Likewise the books of Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters (especially Charlotte), which are lovingly referred to several times by Cassandra in her journals, might be more easily understood or enjoyed by students who have read *I Capture the Castle*.

Following is a list of other literary works that mirror and/or refract Smith's novel and so might be usefully studied alongside it: *The Death of the Heart* by Elizabeth Bowen, *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, *The Nick Adams Stories* by Ernest Hemingway, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *Annie John*\* by Jamaica Kincaid, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, *Stonewall's Gold*\* by Robert J. Mrazek, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, *Betsey Brown*\* by Ntozake Shange, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

\*A Holtzbrinck Teacher's Guide is also available for this title.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Gladys "Dodie" Smith, born in 1896 in Lancashire, England, was one of the most successful female dramatists of her generation. She wrote *Autumn*, *Crocus*, and *Dear Octopus*, among other plays. *I Capture the Castle*, her first novel, was written in the 1940s while she was living in America. An immediate success, it marked her crossover from playwright to novelist, and was produced as a play in 1954. Smith also wrote the novels *The Town in Bloom*, *It Ends with Revelations*, *A Tale of Two Families*, and *The Girl in the Candle-Lit Bath*, but she is best known today as the author of two highly popular stories for young readers: *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* and *The Starlight Barking*. She died in 1990. (Scott Pitcock wrote this Teacher's Guide. He lives in New York City and works in book publishing.)

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