

# The Hotel Witch

AUTHOR

**JESSICA MILLER**

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid Primary



## SYNOPSIS

Sibyl is the apprentice hotel witch at the splendid Grand Mirror Hotel.

She is busy each day drawing useful spell patterns to keep the hotel guests happy: spells to shine shoes, spells to remove dust and spells to return lost belongings like hats and gloves to their owners.

But Sibyl dreams of other possibilities—wonderful possibilities like her mother returning from the Black Mountains, and like Grandma letting her draw spell patterns from the *Book of Advanced and Dangerous Magic*.

When Grandma gets stuck in last Tuesday, somewhere on the hotel's thirteenth floor, Sibyl is left to take charge of all the hotel magic—and to solve a mysterious and perplexing problem.

Can she find a way to open the *Book of Advanced and Dangerous Magic*?

And will it contain the spell she needs?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Miller is a children's writer from Brisbane, currently living in London. Her first novel, *Elizabeth and Zenobia*, was shortlisted for the Text Prize and the Readings Prize and was a CBCA Notable Book, as was her second book, *The Republic of Birds*.

## STUDY NOTES

### BEFORE READING

- *The Hotel Witch* can be classified as a 'fantasy & paranormal' novel. Read the blurb of the book out loud, and talk about the elements that indicate what genre the book belongs to.
- What do you think a 'hotel witch' does? Use the information provided in the blurb and your imagination to come up with a list of jobs that a hotel witch might perform on an ordinary day.
- Every day Sibyl uses *The Book of Domestic Magic* to help the hotel run smoothly. Come up with a simple spell that would make your daily life easier.

**WHILE READING**

- What does Sibyl's grandma keep telling her that she needs to do to improve her spells? What happens when Sibyl lets her mind wander?
- Why doesn't Grandma think that Sibyl is ready to learn more complex spells? Is she right?
- 'Sibyl sometimes wondered what Sigismunda would make of her cave now that it had been furnished with cast-offs and knick-knacks from the hotel above.' (p 15) Who is Sigismunda? What advice do you think she'd give Sibyl?
- What is so special about Fräulein Schoenblum's performances? Why does she swear that she'll never sing again?
- What is stopping Sibyl from opening *The Book of Advanced and Dangerous Magic*?
- What is the 'dreadful possibility' (p 109) that Sibyl imagines as the reason her mother cancels her visit? What is the real reason?
- How often does Sibyl's mother come to visit? Why? How does Sibyl feel about this?
- What is the first thing that Sibyl notices is missing its shadow? What do the shadows represent in the story?
- What are Sibyl's buttons trying to tell her when she is trying to figure out how to defeat the Shadowmancer? How does she finally defeat it?

**AFTER READING****CHARACTER**

- 'Sibyl had bigger dreams than cobweb-cleaning and silver-shining. She dreamed of doing proper magic.' (p 3) What does Sibyl think 'proper' magic is? What is standing in the way of her dreams?
- At the beginning of the book, Sibyl wishes 'she knew where to imagine herself'. (p 17) Do you think she figured out what she wants by the end of the book? What has changed for her?
- When Frau Stille arrives at the hotel (p 57), there's nothing particularly remarkable about her. In fact, she is particularly unremarkable. What is your response to her in this scene? Do you have any inkling that she'll be so significant later on? What makes you feel this way?
- Fräulein Schoenblum is incredibly superstitious—so much, that Sibyl has to hide Alfonso because a black cat is said to bring bad luck. What other superstitions have you heard of? Where do you think they come from? Discuss the impact Fräulein Schoenblum's superstitions have on her life.

**STYLE AND STRUCTURE**

- Many fantasy stories begin with the question 'what if?' What if a boy received a letter inviting him to wizarding school? What if you could speak to dragons? What is the 'what if' question that begins this story? How does the writer respond to it? Come up with your own 'what if' idea for a new fantasy story.

**THEMES****Possibility**

- When Sibyl feels sad or worried, she imagines the possibility of good things happening to make her feel better. What are some of the possibilities that Sibyl imagines? Do any of them come true?
- While imagining possibilities is often a positive or hopeful thing for Sibyl, the flip side can be getting overwhelmed by the thought of negative possibilities. How does Sibyl struggle with this when she's facing Frau Stille as the Shadowmancer? What are some of the negative possibilities she imagines? How does she overcome these negative thoughts?
- Why is it supposedly impossible to defeat a Shadowmancer? Grandma says that some things aren't 'even in the slightest smallest way possible'. (p 265) What is she referring to? Is she right? What do you think Sibyl would say about impossibilities?

**Family**

- Discuss some of the differences between Sibyl's family, and families in other books you've read. Are these differences written a positive or negative way? Discuss.
- 'It was possible, she realised, that Grandma was proud of her.' (p 85) Why is Grandma proud of Sibyl in this scene? How does Sibyl feel when she realises? Why do you think she hasn't thought of this as a possibility before now?
- Sibyl feels furious at her grandma for not trusting her enough to teach her difficult spells, and then leaving her alone

in the face of danger. Do you understand her fury? What do you think her grandma would have done differently if she'd known what was going to happen?

- At the beginning of the book, Sibyl thinks that Sigismunda, her great-great-great-great grandmother, wouldn't think very much of her. Do you agree? What do you think Sigismunda would say to Sibyl if she could see her at the end of the book?

### Courage

- What does it mean to have courage? Can you be afraid of something and still show courage? Discuss your answer in relation to a scene from the book.
- When Sibyl imagines a snow-spider, she pictures a 'creature twice as tall as her, with eight spindly stalactites for legs and a large mouth with sharp, icy fangs . . .' (p 133) Is the reality more or less frightening than what Sibyl has imagined? How does she muster up the courage to face the snow-spider?
- What is Sibyl really afraid of? Is it simply the danger of facing the Shadowmancer, or is it something else? How does her fear relate to her ability to focus?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Write a letter from Sibyl's mother to Sibyl that describes one of her adventures in the Black Mountains. What happens when Sibyl opens the letter?
- When Sibyl and Ahmed first hear Fräulein Schoenblum sing, they relive their best memory. What does Sibyl remember? What is your best memory? Write your memory down, focusing on bringing it to life using sensory descriptions (touch, taste, sound, sight and smell) the way that Fräulein Schoenblum's singing does for her audiences.
- Sibyl ultimately has to learn to trust her instincts to overcome the obstacles in the story. What are some of the things (or people) that help to boost Sibyl's confidence in herself? Write about a time that you've had to trust your instincts despite being nervous or afraid. Reflect on how this experience helped to build your confidence in your abilities.
- Consider this line from the first page of the book: 'Sibyl loved early mornings, because early mornings were the time of day when anything—everything—felt possible.' Use this line as the beginning of your own story about a day when something impossible happens (you can change the name of the character or make it your own).