

# ***Abyssinia***

**Ursula Dubosarsky**

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Like many of Dubosarsky's works this book is layered with meanings that are more enjoyably responded to by students when they have some background knowledge of the issues and allusions used in the story.

## **Exploring background to the novel**

### *The Genre – Psychological Thriller*

- The cover describes this book as a psychological thriller. The thriller genre usually deals with a crime or mystery and the notion of a psychological thriller implies that the mystery is located in the psychology of the characters. Have students research the features of the genre of psychological thriller in novel and film forms. Encourage them to share their responses to any books or films they have encountered in this genre.
- The psychological thriller is a relatively recent genre that was given impetus by the developments in psychology at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The name usually associated with this development is Sigmund Freud. Have students research some of his ideas about how the adult's personality is formed and shaped from childhood experiences.
- Freud is also associated with developments in hypnosis. Have students research the practices of hypnosis and the ways in has been used in psychiatry as well as in entertainment contexts.
- Have students research the ancient philosopher, Pythagoras and his notion of reincarnation. Explain that some people today also believe in reincarnation although not all agree with Pythagoras about souls transmigrating into animals. Have students speculate about the implications for the transmigration of a soul. Could the soul take with it memories and knowledge from the previous body or bodies? What might be the implications of that if it were possible?

### *Time shifts*

- This psychological thriller depends upon a shift in time and place. Have students recall any time travel stories they have encountered, or stories where dual worlds exist in the same time period. Encourage students to consider how the characters in these stories shift between the different times and places.
- Encourage discussion about why authors might choose to present stories that move between different times and different worlds. What ideas about the nature of our existence are suggested by such settings?

### Abyssinia

- Abyssinia is the previous name of the African country, Ethiopia. Have students examine a map of Africa and locate this country. Then research its geographical, historical and social features. Encourage students to explore colonial ideas about Africa and its peoples and the ways in which Europeans colonised what was thought to be primitive or wild places. What ideas are suggested by this setting for the story?
- The term Abyssinia also appears in a poem by Coleridge called Kubla Khan. Read the poem aloud to the class and ask them to respond. Focus particularly on the lines that relate to the Abyssinian maid.

*A damsel with a dulcimer*

*In a vision once I saw:*

*It was an Abyssinian maid,*

*And on her dulcimer she played,*

*Singing of Mount Abora.*

*Could I revive within me*

*Her symphony and song,*

*To such delight 'twould win me,*

*That with music loud and long,*

*I would build that dome in air,*

*That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!*

Encourage students to discuss what this enigmatic image suggests about the exotic maid. Have them draw the Abyssinian maid as they imagine her. Encourage discussion of the ideas suggested by these images.

### Responding to the novel

- Before reading the novel have students examine the cover design and discuss the ideas and issues that it raises.

- Note particularly the costume of the characters depicted and ask students to speculate as to the period in which the story might be set. Note the post-mark date – 1891 and discuss the implications of this image.
- What does the dolls house suggest? Note that this image is repeated on the title page.
- Examine the contents page. Note that the chapters are framed by the newspaper articles separated by exactly one year, and by two sections entitled 'The Beginning' and 'The End'. Point out that the story is then divided into two parts – 'The Dolls House' and 'Abyssinia'. Point out that the chapters in the first part are all identified by titles that indicate some part of the house, while the chapters in the second part are identified by numbers. Have students speculate on how this structure might relate to the story.
- Examine the two framing excerpts from the Gazette. Have students explore the issues raised in these sections and discuss how the first one positions the reader in relation to the story.
- Examine the two framing pieces about beginnings and endings. What are the connections between these two pieces?
- Note the inscription about the lost child that precedes the first part. Encourage students to discuss the implications of this inscription. Have students recount any personal experiences when they recall being lost – or stories of lost children in other contexts, fictional and non-fictional. Why does the idea of a lost child evoke such emotive responses?
- Have students read the first part of the novel, recording their responses to the parents and the children as they read. Encourage discussion of their responses.
- Have students examine the chapter in the conservatory where Sarah comes into contact with Dr Fleet. Ask students to imagine that they have been asked to write this episode as a script for a film. Have them examine the features that would need to be highlighted to build up the suspense of the mystery. Allow time for them to develop scripts and/or storyboards for this section of the story. Encourage discussion of the issues raised.
- Have students examine the extract from The Orange Tree that precedes the second part of the novel. What are the issues raised? How do these issues relate to the story so far?
- Have students read the second part of the story set in Abyssinia. How does this part of the narrative connect with the events and characters of this first part?
- Encourage them to discuss their responses to Miss Lothian. Have students re-examine chapter two where the narrator introduces Miss Lothian in a way that surrounds her with mystery.
- *Miss Lothian had to behave in a very particular way. Mary had noticed this. Everyone expected her to be sensible and helpful and even*

*grateful. It was because she lived in their house. Who was Miss Lothian? Nobody knew. Mary didn't even know her first name. Everyone called her Miss Lothian.*

Ask students to consider what the possible answers to the question asked by the narrator might be.

- Have students discuss the role of the whistle as a motif in the story. Encourage them to examine the moments that the whistle appears in the story and its significance at these moments.
- The murder of Julius Caesar is a somewhat unusual choice for two girls to make for a performance before their parents friends. Have students examine the historical events of the murder and the way in which Shakespeare presents it in his play – Julius Caesar. Then compare this with the way Dubosarsky employs it in this story. What ideas does it introduce into the story?
- Have students reread the final chapter when Dr Fleet and Miss Lothian depart in the carriage. How does this begin to resolve the story?
- Have students examine the final section of the story that returns to Gussie and the dolls house. How does this section contribute to the resolution?
- Dubosarsky repeats the mention of Grace as a 'very, very old lady with nothing to do but sit and gaze at the sea' and that she would always remember 'the dolls house' and 'tears would fill those old, old eyes.' Have students discuss why she does this and how this relates to the main ideas of her story.
- Dubosarsky passes quickly over the almost magical transformation of the parents. Have students speculate as to why she does this in this way, focussing more on Gussie's reaction to the lost doll.
- Have students use the idea of the lost child to develop their own story. They may wish to develop a short story using a similar thriller format or write in some other style. Allow time for the development of the story and for sharing the completed stories.