Liar's Test

AUTHOR
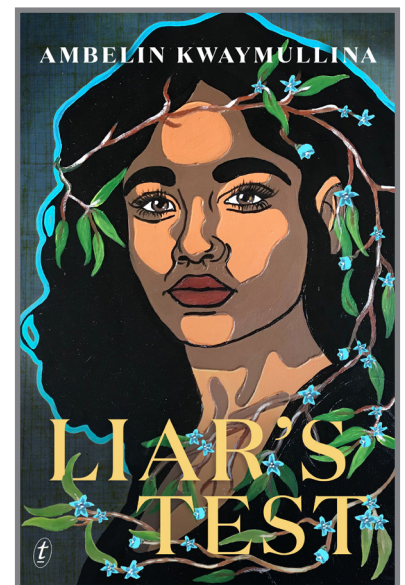## AMBELIN KWAYMULLINA

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary
(Violence)

SYNOPSIS
I didn't want to rule the Risen. Wreak a little havoc upon them, though? That was something else entirely.

Bell Silverleaf is a liar.

It's how she's survived. It's how all Treesingers have survived since they were invaded by the Risen and their fickle gods. But now Bell is in the Queen's Test—she's one of seven girls competing in deadly challenges to determine who will rule for the next twenty-five years. If Bell wins, she'll have the power to help her people and take revenge on the Risen. But first she has to make it through the challenges alive.

She doesn't know how much she's been lied to, or where she fits in a bigger story, a mystery stretching back generations. And she's facing much bigger dangers than the Queen's Test. She's up against the gods themselves.

Liar's Test is a fast-paced, intricately woven fantasy novel with an unforgettable heroine inspired by the strength and power of Aboriginal women.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Ambelin Kwaymullina is a First Nations writer and illustrator who comes from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Ambelin tells stories across a range of forms, including poetry, short stories, essays, young adult novels and picture books. She is a previous winner of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and the Aurealis Award.

STUDY NOTES
BEFORE READING
- Using the essay, following these notes, and the additional author resource listed below, explore the concept of Indigenous Futurisms. Consider:
  - What difficulties have Indigenous peoples encountered with the genre of speculative fiction?
  - What are some of the characteristics of Indigenous Futurisms? Does knowing Liar's Test is a work of Indigenous Futurisms mean you expect different things from the story than you might of another speculative fiction book?
- Here is an additional resource written by the author, Ambelin Kwaymullina: *Ambelin Kwaymullina, Reflecting on Indigenous Worlds, Indigenous Futurisms and Artificial Intelligence* <http://motherofinvention.twelfthplanetpress. com/2017/09/16/reflecting-on-indigenous-worlds-indigenous-futurisms-and-artificial-intelligence/>

WHILE READING

- On pp 28–29, Bell invents names for most of the other candidates in the Queen's Test. What do those names tell you about Bell's assessment of their personalities? Why do you think the author used nicknames instead of the characters' real names?
- On p 33, Bell says: 'When my people first came here, they'd been shocked to find the Risen didn't have any trees (although they'd also thought it explained a lot).' How does the architecture of Radiance reflect what is valued by Risen society?
- The Queen's Test is separated into three different challenges: one belonging to the sun-priests, one to the moon-sisters, and one to the guilds. What are each of these three groups looking for in a Queen? How do their challenges help them find it?
- Power in Risen society is shared between the sun-priests, the moon-sisters, the Queen and the guilds. Who do you think holds the most power? Why?
- In Chapter Six, Bell experiences one of her mother's memories. How does this change how Bell sees herself and what she considers her purpose to be?

AFTER READING

Character

- 'We all draw something from the trees we were named after.' (p 101). Discuss how Bell, Tamsin and Uncle Dar are influenced by Silverleaf trees, Blackbark trees and Holdfast trees. (See pp 101–2 for an explanation of the characteristics of these trees.)
- ' . . . I wasn't made out of the people who'd tried to bring me down. I was made out of the ones who'd lifted me up. Tricks and the Nexus. Ronan, Tamsin and Sasha. Journeys Far. The Ancients. Even Elodie.' (p 258). Why is it important that Bell defines herself through the people who lifted her up? How might she see herself differently if she allowed herself to be defined by the people who'd tried to bring her down?
- 'A new picture. Five seeds thrown into a pool of water. The seeds were little. But the ripples they made were big, reaching all the way to the edge of the pool. I sighed. "You think we can change them. Me, Tricks, Ronan, Tamsin, and Sasha."' (p 184). Why do you think the Nexus brought together these five people? What qualities do these characters possess that will help them transform Risen society?

Structure

- While Bell Silverleaf is the primary narrator of the story, *Liar's Test* also includes a number of other voices. In the order that these voices appear in the text, they are:
  - Leana Silverleaf (p 48)
  - Journeys Far (p 135)
  - Alethea Silverleaf (p 140)
  - Granny Silverleaf (p 147).

  Choose two of these voices and discuss how they are different from each other and from Bell's voice. How does the author make each voice distinct?
  - Why do you think the author used different voices to tell the story?
- 'Seven will come/two will die/two will sleep/two will serve/one will rule.' Much of the book is loosely structured around the Queen's Test. Map the relationship between the Test and the plot of the book.
- 'I was trying to put together a puzzle without all the pieces.' (p 54). Bell uncovers the knowledge she needs as the story progresses, including information that she doesn't recognise the significance of until later (eg. she doesn't understand the importance of the medallion worn by Eldan until page 196). Identify the information in the book that is critical for Bell to heal her grove and defeat the gods, and map out when she receives it. Why do you think the author communicated knowledge in this way?
  - What would happen if Bell knew earlier in the story?

Themes

Inequality

- Bell lives within a society that discriminates against Treesingers. Consider the different forms of discrimination that

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exist in Radiance.

- ◦ Which characters hold explicitly discriminatory views against Treesingers (ie. they knowingly believe that Treesingers are 'less than')?
- ◦ Which characters hold unconscious bias (ie. they don't consciously characterise Treesingers as 'less than' but their attitudes and behaviours are shaped by adverse stereotypes which cause them to treat Treesingers unequally)?
- ◦ What systems and organisations have prevented Treesingers from determining their own futures? How have these systems and organisations changed over time? Why have these changes happened?
- Bell is the first Treesinger allowed into the Queen's Test. But at the end of the book, she thinks 'One Treesinger making to the top in spite of determined efforts to destroy me did not make this an equal society.' (p 253). Why does she think this? What more might she believe needs to be done to make Risen society equal for Treesingers?
- '"You want to talk about imbalance?" I growled. "Their whole society is built on it! Traders matter less than knights, and crafters less than traders, and workers less than crafters, and Treesingers less than anybody."' (p 184). Throughout the book, how does position in the hierarchy affect how people are treated? How does it change how they interact with authority figures? (See, for example, the conversation between Bell, Tamsin and Sasha about Alasdar on p 130.)

Strength and resistance

- What different kinds of strength are held by Treesinger women in the book? How do these different strengths shape different resistance strategies?
- How have Treesingers and their trees and plants used deception to protect themselves and others? How has Bell?
- What is the cost of continually having to hide who you are? How does it affect Bell?

Connectedness/Relationships

- How do Tricks, the Nexus and Bell help each other to 'grow and be happy' throughout the story?
- The perspectives of trees and plants are an integral part of the story. Consider:
  - ◦ How do trees and plants view things differently to humans? (see, p 36, 145, 149; 183–5).
  - ◦ How do these perspectives influence Bell?
- Identify the connections Bell makes with her relatives, friends and allies throughout the story. How do these connections contribute to healing her grove and defeating Tomas and Allora?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Refer to the website below, where Ambelin has explored some aspects of Indigenous futurist thinking through a series of five paintings as part of a creative residency at the ANU School of Cybernetics: <https://cybernetics.anu.edu.au/projects/IndigenousFuturisms/>
  - ◦ The third painting contains a poem about non-linear time. In groups, discuss how the ideas in this poem are contained in *Liar's Test*.
  - ◦ The final painting in the series is expressed entirely through symbols. Choose a character, idea or event in *Liar's Test*, and create a symbol or series or symbols to represent the character, idea or event.
  - ◦ Come up with an idea which you think will contribute to creating a positive future. Express this idea as a work of art (this can be done through incorporating text into artwork or using images instead of words).
- 'This focuses attention on process, rather than outcome, for there is no fixed destination to be reached. It is the balancing and nurturing of relationships that moves life closer together, and imbalance that breaks us all apart.' Drawing on the selection of short resources below (or through researching your own resources), create a presentation on First Nations knowledges and sustainable futures.
  - ◦ What have been the problems with the processes used to engage with First Nations knowledges in the past? How are those processes being changed now?

Resources

- ◦ CSIRO, Our Knowledge Our Way in caring for Country: Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening and sharing our knowledge for land and sea management. <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/indigenous-science>
- ◦ Bronwyn Carlson, Peita Richards, Indigenous knowledges informing machine learning could prevent stolen art and other culturally unsafe practices.

- ◦ <https://theconversation.com/indigenous-knowledges-informing-machine-learning-could-prevent-stolen-art-and-other-culturally-unsafe-ai-practices-210625>
- ◦ How cultural burning protects land and heals people: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cro_iBShSfM>
- ◦ Tara de Landgrafft, Indigenous medicine used to soothe crocodile bite could gel in time to help Brisbane Olympic athletes: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-02/traditional-medicine-after-crocodile-bite-use-olympic-athletes/103057744>
- ◦ NB: a more comprehensive examination of First Nations knowledges and inventions, along with associated educational resources, can be found in SBS The First Inventors television series and teacher resource:
- ◦ <https://www.sbs.com.au/learn/resources/the-first-inventors-teacher-guide/teacher-resource/>
- The author, Ambelin, has written that 'When colonisers came to Indigenous shores, they did not value the life-ways of Indigenous peoples, especially those of Indigenous women. Characterisations of Indigenous peoples in general and Indigenous women in particular as 'less than' shaped laws and policies for much of the last two centuries and while this idea is now recognised as false, it continues to manifest in bias against Indigenous peoples . . . ' (Essay). First Nations women and girls continue to experience high levels of inequality and intersectional discrimination. The landmark Wiyi Yani U Thangani initiative has set out a change agenda for First Nations gender justice which includes a visual representation of gender justice and equality in the form of a Sacred Grandmother Tree. The change agenda is downloadable here: <https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/WYUT%20Change%20Agenda%202024%20%28FINAL%20DIGITAL%29.pdf>

In groups, explore the image and discussion of the Sacred Grandmother Tree at p 12–17 of the change agenda. Consider the following:

- ◦ Why use an image of a tree? What do the different parts of the tree represent? Do you think art is a more compelling way of conveying knowledge than words alone? Why/why not?
- ◦ The Grandmother Tree combines three elements (outcomes, practice, evaluation—see p 12 of the Change Agenda). Why are all three required for change to occur? (Australian Human Rights Commission, Wiyi Yani U Thangani

—Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice (2024), page 37; 75 ff—

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