The Witching Stone

Book Club Discussion Points

1. In the opening chapter, despite Mia’s warning, Alfie is spurred on by bravado to walk three times around Meg’s grave, repeating the phrase, ‘I don’t believe in witches.’ What would you do in a similar situation?

2. From the very beginning, Alfie is positioned as an outsider. How important is it that he is in unfamiliar territory?

3. In Chapter 3, when Alfie researches Meg Shelton, he discovers a lot of strange stories about the ‘Fylde Hag’ who died in 1705, mostly about her ability to transform herself into various animals and objects, but this is not how Meg appears to him. Why do you think Weston creates this disconnect between the folklore and Alfie’s ‘real’ experiences?

4. Weston obviously enjoys subverting stereotypes, as can be seen by his depiction of Selena. She looks like a story-book witch, with her long black hair, pointy nose and wart but, in reality, she is a victim. Meg - the real witch - defies convention. Why do you think Weston upends our expectations in this way?

5. Although she is terrifying and poses a real danger to Alfie and those he loves, Meg is actually quite a sympathetic character. Weston treads a fine line, eliciting contradictory emotions in both Alfie and the reader, so that we fear for Meg as much as we fear her. How does he do this?

6. If you were casting a film version of The Witching Stone, which actors would you choose to play the different characters? Why have you selected them?
7. The Witching Stone is part-comedy, part-horror, which makes it quite unusual. What effect do you think this has on your experience as a reader?

8. The legend of Meg Shelton is well-known in Lancashire: you can visit her grave in Woodplumpton and read its inscription for yourself. Are there any legends local to you that could inspire a story like this one?

9. The philosopher Carl Jung maintained that people could be divided into twelve archetypes, including the hero, the outlaw, the jester, etc. Another key archetype is the sage, who represents truth and wisdom and who, in literature, often takes the form of a teacher or librarian. In The Witching Stone, Hannah is the sage: she’s a wise old woman, a retired university lecturer and local historian. How does Weston use this character to convey important information to the reader?

10. Alfie’s dad obviously tries hard: he attempts to talk to Alfie about difficult subjects such as contraception and self-harm, even when it’s clear that Alfie would really rather he didn’t. Do you think he’s a good parent?

11. In fiction - ranging from fairy tales to Shakespeare’s plays - forests are enchanted places, full of secrets and magic. They are certainly a staple of the horror genre, where the supernatural thrives amongst the trees. Hunter’s Lodge, where Edgar is buried, is situated in the Forest of Bowland. How do you think this setting adds to the reader’s (and Alfie’s) sense of growing unease?
12. Do you think Alfie’s relationship with Mia has a future?

13. The way women are treated has obviously changed a lot since the 1700s, and this is particularly apparent when we compare the reactions to Sophie’s pregnancy to Meg’s. Whereas Meg faced judgement from everyone around her, and was not allowed to make her own decisions, Sophie’s experience is very different. Why do you think Weston chose to include this detail in the story?

14. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Mia is a young carer. How does this information enrich our understanding of her character?

15. Hannah reminds Alfie that Meg’s murder ‘happened at a time when one of the easiest ways to silence a difficult woman was to denounce her as a witch.’ She gives Alfie some sound advice: simply to ask Meg what she wants. Why do you think it matters that Meg is given a voice?

Learn more about Meg Shelton: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meg_Shelton