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THE WINTRISH GIRL

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Teachers' Notes

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ISBN: 978 0 7022 6563 1 / AUS \$17.99

Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	8
About the Author	8

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SYNOPSIS

Now that the War is over, a magical shroud surrounds the area in and around the town of Perianth, protecting it from evil Malevolence. Royal servant girl Penn is an outsider whose life is forever tied to that of her Knot-Sister, Seraphine, Princess of the Empire of Arylia. Bound by lore, Penn is unable to return to her home province of Midwinter, and her family. Her future is forever entwined with that of the soon-to-be Empress.

When the first Talisman Day since the War takes place, the children of Arylia are each allocated an object from the Casket of Fate that gives them special powers and reveals their destiny. No-one is more surprised than Penn when she too receives a Talisman, sparking fears that Malevolence is stirring once more.

In a quest filled with mystery, adventure and courage, *The Wintrish Girl* is a story about belonging, trust and fate, and the importance of friendship.

THEMES

- Belonging
- Identity
- Trust
- Family
- Fate
- Loneliness
- Bullying
- Problem-solving
- Magic

WRITING STYLE

The Wintrish Girl is the first book in the *Talismans of Fate* series. Written in third person, past tense, it integrates an elaborate succession of magical creatures, good and evil powers, and intricate portals between the nooks and crannies of Arylia. It is highly original and engaging, and middle readers will enjoy discovering this empire, with its many customs, lores, histories and hierarchies. Underlying the narrative are classic themes of belonging, identity and courage, together with detailed settings and humour. The pace of the storytelling makes for a compelling and page-turning read, while the inclusion of figurative language affords *The Wintrish Girl* a literary quality.

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STUDY NOTES

- Discuss the opening paragraph of Chapter 1. How does it immediately establish the mood and voice that persists throughout the text? How does the author engage readers so effectively? Why is this important?
- Discuss the use of italics to indicate the girl's nightmare. How does this nightmare and the existence of the Night Hag give the text cohesion?
- We learn early about Penn that 'although [...] her screams could be heard, there was [...] no-one to care' (p. 2). How does Penn's sense of isolation change as the story progresses?
- In your own words, explain the significance of Talisman Day to the people of Arylia.
- As you read, create a glossary of terms specific to the Empire of Arylia. Examples include:

○ Marvellance	○ Slumweed
○ Malevolence	○ Calamus
○ Casket of Fate	○ Loophole
○ Talisman	○ Smungle
○ Epistle	○ Relic
○ The Grey Ones	○ Scavenger
○ The Eslit	○ The Celestial Ceiling
○ Knot-Sister	○ Seeker
○ Malumest Tor	○ Revivification
○ Huggle Beast	○ Dead Language
○ Quintessence	○ Divisibility
○ ART	○ Talisman Seeker
○ LIE	○ Impling
○ Sower	○ Augur
- Why does Penn think that Talisman Day will be 'the exact opposite of marvellous' for her (p. 6)? In the role of Penn, write a journal entry about this day.
- How would Penn's life have been different had she been born on any other day (see p. 18)?
- Throughout the text, Penn feels like an outsider. How do Juniper and Arthur help change this?
- Why does Penn consider the small painting of a village in Midwinter to be her most prized possession (pp. 7–8)? In her desire to return to Midwinter, what will Penn be happy to leave behind in Arylia?
- In your own words, explain the four Talismanic Guilds: Weapons, Treasure, Lore and Art. What comment does Portentia make about these guilds later in the book?

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- Using descriptions from *The Wintrish Girl*, choose one of the creatures such as the Panthera, the Night Hag, Ajax, Tantivies, Bundlers, Implings or Smungles to sketch.
- Discuss how Wintrish people are treated in Arylia. How does this make Penn feel? And how does Juniper's way of speaking about Wintrish people change after meeting Penn?
- In the role of Seraphine, write a journal entry after being freed from the glass prison.
- What role does Arthur play in *The Wintrish Girl*? How would you describe his character? What do you predict about his character in Book 2 of the *Talismans of Fate* series?
- Why does Penn hold a special liking towards the Clock Immemorial? How is this clock important to the story?
- What role do characters such as the Regent, Corin and Angus play in *The Wintrish Girl*? Which characters from other stories have similar qualities to them?
- Discuss the relationship between Penn and Seraphine. Why does Seraphine describe her as 'impossible' (p. 25)? How does their relationship develop from the beginning to end of the story?
- How and why are riddles used throughout *The Wintrish Girl*? Why doesn't Arthur like them?
- Why doesn't Penn cry for most of the book? Is this a strength or weakness? What is it that finally prompts her to cry? How did you feel when this happened?
- What role do logic and reasoning play in *The Wintrish Girl*? What comment does the text make about logic versus destiny?
- Why does Juniper say, 'You'd be surprised how extraordinary seeing what's true based on factual information and critical thinking can be' (p. 131)? What examples from your own experience can you think of that prove her to be correct?
- In the role of Arthur, write a recount of your trip down the lavafall in the eggshell.
- How is bullying in the text dealt with? Which characters are bullied? How are they bullied in different ways?
- Write a reflection that responds to the importance of love and companionship based on the following excerpt:
 Penn closed her eyes as a wave of blissful happiness rolled over her. The cuddle made her feel like she was wrapped in a blanket of soft velvet and drinking hot chocolate, while Wintrish voices sang their haunting folk song for her once more. (p. 227)
- How important to the story is Ned? How would it be different without him?

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- What are your thoughts about Portentia's character? What questions would you ask the author about her?
- Why do the Malevolents use their 'prisoners' hopes and dreams against them' (p. 272)? How does this lead to fear and self-doubt? Do people do this in real life? Discuss.
- Arthur does a great job of summarising their escape from Malumest Tor in the passage below:
 'Dragon rescue. Night Hag in hot pursuit. Deadly fall. Impling attack,' Arthur reeled off. 'That was in reverse order, but you get the general idea. Also it turns out winning second place in the coconut shy at the Candlemage Fair is very good practice for fighting off an Impling attack with a Royal Orb. Oh, and Ned has super-stretchy powers. I think that's everything. Except I thought Huggle Beasts weren't Marvellous?' (p. 296)
 Try summarising the whole book in a similar way.
- Why is 'true despair [...] powerful stuff' (p. 296)?
- Why is Penn so determined to rescue Seraphine?
- At first, Penn is underwhelmed by Sparkle. How and why does her attitude towards her Talisman change during the narrative?
- Why does Portentia say, 'it's far easier to spend your whole life being someone a Marvellous Casket says you are' (p. 335)? What point is she trying to make?
- Discuss the use of language features in the following passage: 'The Night Hag's shadow already covered most of the floor. It slithered on, heading straight towards Penn, its ink-black tentacles spreading swiftly to surround her' (p. 372). How do these language choices help readers to visualise the action?
- On p. 391, what does Juniper mean when she says of Arthur, 'he's just being Arthur-ish'? List Arthur-ish traits.
- Did you suspect Mistress Goody may be the Night Hag? If so, what clues helped you to deduce this? Discuss Arthur's comment: 'It's ironic, isn't it [...] Goody was the baddie' (p. 411).
- Why do you think the caged bird and Goody share the name Ina? Where do you think Ina disappeared to when she was let out of her cage?
- Why, after discovering the truth about her parents, does Juniper look at them 'as though seeing them for the first time' (p. 391)? Have you ever had cause to see your parents 'for the first time'? Share with a friend.
- Create a Character Iceberg of Penn or Seraphine. Above the surface, note what we are literally told about her. Beneath the surface, add what readers must infer. Why is it important that we have both literal and inferential information about characters?

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- What are the differences and similarities between Penn and Seraphine? What would the Knot-Sisters admire about one another? What might frustrate them? Why do they feel compelled to protect one another?
- What small details in *The Wintrish Girl* make it especially engaging to you? What are your favourite parts of the story? Why?
- What are the roles of libraries and books in *The Wintrish Girl*?
- Which character from *The Wintrish Girl* are you most like? Why? Which do you wish you were most like? Why?
- In small groups, choose a scene from *The Wintrish Girl* to dramatise for your class. Create props to enhance your performance.
- Retell part of the story from Juniper's or Arthur's point of view.
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, create a story map to capture the main characters, settings and events of the story.
- If you could choose your own Talisman, what would it be and why?
- What are your favourite magical things in Arylia? What is it you most like about these elements?
- Discuss whether you agree with the following statement from *The Wintrish Girl*: 'Silence made for an easier life' (p. 25).
- Can you '[change] your fate' (p. 87)? Support your thinking with reasoning.
- To the Librarians of Anamora, there are two things that matter above all else: Knowledge and Truth. Why do you think this is? How important are these to the modern world?
- Portentia says, 'There is a rare goodness in Arthur. It is powerful on its own but when combined with the fact that he is not attempting to use Marvellous objects for his own ends but to help others ... it makes him a truly formidable foe' (pp. 422–423). How can you apply Arthur's way of being to the way you conduct yourself in the real world?
- What is Portentia really getting at when she says, 'labels can get mixed up. And they rarely give an accurate description of all the potential contained within' (p. 424)? What examples of this can you think of from your own experiences?
- Having read *The Wintrish Girl*, discuss what clues on the front cover reveal important story elements. Design a front cover for Book 2 in the series. Alternatively, write the first chapter of the second book.
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language throughout *The Wintrish Girl*. Examples include:
 - Like a dark stain, the shadow slithered across the floor (p. 1)
 - the shadow covered her like a cloak of black ice, plunging her straight into a nightmare (p. 1)
 - two small rolled scrolls zinged through the open window like hornets (p. 4)
 - She felt a flash of longing (p. 7)

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- rays of sunlight flooded through the enormous stained-glass windows, turning the motes of dust stirred up by Penn's sweeping and polishing into a swirling, multicoloured swarm (p. 10)
- Seraphine kept her expression blank but she felt warmth creep into her cheeks (pp. 21–22)
- Penn took a shortcut through the fields of silvery Iliastar flowers that glistened in the morning sunshine (p. 30)
- She was a small, ancient woman with suspicious eyes that were like two glinting blackcurrants pushed deep into the wrinkled dough of her face (p. 33)
- Penn felt a prickle of curiosity (p. 44)
- A razor-sharp dagger of jealousy stabbed deep into Seraphine's heart (p. 77)
- Their combined nervousness was like a wild thing skittering around the room (p. 82)
- They stared at one another for a long moment, the bindings around their wrists crackling with spiteful energy (p. 110)
- The Princess was standing on the raised platform, her face a mask of shock as she stared at the scene before her (p. 113)
- a ruined castle squatted deep in a desolate valley, as though it was trying to hide (p. 122)
- The voice was like a knife, like poison, like a curse. It dripped Malevolence with every syllable. (p. 122)
- A tiny thrill of hope flickered in Penn's heart and then burst into flame (p. 141)
- Wicked-looking whirlpools spun and sucked (p. 153)
- Amplified by the rock walls, the roar of the molten lava cascade was thunderous (p. 153)
- One withered hand snaked towards Juniper (p. 177)
- the majority of the books and scrolls now formed a mountain range of chaos (p. 186)
- A note of misery crept into her voice (p. 201)
- the walls rippled like watery silk (p. 205)
- Despair enveloped Penn (p. 221)
- Glistening strings of saliva hung from its jowls (p. 247)
- Pride was practically shooting out of his eyebrows (p. 256)
- Victory flashed in the Hag's scarlet eyes (p. 294)
- Penn felt a sudden shock, as though a plaster had been ripped off, revealing the raw truth underneath (p. 302)
- Penn and Juniper were sitting on the floor, mired in gloom (p. 336)
- It made a tiny sound, barely audible, like the faintest of wind chimes tinkling in a summer breeze (p. 354)

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- It felt as though a storm had been unleashed in her mind – the thoughts were whirling too fast for her to make sense of any of them (p. 360)
- An intense yearning filled her heart, so sharp it hurt (p. 365)
- Marvellance exploded like wildfire through her veins (p. 369)
- Penn’s thoughts felt diamond-bright, as though a Spark had been switched on in her mind (p. 369)
- She pushed the memory down, like a dirty stain she was trying to hide (p. 427)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

This is very much a funny romp of a book but there are a lot of serious issues woven throughout. I used to write funny columns about serious issues for *The Age* and in many ways *The Wintrish Girl* is an extension of my deep interest in politics, history and global affairs.

Like all good fantasy, my Empire of Arylia is firmly rooted in our own world. So my fictional world is a place where words have lost their power and meaning, where a history of injustice is still playing out, where borders are closed and impassable walls have gone up out of fear, and where the line between good and evil isn’t always clearly defined.

I also set myself the challenge of writing a book set in a magical world without ever once using the word ‘magic’! I came up with Marvellance and Malevolence to get away from the tired idea of white magic (good), black magic (bad).

This is essentially a series about fate; about how others will try to determine it for you, how you can (and should) try to forge your own destiny, how you will sometimes fail and sometimes succeed, and how your journey will, at times, be shaped by forces beyond your control. And it’s also about realising that on the journey to find out who you are and what you want to be, the answers can change – not just once, but many times. For as Portentia the wise Augur says, ‘Talismans – and children – are never just one thing.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie La’Brooy is an Australian author who has previously written five novels for adults, which were published in Australia and internationally. Over the past twelve years she has lived in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Some of her favourite moments ever include boating down the Zambezi River past giraffes and hippos, seeing the Northern Lights from high up in the Arctic Circle, horse-riding through a snowy forest in Bulgaria and eating chocolate while watching movies with her family at home. *The Wintrish Girl* is her first novel for

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children. Also, her surname is pronounced La-Broy, like boy but with an r. It's confusing, she knows.