

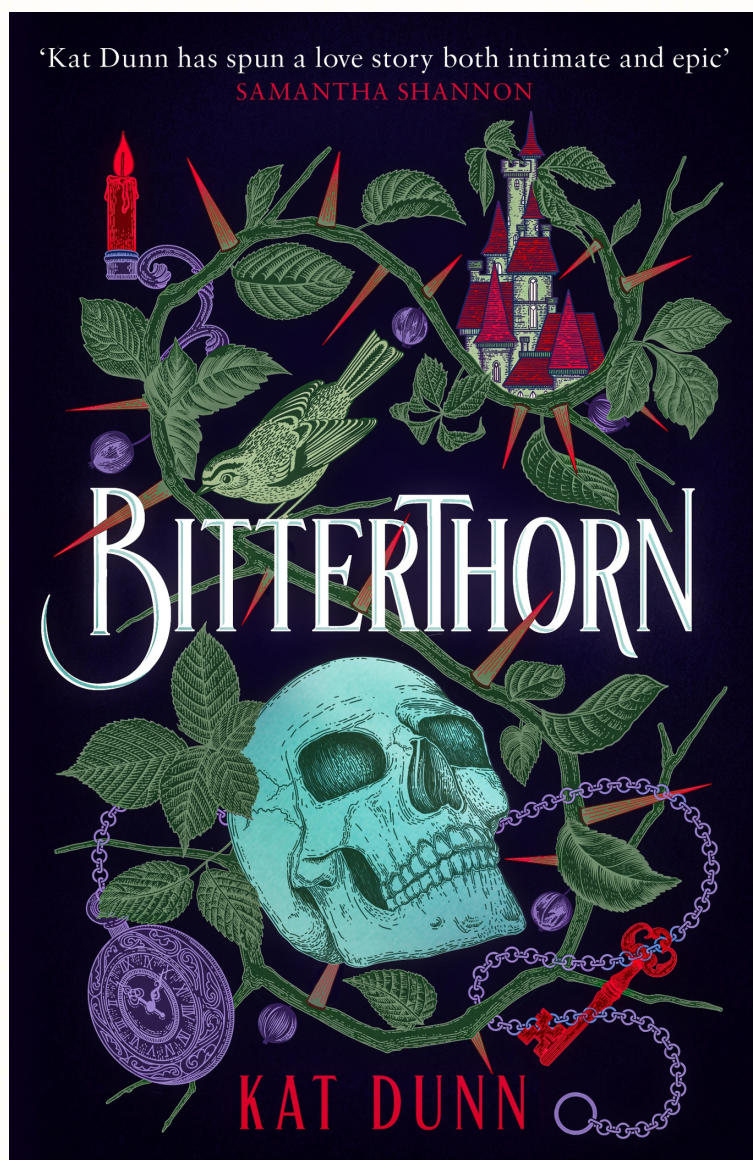
NERO

BOOK AWARDS

Reading Guides

Children's Fiction Shortlist

Bitterthorn by Kat Dunn



Kat Dunn grew up in London and has lived in Japan, Australia and France. She has a BA in Japanese from SOAS and an MA in English from Warwick. She's written about mental health for *Mind* and the *Guardian* and worked as a translator for Japanese television. She lives in London.

'A beautifully written, atmospheric, sapphic YA fantasy with its roots in fairytale and gothic fiction, Bitterthorn is at once fresh and timeless.' - **Children's Fiction judges, 2023 Nero Book Awards**

'I was a dead thing, in my heart. I knew it like a poison I drank each night and purged each morning. I knew that I was isolated, but I didn't understand my loneliness until I knew what I would give to escape it. What I would be willing to do.'

Mina has always felt alone. The daughter of the Duke of Schwartzstein, her father quickly remarried after her mother died but his new wife is too busy finding suitable matches for her own daughters to pay much attention to Mina. Now a young woman, Mina spends her days trudging the woods on the edge of their town of Blumwald. But in the depths of the wood, in a monstrous castle, a witch is getting ready to claim a companion as she does once every generation. When Mina offers herself up and finds herself stranded with the seductive witch in her castle, she uncovers a secret about the companions that have come before her which puts her own life in danger.

Inspired by classic fairy tales like *Beauty and the Beast*, Kat Dunn has created a darkly romantic, fairy-tale world setting for readers to escape into. *Bitterthorn* is a fantastical read with a romantic, queer love story at its centre.

A story of two outsiders finding each other, *Bitterthorn* speaks to the universal human fears of loneliness and loss, the scariest monsters of all.

Discussion points:

- As the novel progresses, we learn of the witch's own story. Do you feel that her own experiences justify her taking a companion from Schwartzstein every fifty years?
- After some time at the witch's castle, Mina goes back to Schwartzstein but returns again to the castle. Why do you think she chooses to go back?
- Do you think that the character of Wolf is a loyal friend and servant to the witch, or are Wolf's motives more sinister?