



## OMNIBUS BOOKS

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Author/Illustrator	D.M. Cornish
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# Teachers' Notes

## Tales from the Half-Continent

Written and Illustrated  
by D.M. Cornish

Teachers' Notes by Rae Carlyle

### Contents

Introduction .....	2
About the Author/Illustrator.....	2
Activities .....	3
Before Reading the Text .....	3
Reading the Text .....	3
Style and Sentence Structure .....	3
Language Choices and Vocabulary .....	5
Characterisation .....	7
Plot Construction and Viewpoint .....	8
Creative Activities .....	9

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## Introduction

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D.M. Cornish first introduced us to the world of the Half-Continent in 2006 with *Foundling*, the first book in The Monster Blood Tattoo trilogy, and this latest book takes us further into the workings of a world both complicated and multilayered. Written in the same Dickensian style as his previous books, *Tales from the Half-Continent* ushers the reader on a journey through a fantasy world that is reminiscent of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe – if, that is, Europe had been populated by monsters, bogles, other strange and terrifying creatures that some worship as deities, and had been in possession of sense-enhancing technologies.

Introducing a cast of new characters, and detailing events that are underpinned by fascinating and strange technology as well as the ever-present threat of dread and despicable creatures, *Tales from the Half-Continent* is enhanced by knowledge of the previous books, but it is in no way necessary to have read them to enjoy and appreciate the two new tales that Cornish is presenting here.

*The Corsers' Hinge*, with its carefully crafted shifting viewpoints, tells of the events surrounding the attempted rescue of Viola Grey *a defiant child barely in her majority* (p 22) who has been snatched by worshippers of one of the monstrous creatures that abound in the hinterlands of the Half-Continent. It describes how Atticus Wells, a renowned sleuth, and his loyal assistants, track her down and venture into the stronghold where she faces an imminent fate as a human sacrifice. The key character, however, is one Bunting Faukes, the corser – or purveyor of corpses – referenced in the title, and the tale revolves around how he finds himself embroiled in the action, and of the pivotal decision he then has to make.

The second story, *The Fuller and The Bogle*, relates the tale of one Virtue Bland, an orphan from the country who, because of her father's recent death, needs to support her stepmother and younger half-siblings. Virtue finds work as a fuller – laundress and cleaner – in the household of her father's business partner and mentor. Coming to grips with her new life is not easy for Virtue. The work is hard and constant, and the master of the house is gravely ill. Things become even worse though, when she encounters a bogle. Bogles are well known and rightly feared in the rural areas from which Virtue hails, but the city-dwellers are complacent and unbelieving that such a creature would dare to risk the populous and well-protected urban heart. Undaunted by the risk to herself, Virtue sets out to rid the city of this dangerous and vicious menace, despite the disbelief of those that surround her and the very real possibility that she will be held accountable for its vile and nefarious acts.

## About the Author/Illustrator

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D. M. Cornish was five years old when he saw the very first *Star Wars* movie. Since then he has enjoyed all kinds of fantasy, reading *Lord of the Rings* at age twelve and progressing to Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* Trilogy. His reading of *Titus Alone* inspired David to create his own world in words and illustrations– the first incarnation of the Half-Continent – which he

mapped in painstaking detail in a series of notebooks over many years. It was not until 2003 that he had an opportunity to develop these ideas further. After studying illustration, working overseas and returning to Adelaide, Cornish was introduced to Omnibus Books publisher Dyan Blacklock. At a meeting he fished in his backpack and journal #23 fell on the floor. On the strength of this body of work, Dyan encouraged him to transfer his fantasy creation to a story. The result was the Monster Blood Tattoo Trilogy, which has been published in many languages and enjoys a dedicated following world-wide.

[www.monsterbloodtattoo.com](http://www.monsterbloodtattoo.com)

<http://monsterbloodtattoo.blogspot.com/>

## Activities

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### Before Reading the Text

While *Tales from the Half-Continent* is not, as such, part of a series, it is however set in a distinctive and unique fantasy world that was first seen in the Monster Blood Tattoo trilogy. Before reading the book, it would be valuable to discuss as a class the basic premises involved in the presentation of fantasy as a genre, as well as the specifics of Cornish's universe as seen in his previous novels. If any members of the class have read his earlier works, then encourage them to share whichever salient features of the world of the Half-Continent that they can recall.

Points for discussion:

- What makes a story fantasy rather than fiction?
- How can we tell when reading a story that it is set in a fantastical world?
- Why might an author choose to use a fantastic setting for their story?
- Can a fantasy novel also belong to another genre (e.g. mystery or adventure)? If so, what should be its primary genre classification and why?
- What are the students' personal opinions regarding fantasy? Who chooses to read it, who prefers not to, and why do they make these choices?

### Reading the Text

Consisting of two short novels, *Tales from the Half-Continent* readily lends itself to being read and studied as a whole-class activity. If a class set of the books is available, then alternating between independent reading followed by group discussions and whole-class reading of select passages would be a worthwhile method of presentation. The language used in the text is rich and at times complicated in its structure. It contains archaisms, neologisms, and a larger number of unfamiliar vocabulary items than do most books that

children in senior primary/early high school will have typically read. As such, frequent teacher-led discussions of the language use and choices made by the author will be of value not just for the stylistic and literary insight that they provide to the students, but also to help support the comprehension of the less proficient readers in the class.

## Style and Sentence Structure

*Tales from the Half-Continent* is in several ways reminiscent of the writing of Charles Dickens. It is worth examining as a class exactly which features of the author's writing contribute to this resemblance, especially given that while Dickens' work contains some fantastical elements, it can more accurately be classified as a fictionalised presentation of some of the most pressing social issues of his time.

### 1) Overall layout

As in Dickens' work, and that of other writers of his era, each chapter is preceded by a brief italicised passage. In Dickens this was in most cases what could be considered either a lengthy chapter title or a brief synopsis of the events that are about to occur. Arising from the original serialised format of Dickens' work, this convention carried over into his bound novels, and is prevalent in other fictional works written at the time. In contrast, *Tales from the Half-Continent* has chapters that are headed not by a synopsis, but by a definition or explanation of a term or phrase found in the book.

Starting the chapters with an epigraph like this serves a dual purpose. In the first instance it serves to introduce the reader to a new, and textually important, concept or word, without which they might have difficulty understanding the course of the story or the characters' motivations. It elaborates on vital events and serves to fill in gaps in the readers' knowledge of Half-Continent society and technology without the need to insert explanations in the body of the text, slowing the progress and flow of the story. Secondly, it creates a visual imprint on the reader that correlates to that of Dickensian-era writing. It subtly reinforces the impression that Half-Continent society is similar in several aspects to societies depicted in books with similar layouts.

Points for discussion/activities:

- Why does the author begin each chapter with a definition or explanation?
- What would be the effect of removing these passages?
- What is the visual impact of having an italicised paragraph at the start of each chapter?
- Find a copy of one of Dickens' works, and compare the visual presentation of the two books. Discuss the similarities and differences. Why might the author want the reader to be reminded of other examples of this type of chapter layout when reading *Tales from the Half-Continent*?

## 2) Sentence structure, sentence length, and use of adjectives

Cornish's sentences are on average longer than is found in most children's literature, and the sentences are complex with embedded clauses and recursions, and make heavy use of adjectives and adverbs. Descriptive passages are frequent, and create an intensely layered image of a culture and society both similar to Dickensian London and fantastically foreign at the same time.

Adjectives follow each other on a regular basis, and metaphor, simile and figurative language abound, as can be seen in passages such as *In this city where money moved more quickly than conscience, the affluent anonymous governors of many illicit trades came down from their fine suburbs in undisguisedly fancy carriages to sponsor the next venture of profitable darkness. Descending from their exulted places, they arrogantly rode the squalid streets in glossy lentums and flashing open-topped dyphrs, secure in the unapproachability of their status.* (p 29)

Points for discussion/activities:

- Why might the author want to invoke Dickensian London in the reader's interpretation of the world of the Half-Continent?
- Look at the passage quoted above. Identify the adjectives and adverbs. How do these words affect our understanding of the events described? Re-read the passage omitting all adjectives and adverbs and discuss the difference in the picture it creates for the reader.
- What is meant by:
  - *money moved more quickly than conscience*
  - *venture of profitable darkness*
  - *unapproachability of their status?*
- Individually, choose a descriptive paragraph from the book. Rewrite it as simply as possible using modern language. Class members share their paraphrased paragraph, and the class discusses the difference from the original, paying close attention to tone and emotive impact.

## Language Choices and Vocabulary

*Tales from the Half-Continent* contains many words that are not commonly found in daily language use, such as *ablute*, *compatriots*, *rigours*, *perambulators* and *promenading* to name a few. It also contains quirky and at times pseudo-archaic usages such as *daftling* and *ladleman*, which despite their novelty, are fairly easily recognisable from context as well as from the root words used in their formation. Such language choices enhance the old-fashioned feeling present in the text. There is a third category of vocabulary items, however, that might prove more problematic to the reader, and that is those words which are uniquely part of the language, speech, and technology of the Half-Continent. Some of these words are explained in the body of the text, while others like *scourge* and *fictlers* appear in

the epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. The epigraphs take the form of brief definitions similar to those found in a dictionary, and give the reader the chance to have some of the more mystifying and important terms explained to them clearly. Yet others such as *peltryman* and *lentum* are explained by context alone; the reader needs to infer their meaning from the surrounding events and text.

A book that is constantly explaining a slew of vocabulary suffers from the risk of overwhelming the reader, while on the other hand one that consistently uses incomprehensible terms with no attempt at explanation invariably leads to confusion in the audience. Cornish has managed to avoid both these traps through his multifaceted approach to his use of innovative vocabulary, and as a result the language used in his story conveys the impression of an alien and fantastic world, and an era analogous to our own 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Points for discussion/activities:

- At the start of each chapter read the epigraph as a class. Start by reading just the word that is being defined, and discuss:
  - Whether or not it has been encountered in the text yet.
  - What the class thinks it might mean.
  - How can we make an informed guess as to its possible meaning? (e.g. *fictler* at the start of Chapter 8 has clearly been derived from the word 'fiction')
  - Compare your hypotheses to the stated definition.
- While reading the text, compile a class list of unfamiliar words.
  - Look up the words in a dictionary. Are any of them listed, and if so do they appear to be being used in accordance with their dictionary meaning? If the meaning varies from their listed dictionary definition, discuss in what way it differs, and how we as readers can tell by the usage what it is being used to mean.
  - If the unfamiliar words do not appear in the dictionary, are there other words that do appear or that the class members know that could plausibly be related? (e.g. *fortalice* is presumably a variant on fort or fortress)
  - Discuss the ways in which the reader can deduce the meaning of unknown words. The three main ones are context, cognates, and authorial explanation either direct or indirect.
  - Individually write a short fantasy story, using at least three invented words. Use the techniques previously discussed to ensure readers understand the new words. In pairs, share stories, and if needed edit them to make sure the meaning of the invented words can be deduced.
- As a class read a passage from a novel by Charles Dickens, or one of his contemporaries.
  - Discuss the language used, and any unfamiliar words encountered.
  - Look at the ways in which words are formed from their component morphemes, and point out any similarities to the word formation techniques that Cornish has used in *Tales from the Half-Continent*.

- As a class brainstorm and create a list of new words formed from familiar root morphemes that have an old-fashioned feeling to them. Make a companion list of words with a futuristic feeling to them.
- The sea in *Tales from the Half-Continent* world is unlike our own sea. Not only is it home to monsters, but it smells not of salt, but of vinegar. As a result the sailors who ply the waters around the Half-Continent are known to the inhabitants as *vinegars*. Discuss with the class:
  - Why has Cornish chosen this word to refer to sailors?
  - What is the English real-world analogue to this word?
  - Are there any other words in the story that are analogous to English usages, and differ primarily because the universe that they are being used in differs?

## Characterisation

Characters in *Tales from the Half-Continent* may appear only briefly, but Cornish is meticulous in his descriptions of them, their attire, and their attitudes. The more central characters have even more time devoted to them, and their attitudes, opinions, and key elements of their past histories are all addressed to a certain extent.

In any story character development is a key issue, as without intriguing characters, a narrative is merely a bland description of events and there is no emotional involvement on the part of the reader. Character development can be done overtly through descriptive passages, and more subtly through the use of dialogue and character interactions.

Points for discussion/activities:

- Atticus Wells in *The Corsers' Hinge* is a complicated man whose motives are not immediately clear to the reader, but the life-events that inform his decisions and the reasoning he uses can all be found in the text. After reading *The Corsers' Hinge*, discuss as a class how Cornish has developed the character of Atticus Wells.
  - What does Atticus look like physically? How do we know this? Find the passages in the text where Cornish has directly described his physical characteristics.
  - What sort of person is Atticus – what is important to him, what motivates him, and what is he scared of? How does Atticus' personality affect the decisions he makes?
  - What sort of childhood did Atticus have – what were his parents like? What did he spend his time doing? What aspirations, hopes and dreams did he have, and were any realised in his adult life? How do his childhood and early adult experiences affect his adult choices and lifestyle? Find supporting evidence for these theories in the text.
  - How do others react to Atticus? Hypothesise how others might have reacted to him in the past. Note the fact that he has one of his associates pretend to

- be him when meeting with clients – what does this imply about past experiences he has had, and how he expects people to react to him now?
- What is Atticus’ opinion of himself? What does he think about his physical shortcomings and personal worth? What is his response to the possibility that he might die? How does Cornish share these insights with us, and why are they important in understanding Atticus’ character?

## Plot Construction and Viewpoint

The two short novels in *Tales from the Half-Continent* have both similarities to and differences from each other in terms of their plot construction. In *The Corsers’ Hinge*, the viewpoint shifts from one character to another, as well as back in time. Bunting Faukes is the first character that the reader meets, but his role in the tale comes in very much towards the end of the action. Having introduced Faukes, Cornish then shifts the viewpoint briefly to that of Valentin Pardalot, whose actions serve mainly to introduce both the rationale behind the rest of the events that will occur, and the character of Atticus Wells. Once the viewpoint shifts to that of Atticus Wells, it continues to follow him until very near the end of the tale, when it once again becomes that of Bunting Faukes. In contrast, *The Fuller and the Bogle*, once the introductory scene-setting passages are completed, is written entirely from the point of view of Virtue Bland.

Both stories have, as a prominent feature, an open-ended denouement. The stories are clearly completed, but there is a lot of room for speculation by the reader as to what actually happens next, and the long-term fates of the surviving characters are almost entirely unclear.

Points for discussion/activities:

- In *The Corsers’ Hinge*, Cornish shifts the viewpoint from one character to another, as well as in time.
  - Why does Cornish shift the viewpoint between characters?
  - What is the effect of introducing the character of Faukes at the start of the story rather than during the action? How does this influence the readers’ understanding of events?
  - Why is it important that the reader understand Valentin Pardalot’s perspective?
  - How does our knowledge of Faukes’ character and motives affect our interpretation of the final scene?
- In *The Fuller and the Bogle*, most of the first chapter is spent setting the scene.
  - Why does Cornish spend so much time describing the background to the story?
  - What would be the effect if he left out this information?

- What are some other methods that authors can use to give background information without explicitly setting it down at the start – and why might they choose to do so?
- Both stories are to an extent open-ended in their conclusion.
  - What decision do you think that Bunting Faukes made in the end? Why do you think this – what evidence is there in the text to support your interpretation?
  - Speculate as to what will happen to Virtue Bland. Remember to take into account the society and culture of the Half-Continent when predicting what might happen next.
  - Why do writers leave stories with open-ended conclusions? What might Cornish’s purpose have been in doing so? What is the effect on you, the reader, of the endings of these two stories?

## Creative Activities

- Write a passage describing a familiar place using a style of writing similar to D.M. Cornish’s writing.
- Draw your impression of a bogle, monster or other creature that might be found on the Half-Continent.
- Make a wordsearch using all the adjectives and adverbs you find on a double-page spread of the book.
- Create a crossword using Half-Continent words as the answers, and definitions from the epigraphs or text as the clues.
- Our salt-water oceans cause metal boats and ships to rust. Investigate what some of the effects of a vinegar-water ocean might be on shipping and materials. (Set up three jars, one salt water, one fresh water, one water and vinegar, and submerge items made from different substances such as wood, metal, and plastic in each. Observe and record any changes to the materials.)
- Write a poem about hunting a bogle.
- Write a short story with a character who has a sense of smell or sight as sensitive as that provided by the Half-Continent technology.