

## Teaching Notes – Night Vision

**TITLE:** Night Vision  
**AUTHOR:** Ella West  
**PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin  
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**AUDIENCE:** 11-14  
**READER:** Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin

### SYNOPSIS

Viola is a fourteen-year-old with Xeroderma Pigmentosum (XP), an extremely rare condition where she lacks the vital gene that protects her skin from UV rays. Living with her mother and father on a remote farm in New Zealand, Viola spends her days asleep and her nights wandering alone in a nearby forest, watching nocturnal activity with the aid of night vision goggles. One night she witnesses what she thinks is a murder, and the burial of a big plastic bag. When she goes back later, she discovers the bag is full of money — \$1,000,000 to be exact.

Viola doesn't act in the way readers might expect. Her isolation and sense of her own impending death (XP kids rarely live into their twenties) give her a highly detached, almost amoral sensibility. So the first thing she does is take the money and hide it away on the farm without telling anyone what she has seen. Although she has no interest in the money for herself she wants to give it to her parents to clear their crippling mortgage.

Even after seeing the murderer return to the site of his crime and finding his money missing Viola remains resolved to keep quiet....That is until a local newspaper writes an article about her condition and night wanderings which alerts the murderer to what has happened to his money.

What happens next is a fascinating tale of cat and mouse, throwing up a number of intriguing ethical issues.

### AUTHOR STYLE

Ella West writes in the first person voice of her protagonist, 14-year-old Viola, and, unusually, writes in the present tense. The combination delivers a sense of immediacy, with the use of the present tense, in particular, giving the feeling that the writer/narrator is as unsure as the reader about what will happen next.

From the intriguing opening, "A car has stopped on the side of the road, the noise of the tyres on gravel warning me", West carefully paces the revelations to maximise tension, accruing small details to keep the story building.

Ultimately, Ella West's skills are such that, from the seemingly prosaic world of small-time NZ farm life, she creates a page-turner every bit as captivating as those dealing with world-changing events.

### AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Ella West said of *Night Vision*, 'If I hadn't been flicking through TV channels one night, [it] would never have been written. By sheer chance I started watching *60 Minutes* which had a story about kids with XP. I think you can still watch it on YouTube. It's an amazing doco. Something I've always remembered New Zealand children's writer Margaret Mahy saying

is that children see different things to adults so, if kids with XP can only go out at night, I thought they must see completely different things to adults and also other children. So what could Viola, my hero with XP, see that no one else sees?

‘I also wanted to write a book about music. When I get the chance, I go to a music concert at the university near where I live which is always at 1pm on Wednesdays. I know nothing about classical music, have never played a musical instrument, but I love listening to these concerts. It makes my brain work! It was in one of them that I thought up the opening lines of what is now chapter two. Writing about music also seems to make the sentences more lyrical. I love the sounds of words, how they work together, how the pauses change everything. It’s great fun.

‘And of course there is all the sheep stuff. I grew up in a city and the novelty of living on a sheep farm still hasn’t worn off. It’s been fun to write about tailing and sheep dogs and possum shooting and what it’s like working on a farm. I’ve also had some fun with the book’s editor – she wanted to know what a lambing beat was!’

## **AUTHOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Ella West lives on a small sheep farm in Otago, New Zealand with her husband and two teenage sons. She started writing plays for children for the New Zealand School Journal but soon crossed over to fiction and her first teen novel *Thieves* was published in 2006. Since then she has also written several adult plays including *The Middlemarch Singles Ball*. She enjoys writing for children and teenagers because anything can happen in a story for children. There’s always magic. West was awarded the Louis Johnson New Writers’ Bursary in 2006 and *Thieves* was a finalist in the 2007 New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults and was listed as a Storylines Notable Young Adult Fiction Book.

## **EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY**

Themes include: crime/thriller, XP, morality and ethics.

Suggestions for discussion and classroom activities

- Before reading *Night Vision* ask students to consider the title and cover design. What visual techniques has the designer used? Consider font, colour, composition, framing to create the mood of the novel. Compile a list of words to describe the mood that the cover evokes. Given these words what genre do students expect the book to be?
- Break students up into groups and ask each group to watch one of the following YouTube clips on Xeroderma Pigmentosum (XP).  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRR-1z0woII>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5N2LIX8naDE>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtLtByN1mQA>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2QqNiFi-tk>  
After viewing their clip, ask groups to report to the class on its main points.
- In small groups, compile a list of adjectives to describe Viola. When complete, ask students to find incidents from within the story to illustrate these adjectives. For instance, if the word ‘unemotional’ is used to describe Viola, students might site her response to seeing a dead body being buried.

- Look at the scene where Viola finds out from her father that her favourite dog, Jim, has died. ‘Dad tells me Jim has died. He had found him in his kennel that morning. He was an old dog. Old dogs die. He’s already buried him. And it’s raining outside, so maybe tomorrow for spotlighting.’ What does this scene tell us about Viola’s personality? Do students think Viola’s health issues explain her response to death or is she simply a very practical person who has lived on a farm all her life?
- Read the scene in Chapter 3 where Viola finds the money left by the murderer (P24). What adjectives, adverbs, metaphors and similes has the author used to add to the tension of the scene? What does the sentence, ‘I think about the fat man, stuffed behind the wheel of the burning car.’, tell the reader about Viola’s response to what she has witnessed?
- Ask students why they think Ella West decided to make Viola musically gifted. Do the passages detailing musical pieces, classical musicians and Viola’s own playing contrast or compliment the more violent events of the story?
- Essay question: Can Viola be described as missing a moral centre? Illustrate your answer with examples of how Viola responds to major events in the novel.
- Divide the class into groups of two and debate the following question: Viola’s decision to keep the money and help her parents was the right thing to do.
- What does the final sentence of the novel, ‘It’s just that, I think a spotlight will be okay.’ convey about Viola’s character development?

## **MARKETING AND SELLING POINTS**

- This book’s ethical and moral issues make it particularly strong fodder for discussion and writing activities.
- *Night Vision* will feature prominently in both the primary and secondary Allen & Unwin newsletters.
- Review copies of *Night Vision* will be mailed broadly to relevant media.
- The book will be advertised in key children’s literature journals.