

## Literature Circle Guide to *Shakespeare's Secret* by Elise Broach

### Book Summary

When Hero starts sixth grade at a new school, she's less concerned about the literary origins of her Shakespearean name than about the teasing she's sure to suffer because of it. So she has the same name as a girl in a book by a dusty old author; Hero is simply not interested in the connections. But that's just the thing: Suddenly connections are cropping up all over, and odd characters and uncertain pasts are exactly what fascinate Hero. There's a mysterious diamond hidden in her new house, a curious woman next door who seems to know an awful lot about it, and then, well, then there's Shakespeare. Not to mention Danny Cordova, only the most popular boy in school. Is it all in keeping with her namesake's origin, or just much ado about nothing? Hero, being Hero, is determined to figure it out.

### Author Information

Elise Broach lives with her family in Easton, Connecticut, where she writes, reviews books for the library newsletter, and is active in town government. This is her first novel for young people.

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### Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Hero is named after a character in a play. What is the name of this play? Who wrote this play?  
**On page 8, the narrator explains that Hero is named for a character in the play *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare.**
2. What expression does Mrs. Roth use that makes Danny think of his mother?  
**On page 194, Hero refers to a hiding place as a 'finding place' and explains to Danny that she heard the expression from Mrs. Roth.**
3. Whose initials do Hero and Mrs. Roth believe they have found on the back of the Pembroke pendant?  
**On page 89, Hero realizes the initials on the back of the Pembroke falcon are AB for Anne Boleyn, not AE as she initially thought.**
4. Why is Hero late to class on the first day of school? Whom has she taken the time to help?  
**On pages 22 and 23, Hero helps a little boy named Aaron to his classroom, which he is struggling to locate.**

5. What is the connection between the Murphy diamond and Arthur Murphy? Briefly explain how it came to be in his possession.  
**On page 31, Mrs. Roth explains to Hero that Arthur Murphy came to possess the Murphy diamond through his marriage to Eleanor, who was English and who inherited the jewel from a reclusive aunt.**
6. What advice does Beatrice give Hero about fitting in at a new school? Do you agree with this advice? If you were Beatrice, what advice would you give Hero about making friends?  
**On page 157, Beatrice says, “You need a way in. Just one person. I know you think they either hate you or they like you but that’s not how it works. You just need one person to let you in, the right person, and then the rest is easy.” Look for answers to the question that demonstrate an understanding that Hero lacks self-esteem and is a chronic worrier.**
7. Imagine you are going to hide one valuable item in your house. What item would you hide? Where would you hide it? What hint would you leave behind to help the right people find the hidden item?  
**Answers will vary but should indicate that the reader recognizes the connection between the diamond, its hiding place, and the poem that is the clue to its location.**
8. Reread the poem by Dylan Thomas on page 75. Then, reread the conversation on page 183 in which Danny and Hero discuss the meaning of the poem, particularly the line “rage against the dying of the light.” Do you believe the “dying of the light” refers to darkness, to death, or to something else?  
**In the conversation, Hero guesses “dying of the light” might refer to death; Danny wonders whether the expression refers to something that fights the night—like a light. This connection ultimately leads to the discovery of the Murphy Diamond in a light fixture. Readers should feel free to interpret the poem liberally as long as their answers address the notion of a dying light.**
9. Why do you think Danny chose to send the Murphy diamond to his mother in California? Do you support his decision to send the diamond away without asking Mrs. Roth and Hero? What would you have done if you were Danny?  
**On pages 209-211, Danny explains to Hero and Mrs. Roth that he sent the diamond to his mother, a struggling actress. He reasons that since he, Hero, and Mrs. Roth would have turned in the diamond anyway, he might as well give it away to someone who needs the money, like his mother. Readers who support this decision will have to argue that Danny’s act of love for his mother outweighs his betrayal of Mrs. Roth, Hero, and the legal owner of the diamond: Mr. Murphy’s insurance company.**
10. On page 5, the narrator explains that Hero’s walls are bare. What is the author trying to tell the reader about Hero by describing her walls this way? Name one item you have hanging on your wall, and explain what this item says about you.

Presumably, the author intends the blank walls to be a metaphor. Hero is a tabula rasa searching for an identity. By way of contrast, Beatrice, who Hero envies for being confident and full of personality, has covered her walls with posters.

11. On page 6, Hero thinks, “Every school had its own customs and fashions.” In your own words, explain the difference between fashions and customs. Name one thing in your life that is a custom and one thing that is a fashion.

**The full paragraph reads, “She thought of what lay ahead: figuring out the lockers, the right clothing to wear, the acceptable food to pack for lunch. Every school had its own fashions and customs and if she wanted to blend in, she never had long to figure out what they were.” Essentially, the narrator has provided hints about what customs (what to pack for lunch) and fashion (what to wear) might mean. Based on this sentence, a simplistic but adequate distinction might be that customs relate to what someone does while fashion relates to what someone wears.**

12. Reread the author’s note on pages 244 and 245. List one piece of evidence that suggests Edward de Vere was the real author of Shakespeare’s plays and one piece of evidence that suggests he was not. Do you think Edward de Vere could have been the real author of Shakespeare’s plays?

**The author lists the following facts as evidence suggesting Edward de Vere was William Shakespeare: His bible was marked with passages corresponding with key verses in the plays; his nickname was Spear shaker; similarities also exist between poetry attributed to Shakespeare and poetry published by de Vere. The single piece of evidence offered in rebuttal is the fact that several of Shakespeare’s plays appear to have been written after de Vere’s death in 1604.**

13. On page 156, Mr. Netherfield tells Hero, “Sometimes the best way to defend one’s honor is to simply behave honorably.” Using evidence from the text, describe an event in the story in which you think a character behaves honorably. **There are a number of examples of characters behaving honorably that readers may cite. On page 54, Hero defends Aaron as he is being teased by several older boys; on page 103, Danny explains that he was once suspended for pushing a teacher who had picked on a girl; on page 164, Danny breaks into the school to erase something written about Hero in the boy’s bathroom; on page 35, Mrs. Roth explains to Hero that Mr. Murphy faked the theft of the diamond to raise the money needed for expensive medical treatment for his wife; and, on page 237, Anna returns the diamond Danny sent her in the mail. Finally, there is the example of Anne Boleyn, who accepted her execution without accusing anyone else or admitting guilt. While many of these examples involve a character breaking a rule or a law, each did so arguably in pursuit of a greater, honorable good.**

14. On page 119, Mrs. Netherfield explains that Hero is brave, gentle, and faithful, and therefore like her namesake. Do you agree with this statement? Choose one of these traits and explain why the trait you have chosen does or does not describe Hero Netherfield.

**An example of Hero being brave might be her defense of Aaron as mentioned in the suggested answer to Question 13. Likewise, she exhibits gentleness through her friendship to Aaron and to Mrs. Roth. She is also faithful to Mrs. Roth, even when she discovers Mrs. Roth has not disclosed everything about her past.**

15. Now that you have finished the story, think about the title of the book and about William Shakespeare. Do you think the author chose an appropriate title for her book? In your opinion, what was Shakespeare's secret? Hint: Remember that the word "secret" does not always mean something you keep or hide from other people.

**Readers would be factually correct to say that Shakespeare's secret was his uncertain identity—that he might actually have been Edward de Vere. However, look for answers that examine "secret" as a synonym for "method" or "trick." On page 241, Mrs. Roth says, "That's the real mystery isn't it? Not whether he was a common merchant or the queen's son, but how he could understand so much about human nature." In that sense, Shakespeare's secret—as articulated by Mrs. Roth—is left a mystery.**

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-9; Synthesis: 10-12; Evaluation: 13-15.*

## Activities

1. Imagine that Mrs. Roth and Hero are correct that Edward de Vere is actually the son of Queen Elizabeth. Using the timeline in the back of the book, build a family tree that includes the following people: Elizabeth, Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and Edward de Vere. You will get bonus points if you correctly add other important historical figures to your timeline.  
**The timeline appears on pages 247 and 248.**
2. Near the end of the story, Mrs. Roth writes a letter to her daughter, Anna, in California. How do you think that letter begins? Remembering how Mrs. Roth speaks, write the first three sentences of that letter. Be sure to mention Danny!  
**Answers will vary.**
3. Hero and Mrs. Roth enjoy doing crossword puzzles together. Create a simple crossword puzzle using names, places, and key words from the story. Examples

might be diamond, Hero, and play. After you have written clues for each word, show the puzzle to a friend and see if he or she can solve it.  
**Answers will vary.**