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# JUST FLESH & BLOOD

## Jane Caro



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

*Just Flesh & Blood* is the final volume in Jane Caro's historical trilogy that traces the life of Queen Elizabeth I. As she lies on her deathbed, Elizabeth replays the pivotal moments of her life, grappling with decisions made during this time. Filled with overwhelming regret and isolation, she nevertheless finds strength and peace as she is flooded with memories. Foremost in her mind, though, is the painful imagining of her mother's execution, and her relinquishment of love and marriage in the name of duty.

*Just Flesh & Blood* is a personal account of the last Tudor, giving enormous insight into the challenges faced by female monarchs and the love a queen has for her people above all else.

**THEMES**

- Isolation
- Loneliness
- Regret
- Friendship
- Leadership
- Guilt
- Responsibility

**WRITING STYLE**

*Just Flesh & Blood* begins with a powerful third person prologue depicting the beheading of Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother. The remainder of the text is told from Elizabeth's first person point of view, switching between present tense and past tense as she reflects on her life, both before becoming queen and during her reign. Throughout the novel, Jane Caro interweaves the queen's innermost thoughts with well-researched and detailed historical facts, creating an engaging and extremely personal story. The writing style reflects the language of the period, yet is very accessible to young adult and more capable upper primary readers. It includes excellent description and beautifully nuanced scenes, allowing readers to develop a genuine sense of empathy.

**STUDY NOTES**

- *Just Flesh & Blood* begins with a prologue depicting Anne Boleyn's execution. Why do you think Jane Caro has started the novel in this way? Discuss the descriptive techniques and language features that make this scene so effective. Use excerpts to support your ideas.
- How has Jane Caro used pace and mood in the prologue? Why are these devices pivotal to the prologue's success?
- Why does Elizabeth say that 'facing death, I am more my father's daughter than my mother's' (p. 9)?

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- Elizabeth speaks about the sins she has committed throughout her life. What are these sins, and why are they of concern to her on her deathbed?
- Throughout most of the text, Elizabeth refuses to leave the cushions on the floor. Why is she so against going to lie in her bed? What does this reveal about her nature?
- Why does Elizabeth say that ‘the loss of a woman’s hair is the mark of her shame’ (p. 17)?
- Elizabeth says that ‘no matter how old we become it seems we never outgrow the need for our mother’ (p. 20). Write a reflection in response to this assertion.
- Throughout Elizabeth’s dying days, she speaks of the ‘flickering light’ (p. 24) in her room and ‘the beauty of [the] simple posy’ that hits her with an ‘intensity that almost hurts’ (p. 24). How do such details bring the reader and Elizabeth closer to the solemnity of the setting?
- Lying on the cushions, Elizabeth looks at the flowers and says ‘a petal falls from a rose in the vase on the mantel and I feel it like a blow’ (p. 25). With reference to this, discuss how flowers are used as a motif throughout *Just Flesh & Blood*.
- How does Robin Dudley help Elizabeth feel ‘less like a queen and more like a flesh-and-blood woman’ (p. 25)? How does this notion of being ‘just flesh and blood’ pervade the text? Discuss the novel’s title with reference to the themes and messages in the text. Why is Elizabeth so determined to be recognised as a ‘flesh-and-blood woman’ as well as a queen?
- Why, when thinking about her refusal to marry Robin, does Elizabeth say ‘no wonder I regret and I do not regret in equal measure’ (p. 29)?
- When visiting the troops at Tilbury, Elizabeth says, ‘I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king’ (pp. 39/40). How does this prove her strength as a leader to the men gathered there?
- Why does Robin’s untimely death bring Elizabeth face to face with her own mortality? What impact does his death have on her?
- Elizabeth desperately seeks her father’s good opinion, but never seems to receive it. What impact does this have on her life? In a reflection, compare Elizabeth’s relationship with her father with the relationship you share with yours.
- Discuss the relevance of Elizabeth’s motto ‘always the same’ in *Just Flesh & Blood*.
- How has Jane Caro allowed readers to infer and visualise in *Just Flesh & Blood*? Why is it important that readers are given this opportunity?
- Discuss the circular structure of *Just Flesh & Blood*, as well as the use of flashbacks. Write a reflection of your own life that uses the flashback technique.

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- Using a suitable graphic organiser, compare your understanding of Elizabeth the woman with Elizabeth the queen.
- Using evidence from the text, create character profiles that compare and contrast the roles that Robin Dudley and his stepson, the Earl of Essex (Robert Devereux), play in Elizabeth's life.
- Why are the faces Elizabeth sees as she remembers her past all young?
- Discuss Elizabeth's comments that 'decay is followed by renewal – it is the natural way of things' and 'change is frightening and unsettling, but it also carries with it new chances' (p. 82).
- How does the Earl of Essex represent the sexist and racist views of the Elizabethan era?
- Why does Elizabeth relate to Robert Cecil, regarding him as an 'outsider' (p. 89), with an understanding of what it's like to feel isolated?
- Isolation is a key theme in *Just Flesh & Blood*. In what ways does Elizabeth feel isolated during her life?
- Why does Elizabeth say that her 'heart swells with pity for so many, but particularly for the women' (p. 109)?
- Who are the important women in Elizabeth's life? Create an annotated sociogram to show their connections and significance to Elizabeth's life.
- How would you describe the relationship Elizabeth has with her sister, Mary?
- Why does Elizabeth speak of her cousin Catherine Carey with equal measures of respect and sadness? Why does she blame Catherine's children for 'slowly [draining] her [vigour]' (p. 121)? What does this reveal about Elizabeth's views towards the role of women during this time, particularly that of motherhood?
- In the role of Elizabeth, write the letter to Catherine when she is about to leave England with her family. (See pp. 126/127.)
- Why does Elizabeth say, 'I long to die, yet I am afraid of what may await me when I do' (p. 129)?
- What does Elizabeth mean when she says 'sons of queens cause their mothers nothing but heartache and, too often, deadly danger' (p. 161)?
- Compare the storyline of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* with Elizabeth's life, especially with reference to the scene described on p. 166. Discuss Elizabeth's sentiment that Shakespeare was able to 'find within him the sympathy and understanding of my poor sex' (p. 166). Alternatively, compare Elizabeth's reign with Shakespeare's *Richard II*.
- Why does Elizabeth refer to herself as 'Patience on a monument' (p. 167)?
- With reference to *Just Flesh & Blood*, respond to the following statement: 'To be a king and wear a crown is a thing more glorious to them that see it than it is pleasant to them that bear it' (p. 205).

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- In what ways does Elizabeth see her womanly ability to love as something that sets her apart from kings? (See p. 207.)
- Elizabeth says, 'I am alone, and I have always been alone' (p. 207). In the role of Elizabeth, share in a diary entry or monologue why she feels this way.
- What does Elizabeth mean when she says 'there is no one left who loves Elizabeth. Those who remain love a queen' (p. 207)?
- Elizabeth speaks about a phantom chain that weighs her down – a chain of 'melancholy and isolation' that forces her to think of 'every link and every sin' (p. 208). Who are the links in her chain?
- What role did Sir Walter Raleigh play in Elizabeth's life? Research more about his explorations and contribution to Elizabeth's reign.
- Discuss the symbolism of Elizabeth's coronation ring. Why is she so distressed that it has been cut off?
- Elizabeth wonders if her father would have been proud of her. In light of this, evaluate Elizabeth's achievements.
- Why does Elizabeth say, 'I am dying at the time of God's choosing and not of any man's' (p. 273)?
- Why does Elizabeth feel the burden of her mother having lost her life for the 'sin of creating mine' (p. 280)?
- *Just Flesh & Blood* starts and finishes with the life of Anne Boleyn. What does this say about the role she plays in Elizabeth's life, even though she dies when Elizabeth is so young?
- What is the significance of the family portrait commissioned by Henry VIII in which Elizabeth defiantly wears her mother's pendant? Why does Elizabeth say that to her father, she will always be 'just a girl' (p. 287)?
- Study a family tree of the Tudors to help visualise the structure of this family <https://www.britroyals.com/Tudortree.asp>.
- Although set many centuries ago, the theme of sexism is still relevant today. If Elizabeth was alive today, how would she advocate for women's rights in the #MeToo campaign?

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

Many years ago now, I set out to write the story of Elizabeth Tudor's life from her point of view. I wanted to explore how it must have felt to BE her. I always envisaged a trilogy: the first book being about her early life as a despised and neglected princess (*Just a Girl*), the second about the great crisis of her rule – the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots (*Just a Queen*) – and the third about her whole life as she looks back on it from her deathbed (*Just Flesh & Blood*).

In *Just Flesh & Blood* I wanted to explore what it might feel like to be a great and revered (but lonely and isolated) queen reflecting on the extraordinary life

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she has lived and the people she has known. In the end, I wanted her to move beyond the pomp and ceremony, the great events of history and – as a human being, made of mere flesh and blood, just like the rest of us – realise that in her end was her beginning and that it is love and loss that make us who we are, much more than triumph.

The consistent motivation I have had writing the trilogy is to find the person behind the monarch and the legend, to reveal the girl and the woman beneath the crown. Women can be great, regardless of barriers, as Elizabeth's life proved, but we are all human.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jane Caro is an author, columnist, broadcaster, advertising writer, documentary maker and social commentator. She has published ten books, including a memoir, *Plain-Speaking Jane*, as well as *Just a Girl* and *Just a Queen*, the first two novels in the Elizabeth Tudor trilogy. *Just Flesh & Blood* is the third and final book in the series.

Jane appears frequently on Q&A, *The Drum*, *Sunrise* and *Weekend Sunrise*. She has created and presented three documentary series for the ABC's *Compass*, with another in production. A frequent ad hoc columnist, she writes regular columns for *Sunday Life* and *Leadership Matters*.

Jane divides her time between Sydney and a cattle property in the Upper Hunter. She is married, with two daughters, a grandson and a granddaughter.