

THUNDERWITH TEACHING NOTES AND SOME GENERAL TEACHING NOTES

Thunderwith Blurb

At fourteen Lara feels completely alone after the death of her mother. She is an intruder in her father's new family, living away from all that has been familiar. How can she find acceptance and love in this harsh place? Will the hostile Gladwyn and her kids ever allow Lara to be part of the family she so longs for.

This bestselling novel for adolescents is a classic Australian story that has been translated into several languages, won awards in Australia and Europe and was also named a Best Book for Young Adults in United States. It has been adapted as a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie, which earned Judy Davis an Emmy Award nomination for her portrayal of Gladwyn. Entitled *The Echo of Thunder*, the movie also stars Lauren Hewett as Lara and Ernie Dingo as the storyteller Neil.

Questions

1. The issue of resilience and independence is a strong one here. Lara shows her strength and bravery in a number of incidents, such as driving the car when Gladwyn cuts her foot. Lara suffers bereavement and has to adjust to a new family, moving to a new area and going to a new school. What would you have done if faced with some of Lara's problems?
2. Gladwyn's treatment of Lara stems from her own insecurity. How do we know that she is 'good' underneath her ill-treatment of her stepdaughter?
3. The farm demands a lot of hard work. Do you think Gladwyn and Larry expect too much of their children?
4. Who was the most interesting character for you?
5. Do you know anyone like Gowd? How do you deal with a bully?

Activities

1. The dog Thunderwith is symbolic of a number of ideas in this book. Write your interpretation of what the dog represents for Lara.
2. There has been a film made of this book. Is there anything you think they might have had to change to make this book into a film? What scene would the film have opened with? Describe it and write a short 'script' for it. Look at examples of scripts to give you an idea of how to go about this.
3. Isolate a passage from the book and read it aloud. Discuss techniques the writer has used to achieve effects and make it 'work'.
4. Imagine if the book was written in the first person. Rewrite one section and see what it would mean in terms of meaning and 'tone'. Discuss tenses and their effect.
5. In order to convey information about a character, an author describes a particular person but also puts them in situations which show what they are like. How do we get to 'know' the children in this book? How does the author give us an idea of their different natures? Isolate passages which show us, rather than tell us, what these characters are like.

UNIT ACTIVITY 1: LANGUAGE USAGE

CURRICULUM AREA – LANGUAGE STUDIES

Prepare a unit on language usage for any two age groups addressed by Libby Hathorn novels. Isolate, from her books, examples of language usage, such as:

- a) figures of speech (e.g. simile, metaphor)
- b) writing techniques (e.g. rhyme, repetition, emphasis)
- c) devices (e.g. imagery)
- d) symbolism
- e) setting description

It might also be of interest to find references to poetry. In most of her books Libby either mentions someone who reads poetry, or quotes poetry itself. Her poetry anthology *All Along the River* (ABC Books) is a collection of many of her favourite Australian poems. And her literacy program Libby Hathorn's 100 Views encourages teachers to work with poetry by providing workshops. See www.100views.com.au

UNIT ACTIVITY 2: BOOK COVERS

CURRICULUM AREAS – ART & DESIGN

Examine the covers of Libby Hathorn's *Thunderwith*. There are several books in translation on her website too. You might like to look at other recent Libby Hathorn covers such as *Georgiana: Woman of Flowers* and *Fire Song* and picture storybook *Zahara's Rose*. Ask the class the following questions:

- a) Does the cover convey the emotional content as well as the factual content of the book?
- b) Would you have designed something differently? Design a cover of your own for one of Libby Hathorn's books. Take a recent book such as *Letters to a Princess* (ABC Books) *Georgiana: Woman of Flowers*, (Hachette) *Fire Song* (ABC Books) or *Zahara's Rose* (IP Kidz)
- c) Several of the YA novels have photographic cover illustrations. Others are illustrations by artists such as Ann James, Anna Pignataro, Peter Gouldthorpe and Greg Rogers. Discuss with students the various mediums used in cover illustration. Compare and contrast their effects on the reader.
- d) *The Blue Dress* contains short stories inspired by the painting on the cover. This was an Australia Post postage stamp painted by Brian Dunlop. Choose a painting you like and then have everyone in the class write a response to it – either a poem or a short story.

- e) Typography and lettering may be vastly different; for example, raised laminated letters are used by some of Libby's covers. Discuss and compare. Way Home has a torn paper theme across all the artist's fine artwork. Why might this be so?
- f) In Sky Sash So Blue features the artwork of African-American artist Benny Andrews, who uses both paint and fabric for his pictures. Do you think this cover is markedly different from Libby's other picture books? How has the artist made a focus on the sash? What is the mood of the cover?

UNIT ACTIVITY 3: THEMES AND ISSUES

CURRICULUM AREA - SOCIAL STUDIES

Discuss the themes which feature in Libby Hathorn's books:

- a) Rivalry, jealousy or bullying (Rift, Love Me Tender, Chrysalis, and Letters to a Princess): These are problems often encountered by children and teenagers, and could be a catalyst for dealing with situations at school. The issue of peer group pressure and being independent of others could also be discussed.
- b) Broken families (Rift, Love Me Tender, Letters to a Princess, Fire Song, Way Home): This could be a sensitive topic for many children, so discuss it in an oblique manner-that is, explain in a positive way that families are all different (some parents are single, others are separated or divorced; some children have lost parents and live with grandparents). Talk about the nature of families. What do the members of a family mean to each other?
- c) Grandma's Shoes and Sky Sash So Blue are both picture books which deal with loss, as well as hope, within the family. Both have been adapted as operas. Discuss different generations and begin to construct a family tree. Have each child interview someone in their family who they don't often talk to, such as a grandparent or even a sibling who lives away from home.
- d) Homelessness or child abuse (Feral Kid, Chrysalis, Fire Song): Discuss why homelessness occurs, what could be done about it, and how children escape from 'at risk' situations?
- e) Friendship (Looking out for Sampson, Friends and Secrets, Letters to a Princess,
- f) Georgiana :Woman of Flowers) Cheryl's awful behaviour in the first book, and Jessica losing her friend Josie and finding a new friend in the second, are both good discussion points for this topic.
- g) Love (Fire Song, Thunderwith, Valley under the Rock, Chrysalis). These books are about first love, and might inspire a discussion on the issue of choice and commitment for teenagers.
- h) Indigenous connection with the landscape (Thunderwith, Valley under the Rock, Chrysalis): The idea of a landscape's connection to the original 'custodians' of the land, the Aboriginal people, is frequently raised in Libby's books. Discuss this aspect of her works.

UNIT ACTIVITY 4: GENRES & WRITING STYLES

CURRICULUM AREA - WRITING

Discuss the use of different genres in Libby Hathorn's books:

- a) Expository writing: Read sections in the books where the author is conveying information. How does she do this in an imaginative way? For example, she often uses a range of different 'texts' to convey information in the same book (Letters to a Princess, Chrysalis, and Valley under the Rock).
- b) Letters: Letters to a Princess, Dear Venny, Dear Saffron (co-authored with Gary Crew)
- c) Diary : (Friends and Secrets, All About Anna, Love Me Tender).
- d) Use of narrative person, tense, perspective, tone or 'voice' (Fire Song, The Blue Dress).
- e) Humour: This is one technique which Libby has often used to develop her themes e.g. The Lenski Kids and Dracula. Discuss the stories you find amusing and why. Then discuss techniques used by writers to create humour (such as parody and irony). Which stories are funniest and why?
- f) Life stories and experiences: Children should learn that the real life is the stuff from which stories are made. Start by telling them some of the stories of Libby's life which are included in her books (see Libby Hathorn – Biography). Then explore with them some of their own memorable experiences, people they have known, etc.

UNIT ACTIVITY 5: GETTING TO KNOW AN AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

CURRICULUM AREA – LITERATURE STUDIES

Develop a unit on Australian literature using Libby Hathorn as your focus author. Develop both a library of primary and secondary resources, but also a program to study her works in depth.

- a) Search Libby's website www.libbyhathorn.com and her publisher's websites for further information to arrange for posters, bookmarks etc.
- b) Compare her works to those of other contemporary Australian writers, such as Garry Disher, Gary Crew, Libby Gleeson, Marlena Marchetta, Markus Zusak, Jackie French, Christine Harris or Glyn Parry. Have you noted any common issues, themes, settings or styles of writing in their works?
- c) Discuss Libby's writing style. Does it vary in different books? How?
- d) Do a character study on at least three of Libby's central characters, such as Ingrid from Fire Song, Dianne from Letters to a Princess, Vaughan from Rift, Alan from Love Me Tender or Lara from Thunderwith and Chrysalis.

- e) Discuss Libby's use of Australian settings in several of her books. Libby has said that after 35 years of writing about Australians in Australian settings, (due to a severe lack of children's books that reflect 'us' in our settings in her early days as teacher librarian,) she now feels free to set her books elsewhere. For example, *The Painter*, 2000, is about a young boy meeting Van Gough in the town of Arles, France. Why might this be so? Consider the publishing of Australian children's books over the past 25 to 35 years. How has it changed? Who buys the books? What are common features of books written for young adults? Why might this be so?

UNIT ACTIVITY 6: DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION

CURRICULUM AREA – DRAMA

Many of Libby's works have been adapted to stage and screen and she has also written some interactive stories.:the Weirdestop Series.

Use Libby Hathorn's works as impetus for dramatic activities:

- a) Libby has co-written, with Andrew Johnstone, a stage play based on of her picture storybook *The Tram to Bondi Beach* (Currency Press 2009). This drew on the Depression era of the 1930's and goes well beyond the original text. You might like to study this book for ideas. So even picture books can be used as a source for more complex plays.
- Take one of her works and develop a dramatic production from a scene or scenes. For example, *The Lenski Kids* and *Dracula* or *Way Home* are stories which children of any age could identify with.
- b) Picture storybooks *The Great Big Animal Ask* or junior novel *The Extraordinary Magics of Emma McDade* would make great puppet plays. Explore ideas with your class as to how you would tell it with music and puppetry.
- c) Many of Libby's works deal with emotions. Discuss the emotions being expressed in a particular story and then act them out in an improvised scene.
- d) Libby's picture storybook *Grandma's Shoes* was adapted as an opera in 2000 and had a 'season' in Sydney. The text of *Grandma's Shoes* is descriptive and lyrical but not poetry per se. Libby had to write a libretto which was rhymed throughout. She also added scenes not in the book e.g. *In the Hall of the Monkey King*. *Way Home* was adapted as a play and used modern music as a backdrop for the scenes on the street. *Love Me Tender* is also a piece which uses music to great effect. You could imagine it being very entertaining as a TV production. Write a script from a scene (such as Aunt Jess dancing with Ted for the first time), then use school video equipment to make a short film.
- e) What are the differences between a prose and a script version of the novel? Use one of the books to discuss to discuss the differing tasks as involved in constructing a piece of writing for text as opposed to performance. For example, imagine a film version of any of Libby's novels. Map out the structure of the story. What scenes might not translate well and would be left out of a film or theatrical production? Which characters might not be included?

Original Notes by Robyn Sheehan- Bright, updated by the author.