

Blood to Poison

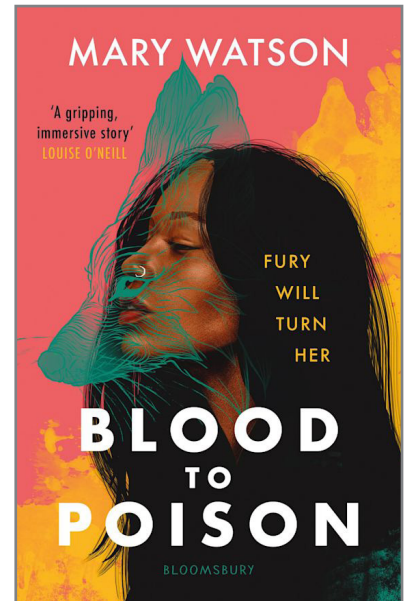
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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid To Upper Secondary
(Violence, Sexual Content)



SYNOPSIS

Seventeen-year-old Savannah is cursed. It's a sinister family heirloom; passed down through the bloodline for hundreds of years, with one woman in every generation destined to die young. The family call them Hella's girls, named for their ancestor Hella; the enslaved woman with whom it all began. Hella's girls are always angry, especially in the months before they die.

The anger is bursting from Savannah—at the men who cat-call her in the street, even at her own loving family. Each fit of rage is bringing her closer to the edge and now Savannah has to act to save herself. Or die trying. Because the key to survival lies in the underbelly of Cape Town, where the sinister veilwitches are waiting for just such a girl.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Watson is from Cape Town and now lives on the west coast of Ireland. She's worked as an art museum guide, library assistant, theatre duty manager and an actor in children's musicals. She has a PhD from the University of Cape Town where she taught for many years. She won the Caine Prize in 2006, the Philida Award in 2022, and writes short stories, young adult fantasy and thrillers. Her YA debut, *The Wren Hunt*, was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards

STUDY NOTES

- Why do you think the author has chosen the title 'Blood to Poison'? How does the title relate to the theme of historical trauma and to the other themes of the novel? What images, feelings and thoughts does the title evoke for you? Do you think it is an effective title? Why?
 - Can you think of some alternative titles for the novel? Think about the themes of the novel and jot down any interesting words or phrases from the text including the names of any important characters or objects. You might want to use a thesaurus to help you think of synonyms for key words. See if you can use these words and ideas to come up with some evocative and memorable titles.
- Have a look at the front cover of the book. What do you like about the cover? How do the different elements of the cover design relate to the plot and themes of the novel? Why do you think the designer has chosen these colours and images? Photocopy the front cover and annotate the image with your thoughts and ideas.
- Design a front cover for one of your alternative book title ideas. Think about how you could use colour, shape and design to convey the atmosphere, themes and emotions the book contains.
- Compare and contrast the characters of Savannah and Kim. What experiences do they have in common? How are

they different? How does each character respond to injustice (for example on p 79)? How has each character's attitude towards anger changed by the end of the novel? Can you find evidence in the final chapter of the book to support your answer?

UNDERSTANDING THEMES

- Themes are the main ideas that lie beneath the surface of a text. Below are some of the key themes that run through the novel *Blood to Poison*. Can you think of any more themes explored within the novel? See if you can add at least two more to the list.
 - Injustice and Discrimination
 - Historical Trauma
 - South Africa (past and present)
 - Anger
 - Power.
- We can begin to build an understanding of a theme by studying extracts and quotations from the text. Below are five quotations. Underneath each quotation, write down which theme (or themes) you feel it relates to. Can you pick out some more interesting quotations from the rest of the book? How does each quotation help you to understand the underlying themes and characters in the book?
 - 'I have the devils in me today' — Savannah, p 2
 - 'Hella had been enslaved, forced to work for a cruel family. Her anger grew until one day, it exploded out of her.' — Savannah, p 5
 - 'I could tell him that the word hysterical is often used as a misogynist smear to dismiss women.' Savannah, p 43
 - 'Your anger, when you feel it, is yours and a valid reaction. The fragment of magic inside you binds you to your ancestor, and your anger holds echoes of hers. When you get angry, it reverberates with Hella's fury.' Ma Daline, p 58
 - 'Anger can warn you when something is not right. It can be a powerful tool, but has to be wielded carefully and with precision. You have to control it, not have your anger control you.' Ma Daline, p 59

DISCUSSING EXTRACTS FROM THE TEXT

- Read the following extract from *Blood to Poison*, and then answer the following questions
When it comes to the curse, the aunties are divided. Auntie Glynis is undecided, but Kim, Tietie and Auntie Nazeema don't believe.

'You want to know why I'm angry?' Tietie likes to say, 'look out the window' She rarely elaborates, but I've heard enough to know she means 'the system'. The system that hasn't delivered housing, or addressed the high rate of femicide, or stopped corruption. And, further back, the system that divided people by race, elevating white to the detriment of everyone else. Apartheid ended before I was born, but the damage persists.

- Why is Tietie angry?
- What do you know about Apartheid?
- Can you define the word 'detriment'? What does it mean in this context?
- What do you think Savannah means when she says, 'the damage persists'?
- What injustices exist in the present day in the novel?
- Consider what life would have been like for Tietie, Glyniss, Nazeema, Kim and Savannah's other older relatives during Apartheid. What effect would Apartheid have had on their education, housing and employment opportunities? How might their experiences during Apartheid continue to affect them in the present? Discuss with a partner or small group.
- Read the extract when Savannah has just discovered Hella's true name and turned the second key, then has a dream. It starts 'I'm runnin. Ahead is the shallow river...' and ends '...your anger does not define you'. Once you have read it,

answer the following questions:

- How is this dream different to the other dreams Savannah has had?
- What advice does Malati give Savannah?
- Can you think of a scenario in which anger would be 'necessary'? In what way can anger be a 'tool'?
- What role does anger play in the novel?
- In what way is this scene a key moment in the novel?
- Create a graph to show how Savannah's anger changes over time. Label the y axis 'Intensity' and the x axis 'Time'. Summarise key events in the story and place them along the x axis, then plot the intensity of Savannah's anger at each of these different points in the story on the graph. Join up all the points you have plotted to make a line graph. How does Savannah's anger increase and decrease throughout the story? You could also plot Savannah's power at different points in the novel and see how the two lines compare. How does your graph help you to understand the role of anger in the novel?
- Divide your page into two sections 'Savannah at the start' and 'Savannah at the end'. Then write down as many words or phrases as you can to describe Savannah's character at the start of the novel and then again at the end of the novel. How has Savannah's character developed during the course of the novel? What has she learnt? How has her relationship with anger changed?

REFLECTIONS

- Have a look back at the themes. Which do you think is the most important theme in the novel? Can you put them in order from most to least important? Compare your order with a partner or group and discuss.
- What impact has the novel had on you as a reader? How did you feel as you read the book? Did you learn anything that you didn't know before?
- Who might you recommend this book to? Why do you think they might enjoy it?