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### THE PLAY

England, 1606: a Catholic plot to blow up Parliament and the king with 36 barrels of gunpowder was foiled a few months before ... and just in the nick of time! The conspirators are in the Tower of London, being tortured and waiting to be hanged. Suspicion is in the air. It is a dangerous time for the truth.

**King James I** commands a play from **William Shagspeare** (Shag) about the Gunpowder Plot. It should tell the official version of the plot and have witches. Definitely witches.

The other members of **The King's Men**, Shag's acting troupe, are horrified and try to talk Shag out of it. A play about current events is a huge risk, and writing the wrong play could get them all imprisoned ... or worse.

Writing and rewriting the play, Shag can't resist delving further into the story of the plot. As he interviews surviving conspirators and questions government officials, he finds holes in the official story and challenges to his conscience.

Can Shag write a play that tells the truth and live? Can he write a play that tells a lie and live with himself?

# EQUIVOCATION

By Bill Cain  
Directed by Bill Rauch  
in the Kreeger Theater  
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## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



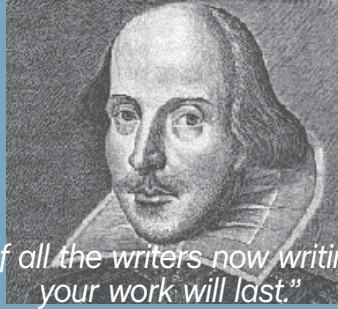
*"The great thing about theater is somehow it all works out."*

**B**ill Cain grew up in New York City. In high school Cain used to watch professional plays from the back rows for \$2 or \$3 and watched Shakespeare in Central Park for free. He estimates he watched 80 plays over those four years. Through theater he discovered he lived in a wide, wide world.

He graduated from Boston College in 1970 and helped found the Boston Shakespeare Company. He was its artistic director for seven seasons. As a playwright, his first major play, *Stand-Up Tragedy*, was inspired by his time spent teaching in New York Public Schools. He has also written for network and cable television.

In addition to being a playwright, screenwriter and teacher, Cain is a Jesuit priest.

## MEET WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



*"Of all the writers now writing, your work will last."*  
– Cecil

**A**lthough William Shakespeare is the most famous Western playwright, we know very little about his life. He was born in 1564 in the village of Stratford-upon-Avon, England. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582 and had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet (who died in childhood) and Judith.

Historians believe that Shakespeare wrote many of his sonnets, histories and comedies during the 1590s, as well as *Romeo and Juliet*. The rest of his plays were written between 1599 and 1612, and performed at the Globe Theatre and the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I.

Shakespeare retired to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and he died in 1616. He is the author of 154 sonnets, 39 plays, and several poems

### ACTING COMPANIES

Shakespeare was an actor, playwright and **shareholder** in the Lord Chamberlain's Men. This acting company later became the King's Men. *Equivocation* depicts their squabbles and brotherhood. This production of *Equivocation* is special because the actors in it also belong to an acting company (from Oregon Shakespeare Festival) and understand the special bonds within a company.

**shareholder** – one who shares in the profits and costs of a company and sometimes has decision-making power

## ELIZABETHAN THEATER

**T**he first English theater was built in 1576. Before this time theater companies traveled to perform in towns or performed in the yards of inns. Theaters were often closed to prevent the spread of the plague, an illness that killed millions across Europe and Asia.

Productions featured few costumes or set pieces. All actors were male, with young boys playing female roles.

Acting companies often depended on patrons. Patrons were wealthy people or groups (including religious organizations) who gave their money and reputation to support art. This practice continues today. ●

*"Dozens of cannons – all fired at the same time. How do we do that without blowing up the theater?"* –Sharpe and Shag



**The Globe:** Home to the Lord Chamberlain's Men/King's Men through the end of Shakespeare's career. The wealthy sat in the covered seats on the top two levels, while the poor, called groundlings, stood in the pit in front of the stage. The Globe burned down in 1613 because of a cannon shot during a performance of *Henry VIII* and was rebuilt.

### ART: OUR FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

Though we understand many plays, books and works of art are fiction, they do contribute to our understanding of current and historical events. People have used art for centuries as a way of demonstrating dreams, sharing important ideas and sometimes swaying public opinion.

When we study past times, we take into account the art of the time to tell the story. Sometimes art, like painting on cave walls, is one of our only ways of understanding a time.

Ben Cameron, a noted speaker on the arts today, often calls the arts humankind's "family photographs." He says, "If we do our job right, they will live and breathe as testaments to who we were, what we thought, what we felt."

Shag wants the truth of the Gunpowder Plot. What could be the consequences of Shag writing his play based on lies?



**Activity:** Choose five modern works of art: books, plays, film, music, etc. If a future person looked at this art to understand our time, what would they believe was important in our time? How accurate is this?

# THE GUNPOWDER PLOT



A drawing of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators. Listen for their names during the play.

At the center of *Equivocation* is the Gunpowder Plot: a Catholic plot to blow up the entire English government, including King James and his family, in 1605. The plot was foiled when guards stumbled on Guy Fawkes, who had been left in the House of Lords' cellar to light the fuse on 36 barrels of gunpowder. Fawkes gave the names of the conspirators under torture.

They were either killed immediately by soldiers or convicted of treason and executed. Traitors were often drawn and quartered. The prisoner was hanged, cut down before death, then castrated, disemboweled, beheaded and cut into four pieces. The remains were often displayed as a warning.



Modern Guy Fawkes Day bonfire.

To celebrate his survival, King James ordered a giant bonfire with an effigy (dummy) of the pope on top. Today, November 5 is still Guy Fawkes Day in England. The effigy is now of Fawkes.

During his reign, King James persecuted Catholics throughout England. In 1604, he made all Catholic priests leave England and made Catholics enemies of the state. By killing James, Catholics might have hoped to get a Catholic ruler on the throne.

Not all historians believe the Gunpowder Plot was a Catholic plot. Some think the conspirators were set up by Sir Robert Cecil (the king's advisor) to make King James further persecute English Catholics. A number of holes in the story are presented in *Equivocation*. ●



**Activity:** With this understanding of the Gunpowder Plot, analyze the meaning of this study guide's cover illustration.

## WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

*"Your world has rules – so does mine. Comedies end in weddings; tragedies in deaths; histories in battles."* –Shag

Some of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies are mentioned in *Equivocation*

**Hamlet:** Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, tries to avenge his father's murder. Hamlet is believed to be named for Shakespeare's son. One character, Polonius, was based on Sir Robert

Cecil's father, William Cecil. This causes tension between Cecil and Shag in *Equivocation*.

**King Lear:** King Lear goes mad after giving his kingdom to his two evil daughters and disowning his good daughter. Act III, Scene 4 is rehearsed in *Equivocation*.

**Macbeth (The Scottish Play):** With the ascent of King James of Scotland to the English throne, London culture became obsessed with the Scottish. Macbeth and his wife murder the king in a quest for power. According to theatrical legend, it is bad luck to say "Macbeth" in the theater, so it is referred to as "The Scottish Play." ●

# WHAT IS EQUIVOCATION?

**E**quivocation is the use of words or phrases with several different meanings to deceive or mislead. According to playwright Bill Cain, equivocation is, in its purest form, “a desperate search in impossible times to tell the real truth.”

Cain uses a quote by Miep Gies, one of the people who hid Anne Frank and her family during the Holocaust, to illustrate equivocation. Gies used to say, “We are hiding no one.” These words were true: they were indeed hiding many, not one. The words led people to believe they were not hiding anyone. This truth would protect the Frank family and Gies’ soul and conscience. ●

**a!** **Activity:** Equivocation is a fine balance. Who do you often hear or see equivocating? When would it be important to equivocate? How could you equivocate in these situations?

## EQUIVOCATION INSPIRATION

In 2004 Bill Cain visited the Tower of London, the prison where traitors were held. He saw where tortured prisoners carved their names and final messages into cell walls. He also saw a sign from the British government by a rack (a torture device) saying, “No prisoner was ever tortured in the Tower of London because of religion.” History shows that people were jailed because of religious persecution. The people may have been officially jailed or tortured for another offense, but their religion made them a target. He wondered: what is the cost of a government lie? The seed for *Equivocation* was planted. ●

## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

### What do you think and why?

**ONE.** WHO WRITES HISTORY?

**TWO.** AT WHAT COST WOULD YOU SEEK THE TRUTH?

**THREE.** HOW DO EQUIVOCATION AND TRUTH RELATE?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

*Complete Works of Shakespeare* by William Shakespeare

### On the Web

Gunpowder Plot: [gunpowder-plot.org](http://gunpowder-plot.org)

Shakespeare Biography & Scholarship: [folger.edu/content/discover-shakespeare/](http://folger.edu/content/discover-shakespeare/)

Shakespeare’s Works: [shakespeare.mit.edu/](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/)

Elizabethan Theater: [academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/sh\\_th.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/sh_th.html)

Interview with Bill Cain: [youtube.com/watch?v=7LeKBj7lapo](http://youtube.com/watch?v=7LeKBj7lapo)

### Museums

Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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