



Reading Notes

The Ghost of Miss Annabel Spoon

Aaron Blabey

SYNOPSIS:

No matter what hour, she lurked looking sour, be it midnight or mid-afternoon. Her dresses were shabby, her mood always crabby. Her name was Miss Annabel Spoon.

Life is cursed for the people of the village of Twee. The ghost of Miss Annabel Spoon haunts their every waking hour and they've had enough! But none of the adults of Twee seem to know how on earth to approach the problem. Then the brave and practical young Herbert Kettle comes up with the most extraordinary idea – why not ask the ghost why she haunts them? Herbert marches with determination into the dark forest towards the ghost's isolated house, but begins to lose his nerve as he approaches Miss Annabel's door. To his surprise and relief, he is met with tears from Miss Annabel – she is overwhelmed that at last someone is not running away from her. She is 'so tired of being alone' and is full of almost manic joy when Herbert offers to be her friend. Now her heart is mended and the village of Twee can live in peace, all because of the actions of one kind and generous boy.

WRITING STYLE

The florid style and old fashioned expressions in the compelling rhyming text of *The Ghost of Miss Annabel Spoon* transports us into times past where the story is set. As the author comments in his notes below, '*The rhyme just lent a kind of 'Greek chorus' melodrama to the telling of the story that tickled my fancy. Additionally, I wanted the narrative to have a rollicking momentum that came very naturally with the meter of the poem.*'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Blabey is a well-known award-winning Australian actor (1995 AFI Best Actor Award) who has starred in numerous Australian series including *Stingers* and *Crashburn*. He has won acclaim Australia-wide with his unique paintings which depict his life and his family. Between his three galleries, he has sold an astounding 90 paintings. Aaron's illustrations, like his paintings, have a magical quality. Quirky and

melancholy yet uplifting and totally unique, they are enhanced by the large hardback format.

Aaron's first book, *Pearl Barley and Charlie Parsley*, won the 2008 CBCA Book of the Year: Early Childhood and was included on the Smithsonian Institute's Notable Book list in the USA. It was also shortlisted for the 2008 Crichton Award for New Illustrators and a 2008 NSW Premier's Literary Award.

His second book, *Sunday Chutney*, was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year and the Australian Book Industry Awards while his third, *Stanley Paste*, was a CBCA Notable Book in 2010.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

'The Ghost of Miss Annabel Spoon' was written in 2007, two days after I'd finished the art for Sunday Chutney. I was buzzing with possibility and deeply interested in heading off in an entirely different direction. I had no specific ideas - just an adventurous muse and a lifelong affinity with 'the outsider'.

Despite the irreverent tone on the back flap, the book really *was* written in a freezing little house (located at the centre of a vast potato farm), miles from the nearest town in the middle of winter. The view from its solitary window revealed nothing but a steep, empty field with a delightfully creepy row of pines on its crest.

I sat at my desk in thermals, beanie and gloves. I had a stack of notebooks, a pot of ink and my magic pen. And in absolute, glorious silence I sat and waited for lightening to strike.

Then, after a short while, I wrote a ghost story.

'Annie', as I like to call her, completes a suite of books about **difference**. Firstly, there was Pearl and Charlie, the contrasting little friends. Then came Sunday Chutney, the unrepentant oddbod, followed by Stanley Paste, a boy who looks infuriatingly different from everybody else at school.

With 'Annie' though, I approached the subject from an entirely new angle - the tendency for difference to cause *fear*. I wanted to explore the unfortunate human propensity to be frightened of those we don't know or understand.

By the end of the story, of course, we discover that Annabel is not dangerous at all. She is merely lonely, heartbreakingly so. Because of her ghostly condition, she lacks the ability to connect to others and tragically causes mayhem whenever she makes an effort to do so. Ironically though, it is the *townsfolk* who behave like ghouls. Their fear of the unknown causes them to behave poorly indeed. All Annie wants is a friend but because she represents the unfamiliar, it ultimately takes an unusually brave soul like Herbert Kettle to make the first step. When he does though, the sun begins to shine.

This seemed like a very natural extension of the themes explored in my previous titles.

Visually, I drew inspiration from the landscape in which the book was created, the German illustrator Michael Sowa's delightful, shadowy landscapes and the work of genius picture book maker Edward Gorey. I was inspired to darken my already muted palette of colours to create a wintery landscape fit for a ghost. Mr Gorey has long been a hero of mine and his influence on this book, particularly in my decision to tell this tale in verse, cannot be underestimated.

And while on the subject of 'verse-versus-prose', I have to say it was not a particularly conscious decision. The rhyme just lent a kind of 'Greek chorus' melodrama to the telling of the story that tickled my fancy. Additionally, I wanted the narrative to have a rollicking momentum that came very naturally with the meter of the poem. I didn't set out to write in verse but I suspect Mr Gorey's spirit was quietly egging me on.

As it turns out, the two new books I'm currently working on represent a departure from stories specifically about difference. It is a thematic territory I'm sure I'll return to again but for the time being, 'The Ghost of Annabel Spoon' feels like the conclusion to a chapter - a chapter that concerns a subject that is very close to my heart.

AB July 2011

EDITORIAL COMMENTS

It's a pure joy to work on Aaron's books as his dedication to his art is absolute. Even the first 'roughs' are practically finished art which delivers us straight into the world of his newest characters. Miss Annabel Spoon and Herbert Kettle are a perfect addition to Aaron's world of 'difference' and it soon becomes clear to the reader that Miss Annabel is anything but scary, though it takes a brave and selfless boy to find that out.

STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

THEMES:

- Xenophobia (fear of the unknown)
- Prejudice
- Communication
- Friendship
- Courage
- Problem solving

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

page 1:

- Looking at the colours and the illustration, what sort of village is Twee?
- The words would suggest that this is the fault of the ghost. How might a ghost help to make a village like this?
- The village is 'plagued by a ghost'. What does the word plagued imply? what connotations does the word have?

- What would people be like in your neighbourhood if it was haunted by a ghost? Why?
- What does this suggest about our attitudes to ghosts? What sort of behaviours do we associate with ghosts?

pages 2-3

- The ghost is described as being shabby and crabby. What is meant by this?
- What do you think might have happened to Miss Annabel Spoon?
- Why do ghosts usually come back and haunt places?
- Does Miss Annabel Spoon look like a terrifying ghost?
- What words would you use to describe her?

pages 4-5

- Act out how a ghost behaves (this should result in a lot of wailing, pulling faces, maniacal laughs, waving hands etc). Have you ever seen a ghost? How do you know that this is what ghosts are like?
- How do the townspeople react to Miss Annabel Spoon?
- What is she doing to create this sort of reaction?
- Is she doing any of the things you suggested that all ghosts do?
- What might this suggest about our preconceptions or expectations of people?
- Are they always accurate?
- Do we tend to base our opinions of people on what they do or say or on what we expect them to do or say?

pages 6-7

- At the town meeting, everyone agrees that the ghost has to go. What sort of action do you think they will take?
- Does it look like anyone actually has a plan?
- What is being achieved here?
- What is the impact of the line *'and the wind through the trees it did howl'*?

pages 8-9

- In what ways is Herbert Kettle different from everyone else?
- How does the use of colour or light help to reinforce this difference?
- Do you think he will manage to solve the problem? Why?

pages 10-11

- How do the townspeople react to his suggestion?
- What is the impact of piling all of the townspeople together and having Herbert Kettle standing apart from them?
- How is Herbert Kettle shown to be different from the other people in Twee?
- What do the townspeople think will happen to Herbert Kettle?
- What do you think will happen to him?

pages 12-13

- What stereotyping is there on this page – eg the fact that Annabel Spoon's house is in a dark wood with dark, crooked trees?

pages 14-15

- When Herbert Kettle arrives at Miss Annabel Spoon's house he thinks *that all the rumours he's heard had been right*.
- What evidence is there to suggest that the townspeople's opinions of Miss Spoon are correct?
- Is there another possible explanation for the appearance of her house?

pages 16-17

- How is Herbert Kettle feeling as he enters her house?
- How has the colour changed to reflect this?
- Why does he not run away even though he wants to do so?
- What characteristics does Herbert reveal on these pages?

pages 18-19

- How do you feel when you realise Miss Annabel Spoon is crying?
- Why do you think she is crying?
- What is the impact of this page?
- Consider the use of colour. Why does this page use predominantly black and white? Are Herbert Kettle and Miss Annabel Spoon very different from each other in these images?

pages 20-21

- Consider how Miss Annabel changes on this page.
- What makes her happy?
- Consider the use of colour. Why does this page have more colour on it?
- What makes Miss Annabel weep again?

pages 22-23

- What is the impact of the single line, *'I'm tired of being alone.'*?
- How does Herbert react to this statement?
- What does he realise about the way the townspeople have been treating her?
- What do you think he realises *'a good lad should do'*?

pages 24-25

- Why does Herbert offer to be Miss Annabel's friend?
- What would he have to overcome in order to do this?
- How do you know this makes a difference to her?

pages 26-27

- Consider the use of colour. How does it reveal Miss Annabel's feelings?
- Do you think Herbert's behaviour will help change the village of Twee?

pages 28-29

- How has Twee changed from the village we saw at the start?
- How are the people and the village depicted differently? Consider the use of colour, the way they are dressed and the activities in which they are engaged.
- Do you think Miss Annabel's behaviour has actually changed or just the people's attitudes?

page 30

- What sort of 'person' does Miss Annabel Spoon appear to be?
- What does this suggest about how we should treat people?

THEMES:

Xenophobia:

- What is xenophobia?
- The people of Twee are terrified of Miss Annabel Spoon because they don't really know her or understand her.
- Why are we always more scared of the unknown?
- What can we do to alleviate or reduce these fears?
- How does xenophobia affect our real society?
- Is there a solution?

Prejudice:

- The townspeople of Twee made judgements about Miss Annabel Spoon and formed opinions about her based on their expectations of her rather than on any realities.
- Do we have the same sort of prejudices about people? Do we stereotype people and expect them to behave in certain ways without taking the time to get to know them properly?
- What problems can this cause?
- What might solve this problem?

Communication:

- The problem faced by the townspeople of Twee is solved with a bit of simple communication. Simply talking to Miss Annabel and listening to her problem helped to relieve her sadness.
- What might this suggest about the importance of communicating with people?
- What sorts of problems can be resolved simply by talking to people?

Friendship:

- People are social beings and enjoy companionship.
- What does the ghost of Miss Annabel Spoon suggest happens to people when they don't have any friends?
- How do you feel when you are lonely?
- What do we gain from having friends?
- How does Herbert Kettle's friendship with Miss Annabel change her?

Courage:

- What sort of courage did Herbert Kettle need in order to help solve the problem in Twee?
- Without his courage and his determination to solve the problem, what would have happened to Twee?
- In what way can fear be seen to be crippling?

- Think of other examples of situations in which people needed to have the courage to create change: eg the courage to believe that sailing to the edge of the map would not result in falling off the edge of the world; having the courage to initiate medical technologies eg transplants etc
- Without courage, what would happen to our world?

Problem solving:

- All the townsfolk of Twee agree that something has to be done about the ghost, but no-one other than Herbert Kettle can come up with a practical solution. In contrast, how did the other people in Twee deal with the problem?
- What attitudes or behaviours did Herbert Kettle illustrate that were useful for helping him achieve his goal – eg calmness, determination, positive action etc
- What does this suggest about the way we need to address problems?

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- How much of the story is told through the words and how much through the illustrations?
- How does the use of colour help to convey mood or meaning in the story?
- How does Aaron Blabey manage to convey humour in his illustrations?
- Which is your favourite illustration from the book? Why?

WRITING STYLE:

- *The GHOST of Miss Annabel Spoon* is written in the same style as early ballads such as A B Patterson's *A Bush Christening*.
- Read some ballads and consider the similarities in style and rhythm.
- Does the use of rhyme and rhythm change your reaction to the story? For example, does it add interest or make the story more memorable?
- What humour can you find in the story?
- How does the use of humour make it easier to convey a message?

ACTIVITIES:

Written

- Write a summary of the story of *The GHOST of Miss Annabel Spoon*.
- Make a poster explaining why we all need friends.
- Make a poster explaining how we should treat people if we don't really know them, or if they seem a little bit different.
- Write your own ballad with a message or a moral such as this one.

Oral

- Spend two minutes telling the class about a time when you didn't have a lot of friends (perhaps you were new to a school, a neighbourhood or an activity). How did you feel? Discuss how different you felt once you made some friends.
- Hot seat activity: Imagine that the press want to interview the people of Twee about their experience. You are to pretend that you are one of the characters from the book – Herbert Kettle, Miss Annabel Spoon or one of the townspeople - and

explain how you used to feel living in your town when it was plagued by a ghost, how you felt about Herbert's plan, and how you feel now that the problem has been resolved.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION:

PUBLICITY

Review mailing to Children's specialists and book reviewers at all metro newspapers.

Review mailing to parenting magazines and websites.

Review mailing to select kids' magazines, including Little Angels, Disney, Total Girl and Girl Power.

ON-LINE

Feature title on puffin.com.au