

A Teacher's Guide for

# SMOKE AND IRON



*Volume 4 of the Great Library*

by

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

This book finds the team scattered from the events at the end of *Ash and Quill*. Jess Brightwell has taken on the disguise of his twin brother, Brendan, and transported the two people the Archivist of the Great Library most wants to Alexandria as “gifts” from his father ... Morgan Hault, his Obscurist girlfriend, and Scholar Christopher Wolfe, the spark that started the building rebellion against the Great Library’s corrupt practices. While Morgan knows what Jess is doing, Scholar Wolfe doesn’t, and neither do most of his friends except for Dario Santiago, who helped him craft the strategy.

Jess is playing an incredibly dangerous game, pretending to be his brother; the Archivist will test him at every turn, and if he’s caught out, he’s dead. But he believes that he can create an opportunity to destroy the Archivist from within, and he intends to take it.

Meanwhile, his other friends—Khalila Seif, Dario Santiago, Thomas Schreiber, Glain Wathen, and Scholar Wolfe’s partner Captain Niccolo Santi—are all prisoners on a ship bound for Alexandria from England. The ship belongs to Red Ibrahim, who—like Jess’s father, Callum Brightwell—is one of the kings of criminal smuggling, but has now switched alliances to make a deal with the Archivist. The prisoners are to be handed over for a massive ceremony called The Feast of Greater Burning, an ancient Egyptian ceremony revived for the occasion ... with a twist. It’s to be a mass execution of the Archivist’s enemies.

With time running out on every front, and countries around the world sensing the Archivist’s vulnerability and beginning their own rebellions, it’s time for change ... but at what cost?

Like previous books, this entry into the Great Library series addresses themes that are very current to our time ... the ownership of information, censorship, terrorism, and the price that sometimes must be paid for both freedom, and justice. It also shows the power of individuals who push for needed change.

You can download READ posters, digital character cards, and the book trailer at the Great Library website:

<http://www.enterthelibrary.com>

## **CONTENT**

This book contains intense scenes of violence, war and death, and may be upsetting to younger readers.

There is some moderate romantic content, with some implied sexual situations.

## ALTERNATE HISTORY

This book fits the definition of *alternate history*, which is a brand of science fiction; it describes a world in which history proceeded on a different course, normally from a single important event. In this world, the Great Library of Alexandria was saved by a common accord between (first) Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, who agreed that it should be always sacred, even in war, as a great resource to all nations. This agreement spread to include almost all nations over time, and while the Library did experience periods of trouble, the formation of their army (the *High Garda*, a term adapted from the Irish) assured the survival of not just the Great Library itself, but other libraries it annexed and put under its protection, one by one. Because of this, there has been remarkably little information lost.

However, there is one great truth about the Library that is *also* drawn from history: it was not, as one might assume today, a totally altruistic organization. In fact, many of the first volumes placed within the Library were done so by Pharaonic orders—confiscated from owners and visitors, and placed into the collection by force. In addition, the Great Library's vast resources were *not* available to the general public, but to a select group of scholars. The development of the *Serapeum*, the daughter library that became open to the public (though, again, a select few), came later.

With that in mind, and the fact that *any* organization, no matter how originally pure, develops internal politics and an entrenched mindset over time ... the Library becomes a nation-state of its own, much like the Vatican. That requires it to engage in politics and self-preservation of the status quo.

The development of the printing press would have meant the death of the Library's stranglehold on power and knowledge ... and so, it was suppressed, the knowledge destroyed or hidden away. But it's a development that is so logical and important that it keeps surfacing, and forcing the Library to defend itself again and again against a purely good thing ... which makes the Library itself the evil in the world.

This is a book about the nature of information, ownership, and guardianship of heritage. It's a book about books and e-books, the Internet and print, rigid beliefs and violent revolution.

I think there's a lot in it that speaks to our modern world.

## RESEARCH AND INFORMATION

Part of creating the world of the Great Library led to many fun and interesting discoveries, so here is a partial list of classroom resources you can use to discuss the novel, history, and other fun and fascinating topics.

### The Great Library

- Here's a great, brief summary of the history and end of the Library:  
[http://www.serageldin.com/ancient\\_Library.htm](http://www.serageldin.com/ancient_Library.htm)
- Bede's Library online has another great summary:  
<http://www.bede.org.uk/library.htm>
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### Lost Libraries

- A great list of 11 lost libraries, with descriptions (or at least estimates) of what was destroyed: <http://www.strangehistory.net/2014/04/29/12-burning-libraries-book-lovers-beware/>
- Wikipedia has a great list of lost and destroyed libraries from ancient times to modern, and it's a staggering number:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_destroyed\\_libraries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_destroyed_libraries)
- Listverse has a fascinating record of great works (mainly books) that only narrowly avoided being lost forever: <http://listverse.com/2014/08/20/10-priceless-cultural-works-we-nearly-lost-forever/>
- And to bring it home, here's an article on the fire that destroyed two-thirds of the Library of Congress in 1851: <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fire-ravages-library-of-congress>

### Automata

- There's plenty of evidence that the ancient Greeks were amazingly advanced in engineering that wouldn't be rediscovered for a thousand years or more ... lots to delve into here on the Ancient Wisdom site:  
<http://www.ancient-wisdom.com/greekautomata.htm>

I've also linked many resources at the Great Library website:

<http://www.enterthelibrary.com>

## CHARACTERS

The key to writing interesting and engaging characters, whether they are to be seen as heroes or villains, is to believe that each of them, in their mind, is the hero of his or her own story. Their actions are driven by what they think is good – either for themselves, or for others.

- **Jess** is an adventurer—and a boy with a genuine love of books. In *Smoke and Iron*, Jess has grown into a real revolutionary and spy, as he tries to play the Archivist and build his own network of allies within Alexandria. The risks are enormous, including his immediate execution.
  - Do you think Jess should have proceeded with this plan while telling his companions what he was going to do? If so, what would have happened differently?
  - Should Jess have tried to free Scholar Wolfe from prison?
  - During the course of the book, Jess has the opportunity to allow the Archivist to die at the hands of another. He prevents this. Why do you think he did this? Was he right?
- **Thomas** has grown from a shy young man with the gift of genius to someone who, though still brilliant, is showing signs that he is troubled by what he's gone through.
  - Can you point to examples of moments in this book when you can tell Thomas is still badly troubled by his imprisonment in Rome?
  - How do you think Thomas can be helped? Do you think he will accept that help?
- **Morgan** has returned to the Iron Tower, which was the last thing she wanted to do, but she has a mission of her own: to find the legendary Eskander, Wolfe's father, to lead the Obscurists in their own rebellion.
  - Does she need Eskander? Or could she lead this rebellion herself?
  - Morgan's powers seem to keep growing. What danger could she pose in the future?
- **Khalila** has likewise grown in her abilities, but in a different direction. She has discovered a talent for leadership, and for diplomacy.
  - Give three examples of moments when Khalila uses this to move the story forward.

- What motivates her more: the desire to save her family from the Feast of Greater Burning, or the desire to save the Great Library?
- **Dario** has matured from a shallow, class-conscious bully to a young man who, while still manipulative, understands how to use this tendency for the better.
  - What do you think Dario’s future will be in the Great Library, now that we know he has a royal title in Spain? Will he stay?
  - Do you think that the good Dario does now and in the future will erase the bad deeds he did when he was younger? Why or why not? How does this question relate to our modern dilemma of “the Internet never forgets”?

These five are the prime movers of this particular novel, and each has a unique perspective that *could* be written as the main character ... yet it would be a very different book from each perspective.

*Ash and Quill*, and all books in this series, can be a way to illustrate to students how every character in a book, no matter how incidental, can take on depth and life if allowed their own stage and perspective.

*Sample class exercise*



Choose a character from *Smoke and Iron* and write a short scene that doesn’t occur in the book ... a prison scene for Scholar Wolfe, a conversation between Santi and Thomas about his ordeal in Rome, Morgan trying out her powers ... anything you like. Try identifying the essential nature of each character and writing a scene to enhance that trait and give them more dimension.

You can also try writing from the perspective of one of the Archivist’s silent High Garda soldiers, who see everything, but we never know what they believe or think themselves. They’re “true believers” – loyal to the Great Archivist. So how does that color their perspective of what Jess does? This allows you to switch point of view and discover the world from another perspective.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Pretend for a moment that you live in the Great Library's Alexandria—a very rich city, the center of the world in many ways, which has known peace and prosperity for thousands of years. No matter how wrong the Archivist was, would you advocate for change, knowing it might impact your quality of life?
  - *This question is designed to bring out discussions of “status quo” vs. “change” – something that is very topical at the moment.*
- Several countries have already declared independence from the Great Library even before this book begins. Why would they make that move now?
  - *The implication is that many nations were already chafing under the restrictions of the Great Library, and want to nationalize the libraries and control them. A good discussion might be which countries intend to nurture the libraries within the borders ... and which intend to control and censor them.*
- Were you surprised when Brendan showed up in Alexandria? Do you think Jess accomplished what he intended by impersonating his brother?
  - *The inevitable outcome was that Brendan couldn't impersonate Jess as well as Jess could impersonate Brendan (they have very different lives), and when that deception was uncovered, Callum Brightwell, in order to preserve his new partnership with the Archivist, would have made his own move to counter Jess's plan. Jess had the chance to kill the Archivist (or allow him to die) but did not. So in a sense, at least, Jess's plan at least partially failed.*
- Ultimately, who would you guess becomes the new Archivist in Alexandria? It could be any of our main characters. Which would be the best?
  - *As Eskander mentions, the head of the Obscurists is prohibited from also being the Archivist, to avoid putting too much power in the same hands. But would he make a good Archivist, if this restriction was changed?*
  - *Scholar Wolfe is an obvious choice ... but does he have the personality necessary to lead the Library forward?*



- *Captain Santi might take the job, but as a soldier, is he qualified to make decisions about the future of the Library?*
- *Jess probably wouldn't even consider taking the job, though he might be good at it. Why wouldn't he? Think about his reluctance to follow his family's business and inherit that responsibility.*
- *Thomas would be a good choice: he's thoughtful, responsible, and smart. But he'll always be drawn to inventing more than administration.*
- *Glain would reject it from the start, though she'd gladly end up the Commander of the High Garda if she could.*
- *Morgan has a horror of being trapped, and she might see the position of the Archivist as a lifelong burden.*
- *What about many of the older Scholars, like Scholar Murasaki? Might she be a good choice? Why or why not?*
- *Dario is ambitious enough, and smart enough; he might be a very good choice for Archivist. He also has political connections through his family.*
- *Khalila, however, is a great choice. She's brilliant, courageous, brave, and inspiring. She might be just the right person to lead the Library into the future.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel is the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and #1 *Wall Street Journal* author of more than fifty novels, including the popular Morganville Vampire young adult series, and the critically acclaimed novel *Prince of Shadows*.

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She does not charge speaking fees for schools or libraries as a matter of policy, but may request defrayment of expenses for lodging and transportation.

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