

GENERIC READING LIST

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David Almond (2010) *My Name is Mina*. London, Random House 300 pages.

ISBN 978-0-375-87327-0

Suitability: KS3. The language used is generally accessible. There are some examples of complex terms used by Mina, the central character, though these are generally broken down into phonic sounds alongside the word to replicate how it is spoken e.g. “archaeopteryx! Ark-y-opt-er-ix.” The visually unusual structure and layout may at first be jarring to readers who are used to traditional and chronological narratives, though the content is not overcomplicated by this presentation. In particular, this book may be of interest to those who enjoyed David Almond’s previous novel, as this prequel explores the life of Mina before the events of *Skellig* unfold. Alternatively, this book will appeal to those who enjoy texts with a strong first person narrator as the text accurately portrays the workings of Mina’s mind.

An empty notebook lies on a table in the moonlight. Mina McKee gazes into the night, and decides that now is the time to begin her journal, as she has often stated she will. She intends the journal to capture her various thoughts. Instead of writing a boring account of things that happen, her journal will “grow just like the mind does”.

Throughout the novel, the various journal entries allow us to glimpse into many parts of Mina’s life. Mina reveals what life is like living with her mother, and how they have coped since her father passed away. Many of Mina’s vivid descriptions take place from her favourite spot for observation and writing; the tree in her garden. Mina feels comfortable amongst nature, and from this secure spot writes of her experience at St. Bede’s Middle School. She reveals that this was not a positive experience, and describes how the decision to leave this mainstream school was confirmed on SATs day, when her creative and imaginative nature upset the school expectation. Mina then pays a brief visit to the ‘Corinthian Avenue Pupil Referral Unit’, where she meets many exceptional characters that also have found difficulty fitting in with others their age. Eventually, Mina begins a home school education with her mother, but is this the best way for her to learn?

The book explores the process of growing up, and in particular what it is like to be a child that is considered to be different from her peers. Through this theme, Almond highlights the importance of individuality. Furthermore, we see how Mina copes with the death of her father. Though criticised for lacking in adventure, this novel is to be celebrated for its exploration of the thoughts, dreams and mind of the child. The theme of how one makes sense of the complex world around us is explored with eloquence and imagination.

The innovative and varied nature of the book emphasises to the reader that not all texts are made up of traditional paragraphs and chapters. Mina presents us with her own personal views and opinions of the world through a journal enriched with poems, short stories and fragments of emphasised text. Most importantly, her account emphasises a love of language and the written word. As Mina states, “Why should a book tell a tale in a dull straight line?”

Suggested Further Activity:

- ❖ Debate issues surrounding the current school system (pros/cons).
- ❖ Create poetry using Mina’s concrete/emblem poems as a model.
- ❖ Explore the effect of nonstandard text structure and layout e.g. poems embedded within the narrative, single words per page, text that appears physically different.

John Boyne (2012) *The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket*, London: Doubleday 278 pages

ISBN: 978-0-857-53146-9

Suitability: 11+

Barnaby Brocket was born to a normal family in a normal street in Sydney with two normal siblings and a normal dog. Except Barnaby is *not* normal, he floats. Growing up, his parents tried to tolerate having a floating son but after eight years of trying, they decide that *enough is enough*. He has to go.

The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket follows Barnaby on his adventures around the globe as he tries to get home to his family, but somehow manages to find himself in places like Brazil, America, Canada and Africa, meeting a plethora of characters who are also *different* in some way.

The story explores what it is like to be *different* with a quirky twist that makes it enjoyable reading, but the themes of *fitting in* and what it means to be *normal* make it very relevant to younger readers and it might be a great way of exploring diversity issues such as disability or gender.

The book itself is well written with a quirky Dahl-esque voice. It starts to get a bit repetitive towards the end however, as you start to realize that every character that Barnaby will meet is going to be in some way estranged from his or her parents for being different. I also felt that one particular location and plot point (without wanting to give it away, but it will be obvious when you get there) stretched my suspension of disbelief to its limit.

Suggested Further Activities:

⇒ Shut the book before you get to the postcards, ask students to write them.

⇒ Explain in their own words why a character (teacher to choose) is seen as different and why people found that difficult.

⇒ Write a descriptive account of what the earth looks like from the spaceship window.

Theresa Breslin (2010) *Prisoner of the Inquisition*. London, Random House Children's Books: 309 pages. ISBN 978-0-552-56074-0

Suitability: KS4 and older teens. Although the language and style is accessible, the grotesque backdrop of The Inquisition requires Breslin to include scenes of torture that may be frightening to younger readers. The novel deals with the complex, traumatic issues of religious oppression, State violence, freedom of expression and slavery, and could be unsettling due to its basis in historical fact and the likelihood that readers will reflect on that bloody era of history. Themes like piracy, exploration, love, murder, revenge and courage makes the novel attractive to students who are not keen readers and who struggle to read for pleasure.

It is fifteenth century Spain, and Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon are waging war against the Moors of Grenada to unify Spain as one whole Catholic nation. In the small port of Las Conchas, teenagers Zarita and Saulo live very different lifestyles. The only daughter of the town's Magistrate, Zarita's life is one of privilege, wealth and finery, whilst Saulo, the son of a beggar man and sick mother, lives a life of poverty and hardship. Their paths cross, resulting in the unjust arrest of Saulo's father. Saulo, forced into a life of slavery at sea, vows to seek revenge against the Magistrate's family.

Whilst Saulo is at sea, learning to navigate and row as a slave, The Inquisition arrives in Las Conchas. Under the cruel, calculated direction of Father Besian, The Inquisition brings terror to the town's people. Fear turns neighbours and families against each other; informants become common-place as the people desperately try to direct Father Besian's suspicion and violent interrogations away from themselves. Based in Zarita's own home, Zarita cannot escape the screams of innocents tortured in the name of religious piety. She struggles with the injustice and brutality of the priests, knowing that, if she protests, she will be deemed a heretic for speaking out against the church's methods and therefore be subject to The Inquisition's merciless scrutiny.

Having escaped slavery and piracy, Saulo arrives at Queen Isabella's court with the explorer and navigator Christopher Columbus. Columbus claims the world is round rather than flat, and is seeking the King and Queen's financing for a voyage of discovery across uncharted waters. At court, Saulo again meets Zarita and the two fall in love. Zarita, betrayed by someone close to her, is then accused of heresy and taken prisoner by The Inquisition. Will Saulo have the courage and wit to save her from the torture chambers? Or will his anger and vow of revenge force him to let Zarita burn at the stake?

The Prisoner of the Inquisition is rich in emotive and sensory language, and creates a vivid, realistic picture of everyday life for people living in Spain in the late 1400s. Both protagonists are likeable and believable; the characters' harsh, dramatic experiences evoke empathy in readers, and make for compelling, exciting reading. Although the final section is somewhat abrupt, and the love scenes within this final section are tediously sentimental, Breslin's novel is gritty and stylistically satisfying in that it begins and ends with a woman burning at the stake. Indeed, the repetition of the prologue, slightly adapted, in the final chapter brings the reader full circle and ensures that readers reflect upon the novel's key themes: the violence, control and oppression of the state and church and the religious and social upheaval of the era. Breslin has also mastered the cliffhanger; her chapters alternate between Zarita and Saulo's perspectives, creating a dual narrative, suspense and tension that makes the reader want to read on. Ultimately, Breslin has created an exciting "page-turner" which is vivid and ambitiously steeped in historical fact. Her realism leaves readers imagining life in fifteenth century Spain, and reflecting on socio-political debates like right versus wrong and the personal versus the political. The novel helps readers to value modern life and freedom of speech.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Research the history of The Inquisition and the terror faced by Spanish citizens in the late 1400s.
- Research the voyage of Christopher Columbus, and his eventual landing in the New World.
- Link the issue of religious oppression to other KS4 literature about enforced political and social control (e.g. *1984*, *Brave New World*, *The Handmaid's Tale*).
- Write your own short story or poem, using dual narratives from two different protagonists, short sentences and cliffhangers to create tension, suspense and alternate perspectives.

Chris Colfer (2012) *Struck By Lightning: The Carson Phillips Journal*, Little Brown Books for Young Readers 272 pages

ISBN 978-1-61969-836-9

Suitability: Late KS3. The language is relatively accessible and the themes are not complicated. However some of the issues considered in the novel such as bullying are probably not suitable for younger pupils. This is also the age at which young people begin to consider 'the future' and when basic dreams are formed. *Struck By Lightning* deals with manoeuvring the social currents and eddies of high school life.

The novel opens with the death of senior high school student Carson Phillips who is struck by lightning. This unfortunate event somewhat surprises the reader because we don't know much about Carson except for that he is dead. The rest of the plot is told through flashbacks to earlier points in Carson's (school) life and through these memories the reader learns about his character. But Carson is also not exactly an average student and he might not be as the reader expects...

As we discover that Carson dreams of becoming a famous journalist and that he is blackmailing the most popular students at school to make them contribute to his literary journal we are also presented with a choice: To turn on Carson and think of him as a power-hungry freak, or to side with him and empathise with his status as an outsider. This key question (along with several other decisions the reader must make) are excellent practice for real-life school situations where young people are constantly forming judgements of their peers.

Colfer's writing is layered – at times dark and multi-layered but also surprisingly witty and comical in places. This constant shift keeps the pace fast and entertaining which makes reading the novel an easy task. It also serves to build up the characters – these are real young people who are moody and angry then suddenly ecstatic.

Colfer wrote the novel as a semi-autobiography in that as a student he considered himself detached from making friends. He said in an interview that *Struck By Lightning* "is about all the kids in high school who are overachieving in their own right and underappreciated for it just like I was." The issue of bullying has existed in schools for many years and this novel seeks to engage with the problem head-on. It isn't afraid to be ambitious with its message that everyone should be noticed and valued, especially young people.

The word 'ambitious' permeates the novel and another wonderful strand to the narrative is the idea that it's *ok to dream big*. Carson Phillips may be a smart boy who dreams of attending Northwestern College but the novel is telling young adults that whatever their background they shouldn't let anything stop them from wanting better and chasing it. Because of this message, *Struck By Lightning* is a worthy read for any young reader and not just fans of Colfer's day job *Glee*.

Suggested Further Activity:

- A – What is your dream for when you are grown up? Research it and give a three-minute presentation to the class on why you have chosen that subject.
- B – Watch *Billy Elliott* and compare/contrast the characters of Billy and Carson. Focus on how they stay determined to reach their goal despite setbacks and bullying.
- C – Design your own literary journal based on your class.

John Corey Whaley (2011) *Where Things Come Back*. New York, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 228 pages.

ISBN 978-1-4424-1334-4

Suitability: Confident and mature KS4 readers and older. Though the book itself is suitable for assured readers aged 14-plus, casual swearing and sexual references are widespread. Readers need the ability to acknowledge and discuss difficult issues surrounding depression, suicide and family relationships. The numerous religious references allow for cross-curricular studies.

Though there are constant interjections from an omniscient narrator, the novel is mainly written from the perspective of a 17-year-old boy. *Where Things Come Back* follows the narrator's final summer before high school graduation – perfect for anyone making decisions for their own future.

Synopsis: Seventeen-year-old Cullen Witter thinks he know everything there is to know about his small and incredibly dull Arkansas town of Lily, until everything changes...

In the summer before his senior year John Barling, an avid but depressed birdwatcher, arrives and thinks he spots the Lazarus, a woodpecker that was thought to be extinct since the 1940s in Lily. This alleged rediscovery sparks mass media frenzy. Everyone gets woodpecker haircuts and begins to eat the “Lazarus burger” at the local diner. This absurd behaviour masks the shocking discovery that Cullen's gifted fifteen-year-old brother Gabriel has suddenly and mysteriously vanished. Cullen leads the reader through a summer of adolescent romance and his navigation towards adulthood whilst holding his family together.

Meanwhile, the story meanders away from Cullen's world, following three seemingly unrelated characters. Benton Sage is a man searching for his faith, desperate for a second chance with his family, his God and himself. Alma Ember is a young woman desperate to escape the confines of a small town. Cabot Searcy is a lost and confused teen, determined to find his place in the world.

As distant as these four stories seem at first, they are thoughtfully and carefully interwoven through a controlled plot, brought head-on in a surprising and tormenting peak. Shocking and complex, streaked with regret, humour and the downright ludicrous, this novel is nevertheless hopeful and uplifting. Whaley calls *Where Things Come Back* a book of “second chances” and is much more than simply a story about “that damn bird”. The story is captivating and its characters are elaborately represented. The fear of losing a loved one and making decisions that will change your life will evoke emotion in all.

Suggested Further Activity:

- ❖ Consider popular culture references throughout the novel. How does this impact upon our understanding of the characters?
- ❖ This is a novel of second chances. How does this relate to the religious undertones throughout?
- ❖ Why do writers use varied narrative approaches?
- ❖ Imagine you are Cullen's best friend, Lucas. Write 3 personal diary entries for him, beginning with the day Gabriel goes missing. Choose 2 more days in the novel which have significance in their relationship.

Frank Cottrell Boyce (2011) *The Un-Forgotten Coat*. London, Walker Books. 99 pages.

ISBN 978-1-4063-3385-5

Suitability: KS3 or KS2. Despite dealing with the complex and sensitive issues of migration, deportation, identity and fear, the language of this book is very accessible. The first person narration maintains clarity, revealing the story in incremental stages. This along with the inclusion of many photographs by Carl Hunter, the larger font size and the fact that the pages look like they are taken from a lined notebook lends the story a greater sense of intimacy, and may appeal to more reluctant readers.

Narrated retrospectively by the protagonist, Julie, the story is based predominantly in a modern Primary School in Liverpool. Julie immediately reveals her innermost thoughts that dominated her life at the start of Year 6; thoughts that would be familiar to any young teenager. The book shifts however away from what could so easily be just another stereotypical documentation of teenage concerns, to a story that incorporates a sparkling sense of intrigue, curiosity and magic.

When two Mongolian brothers, Chingis and Nergui arrive at school for the first time, the older, Chingis immediately defies the class teacher, Mrs Spendlove and begins talking about eagles. Strangely, he does not get into trouble. This, along with the bizarre clothes the brothers are wearing leads to the other school boys pestering them. And so, Chingis enlists the help of Julie.

There follows a period when Julie, labelled as the brothers' 'good guide' shows them everything there is to see at school. Whilst the brothers are determined to integrate themselves into British culture, Julie is desperate to find out more about Mongolia. She envisages what the brothers' home is like and attempts to get invited to their house after school, but they always take a different route home. When she does succeed, she does not receive the welcome she expected; things are not at all as they seem.

As the story unfolds, Julie begins to find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and fantasy. It gradually becomes clear that the brothers' strange behaviour is rooted in their belief that they are being chased by a demon that makes things vanish. They attempt to deter the demon in various ways, but can they escape?

The Un-forgotten Coat is a stunning story of a mysterious and moving cross-cultural friendship. Boyce's comparisons of culture and his use of child perspective are delightful and compelling. We see the importance of forging an identity to fit in and sense the inherent struggle for survival. Boyce's skill lies in his subtle depiction of thoughts and feelings that nevertheless reveal the horrors of deportation. The book's sideways glance at deportation, couched in the terms of childhood, perhaps even exemplifies the eminent pressing fear and uncertainty that hovers over the brothers' lives. The brilliance of detail leaves one in no doubt as to how to envisage the story in one's head and yet it is what Boyce does not say that makes this story so tantalising. Boyce's delicately funny turn of phrase illuminates the story with an inner warmth and humour.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Investigate refugees and asylum seekers.
- Compare your own culture with another. Look at the process of assimilation.
- Visit www.thereader.org.uk to learn about The Reader Organisation – a Liverpool Charity who commissioned this book – whose aim is to encourage all people to engage in reading.

Jenny Downham (2010) *You Against Me*. Oxford, David Fickling Books. 413 pages.

ISBN 978- 1- 849- 92048-3

Suitability: KS4 and older. This is a very sensitive and tense novel about sexual abuse, right and wrong, loyalty and first loves. The language used is accessible and the themes in the text make it a thought-provoking read, suitable for mature teens and even adults. The two protagonists- 18 year old male Mikey and 15 year old female Ellie - are written well; their internal struggles with what is happening around them are candid and sincere.

The story starts with Mikey trying to keep his family together: keeping an eye on his alcoholic mother, looking after his two younger sisters Karyn (15) and Holly (8) and find a way to make his dream of being a chef in London come true. But when Karyn claims to have been raped, his previous attempts are all brushed aside to seek revenge on the boy who did it.

Ellie Parker, on the other hand, seems to have come from an idyllic life. Her parents are rich and happy together and she has a bright and promising future ahead of her. But when it's her older brother Tom who is accused of raping Karyn, she feels torn apart. She has to do everything she can to defend her brother, right?

When Ellie and Mikey meet, their lives take an even more surprising turn. A Romeo-Juliet love story begins to blossom and it all points to tragedy. Can they make their relationship work when so much hangs in the balance?

The novel soon becomes a question of loyalty and truth: what really happened between Tom and Karyn? How well do the two protagonists really know their families? Ellie soon realises that she has to choose between her family and Mikey... and between what's right and wrong.

The novel deals with the issue of sexual abuse in a sensitive and honest manner, exploring contemporary gender issues in the process: such as the 'blame' that often falls on young women who dress or behave in a certain manner and the severity of the accusation and its impact if it is unfounded. Downham's novel is a harrowing and tense read and produces sympathy for the two leads: they are never portrayed as faultless or as heroes and the difficult decision Ellie faces is one that really examines the lines between loyalty and truth.

Overall, Downham's book is a gripping and sensitive read. It's a book about loyalty and the choices that come with it. But mostly, it's a book about love and courage

Suggested Further Activity:

- Link this with *Romeo and Juliet* could prove interesting- analysing how the characters deal with the tests of their loyalty and the devastation their relationships evoke: considering the presentation of first love and family loyalty.
- Investigate the gender issues surrounding rape cases- what affects the likelihood of sentencing and what stops women reporting them?
- An activity in which pupils build two cases using facts from the books- one fighting for Tom's innocence, the other arguing his guilt.

Jenny Downham (2010) *You Against Me*. Oxford, David Fickling Books, 413 pages.

ISBN 978-1-849-92048-3

Suitability: KS4. The language is not complex, but the book contains substance use and sexual relationships (consensual and non-consensual), and is appropriate for an older teenage audience. The plot explores issues of morality and loyalty that require a mature reader response. Although the 3rd person omniscient narrative covers both a male and female perspective, the love story appeals more to a female reader.

Mikey McKenzie is struggling with the pressures of his family life. All Mikey wants is to become a chef and leave the estate in Norfolk where he lives, but his mother's alcoholism puts him in charge of two younger siblings. Karyn has always taken on her share of responsibilities, but their world is upturned after she is sexually assaulted at a punch-fuelled party. Mikey doesn't know how he can help Karyn, and doesn't understand her expectations of him. Unwilling to put himself through the discomfort of listening to her story, he resolves to find the man responsible and even the score.

On the other side of town, Ellie Parker waits anxiously to hear if her brother has made bail, whilst simultaneously hanging balloons for his homecoming party at their substantial country home. Tom has always been the caring brother; he even saved her from being savaged by a dog years before. Besides, everyone knows that Karyn McKenzie threw herself at Tom, and would have slept with him willingly. And yet, Ellie is sure she told Tom that Karyn was only 15.

Confused and oppressed by the 'Team Parker' mentality her father has cultivated, Ellie is intrigued by the stranger who turns up early, looking for Tom. Initially Mikey sees Ellie as a means to an end, a source that might leak information about her brother and give him the opportunity to use the spanner in his pocket. She excites his interest however, and a clandestine relationship begins.

It doesn't take long for Mikey's deceit to unfold, and a used and betrayed Ellie tries to trick Mikey into helping her brother's case. She soon discovers that in fact, Mikey is one of the only people she can trust. Forced to confront the events of that night, Ellie faces a complicated introspective journey.

On the surface it would be easy to dismiss this book as a clichéd Romeo and Juliet story, with our protagonists on either side of a class divide. However, the novel explores some complex ideas about duty intricately, and the characters are well-developed by the narrative of alternating perspectives. It is refreshing, given the recent trend for all things Twilight, to have a relationship based in the real world, dealing with real teen problems. With this foundation, Downham's narrative of desire will have its readers gripped, as will the equally compelling backdrop of the sexual assault court case.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Comparison with *Romeo and Juliet*. Issues of family and duty.
- Look for news stories where substance use has complicated the issue of consensual sex. Research teen rape statistics – PSHE link?
- Debate: What would you have done in Ellie's situation?

Morris Gleitzman (2011) *Grace*. London: Puffin 181 pages

ISBN 978-0-141-33603-9

Suitability: KS3 and younger teens. The language is simple throughout, although the subtlety of some of the concepts dealt with in the book may mean that it is more appropriate for students aged 13-14 than those younger. The book's entertaining treatment of faith and the tone throughout should help it connect to readers who may not otherwise have given much thought to its issues.

Grace has spent her life in a tight-knit religious community in Australia, in which members are discouraged from relating to 'outsiders' for fear of being contaminated by their views. They are taught with others of the same faith, work with them and live alongside them. However, in spite of this, her father has spent her whole life encouraging her family to ask questions of what she knows and to explore the world around her, even daring to live next to 'outsiders'. The trouble begins when Grace writes a family Bible full of stories from "The Book of Mum" and "The Book of Dad" for a school project and the members of the church react by humiliating her and eventually shunning her for what they see as her 'sins'.

Becoming increasingly bewildered by what is happening to the world of the adults surrounding her, and pulled in two directions by what her father has told her of God and what her church tells her to do, Grace wrestles with issues of obedience, faith and doubt throughout the book as her school friends turn against her and the church takes action against her family. When her father is sent away from home and no amount of good behaviour seems to fix the situation, she takes matters into her own hands. Eventually, using her own knowledge of the world and some unorthodox methods, she hatches a plan of her own to try and bring her family back into the church's good books. However, when it comes to light, will her family be able to stand against the might of their church's judgement or will they be forced to conform?

In light of recent debates about the value of religion and the some of the dangers of religious belief, Morris Gleitzman has written a timely book for teenagers. In *Grace* he has created an engaging hero who readers will care about, and through whose eyes he can explore issues of how faith can be something that is both joyful and can also be a tool of real oppression. Grace's own voice is particularly well constructed throughout, with her occasional adoption of the rhythms and style of Biblical language ("and behold, great worry was on me") giving a picture of what life is like inside the compound. Gleitzman also has fun with the language of Grace's friends - "you are so defiled" - and by sending up some of the stereotypes of religious fundamentalists. So, although the book may tackle some sensitive subjects, especially for people of faith, it does so in a manner that is funny and very accessible, and could be recommended to students on either side of the debate.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Encourage students to write their own modernised versions of fables from classic religious texts, in keeping with the tone of the book
- Link with SEAL in talking about the rules of communities (including the classroom), how these are agreed upon and how we know these are reasonable
- Attempt an S&L debate on issues about faith communities raised by the book

John Green (2012) *The Fault in Our Stars*. London, Penguin, 313 pages.

ISBN 978-0-141-34563-5

Suitability: KS4 and older teens. The language can be challenging at times and as such is suitable for more advanced readers. The content is dealt with in a sensitive and honest manner, thus in terms of content the book may be suitable for younger readers and this book could perhaps be used to stretch more able KS3 pupils.

Sixteen year old cancer sufferer Hazel Grace Lancaster, the protagonist and narrator of the story, introduces herself to the reader by way of a witty and verbose discussion of the cancer Support Group that her mother is insisting that she attends. It is whilst attending one of the weekly sessions of Support Group that Hazel meets Augustus (Gus) Waters, a seventeen year old who has fought and seemingly beaten osteosarcoma. She forms a quick friendship with Gus and they share with one another their favourite books; Hazel finds herself reading *The Price of Dawn* – a book based on a computer game, whilst Gus reads *An Imperial Affliction* by the mystique-laden one-time novelist Peter Van Houten.

Van Houten's book ends mid-sentence and Hazel has written to him many times asking that he tells her what happens to the character but she has never received a reply. Gus succeeds where Hazel has failed, managing to make contact with Van Houten via the internet. Hazel then contacts him herself, and receives a response in which she is told that although he will not email her his thoughts on what would have happened to the characters (for fear that these would end up spread across the internet), she would be welcome to come and speak with him at his home should she ever find herself in Amsterdam. Hazel lives thousands of miles away in Indianapolis, USA and is restricted by both finances and her cancer treatments (she travels everywhere with a special oxygen tank that she uses to aid her breathing) so it seems unlikely that she will ever be able to fulfil her dream of knowing what happens beyond the end of the book. Fortunately for Hazel Gus steps in, he is owed a wish by The Genie Foundation, a charitable organisation which grants wishes to sick children, as he did not use his wish whilst fighting his cancer, and he chooses to use his wish so that he and Hazel can travel to Amsterdam and meet Peter Van Houten. Once there, will they like what they find? And will Van Houten continue to have such a hold over Hazel's imagination?

Rather than existing, as so many other books of similar content do, in the shadow of death, this book is able to exist in a field where all concerned can see the cloud and yet none are beneath it. It is elegantly written and the characters are portrayed as people that happen to suffer from an illness rather than people defined by their illness.

Green has produced a book that is as enjoyable for adults as it is for its teenage target audience and that begs for multiple readings.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Introduce the literature that is quoted in the text (e.g. The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock – Eliot) and consider thematic links.
- Explore the descriptive passages surrounding the sculpture park through a multi-modal activity.
- Pupils can write their own extension of "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams as Hazel does.

Philippa Gregory (2012) *Changeling*. London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd. 260 pages.

ISBN 978-0-85707-730-1

Suitability: Top end of KS3 and KS4. The language is accessible to all students in these Key Stages. However the book does have some disturbing scenes throughout that may cause discomfort among pupils. The themes are friendships, family, magic, religion, sexism, racism and heroism. All of these are combined within an adventure for justice and a battle to gain back what is rightfully owned.

It is 1453, Castle Sant' Angelo, Rome. Luca Vero is a handsome seventeen-year-old novice priest who is accused of heresy, after he questions the authenticity of the crucifix relics. His only way out is to accept a mission where he uses his calculating mind to help find out and eliminate the fears of Christendom. Guided only by sealed orders, Luca and his two companions, Brother Peter (priest) and Freize (servant), are sent to travel across the Country to make inquiries into the evils that have been casting shadows.

Meanwhile, at the Castle of Lucretili: Isolde Lucretili, a pretty seventeen-year-old, is facing a life without a beloved father and without any of the riches that she was promised in his will. She is given only two choices by her greedy brother: marriage or a nunnery. Therefore, Isolde is forced to become Lady Abbess and take the vow of chastity within the nunnery. Trapped with only her companion Ishraq for comfort, strange things start to occur among her nuns such as; sleep walking, strange visions and showing the bleeding of the crucifixes wounds. Thus, Luca receives his first investigation.

As Isolde and Luca grow closer together, they are forced to face the darkest fears of the medieval world. As they embark on their journey they will be sure to encounter dark magic, werewolves and madness; however what they will not see coming is how their own destinies and love will entwine on their journey to find the secrets of the Order of Darkness.

Luca's heroic character throughout the book still has his own past to contend with. However his determination and loyalty to the church are what keep him fighting for justice. Isolde is determined to take back what rightfully is hers, refusing to be under the rule of men and fighting the sexism of the time.

With Luca's past and Isolde's limitations, will either of them be able to achieve their goals?

Philippa Gregory, the queen of historical fiction brings this historical story to life. Hitting hard on engaging themes, such as religion, magic, friendships, sexism, racism and even love, what more could you want? Each character has a specific role to play and a reflection of contextual issues surrounding them at the time. Gregory captures both boys and girls, with a sense of adventure, investigations and heroism; and a sense of love, loss and strong determination. The relationships between Luca and Freize; Isolde and Ishraq; Luca and Isolde, shows surviving friendships and developing loves throughout the book, allowing the reader to follow these characters through their adventures. Overall, Philippa Gregory's *Changeling* is a fascinating read, as it follows the adventures undertaken by Luca and Isolde as they battle with dark magic, madness, betrayal and long lasting love.

Suggested Activities:

- Investigate into the historical context of the time in Rome and the Religious issues.
- Compare and contrast the book with one other with similar themes and their representations. (E.g. Of Mice and Men – racism, sexism, friendship, etc.)
- Plan Luca and Isolde's journey throughout the story and what might be yet to come.

Sonya Hartnett (2010) *The Midnight Zoo*. London, Walker Books Ltd, 205 pages.
ISBN 978 – 1 – 4063 – 3149 – 3

Suitability: Years 7 – 9 (KS3). *The Midnight Zoo* is an exploration of power and freedom, told from the viewpoint of two orphaned boys, running from the persecutors of their people. Whilst the narrative itself isn't particularly complex, the language and structure varies from present to past tense flashbacks as memories are re-called, which provides interesting foundations for discussion about the effects of the diverse form in which the book is written.

Andrej, Tomas and the precious bundle they must care for are travelling across a war-torn land in search of safety.

The two orphaned Romany boys are forced to run from their home and family when the Gadge (A disparaging term for non-gypsies) soldiers take everything dear to the children and burn it to the ground. Although he is only a child himself, the elder brother, Andrej, assumes responsibility for his younger brothers safety and health – putting his hunger and worries before any concerns of his own. Whilst Tomas sleeps, Andrej hunts for treasures and food in the ravaged landscape, only sleeping when he can be assured safety, only travelling when he can be assured invisibility, in the dead of the night.

One night, in the most desolate and damaged town they have travelled through on their quest for safety, they find unexpected comfort in the form of a Zoo, a small green haven of nature within their blackened, burning surroundings. Their surprise is not limited to the discovery of the Zoo, as they later discover that the animals can talk and the Menagerie, share their own experiences of freedom and power.

Hartnett has combined historical fiction and fantasy, to reflect the shared experiences of caged animals with the oppression and metaphorical caging of the Romany people during the Second World War. The animals and boys reflect on the freedom they long for and how it was stolen from them in the first instance.

The narrative also explores the theme of heroism. For the animals, their hero is a rebel named Alice, who has fled to the mountains after assassinating a close friend of the leader of the offensive against her land and people. They await her return to guarantee freedom and care which she showed them when she tended them as a child. For Andrej and Tomas, they cling to the knowledge instilled in them by their wise Uncle Marin, who paid the ultimate price for his courage. They hope to find a safe place in which their mother will find and rescue them to enable them to live in peace with her, travelling the lands as before.

The uncertain future of the boys and animals is reflected in the format of the last chapter, which is written as a dream sequence. This ambiguous form leaves the reader questioning whether their goals are attainable, or merely a means to cope with the inevitable fate of persecution met by their friends and family before them.

Just when it seems like hope is lost, a dawn breaks...

Suggested Further Activity:

- Investigate the history of the Romany Gypsies.
- Cross-curricular links – Compare and contrast the persecution of the Romany Gypsies, with that of the Jewish people in World War 2.
- Link the issues of racial tension to other literature (e.g. *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

Holly Gocoul

Anthony Horowitz (2011) *The House of Silk*, London, Orion 389 pages.
ISBN 978-1-4091-3598-2

Suitability KS4 and older teenagers. The language is quite accessible, although it's written to imitate 19th Century English which may take a little getting used to for readers who are used to reading predominantly modern fiction. Some mature themes are explored, in particular the socio-economic divide in 19th Century England, drugs, death and political corruption. There are moments of violence, however these are never overly graphic, and generally leave it to the imagination of the reader to make up the details.

Overview *The House of Silk* is a modern addition to the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle. Written from the perspective of Dr Watson, it is set in the same 19th Century London of the originals, and it aims to replicate the atmosphere and language style of that era.

The story begins with a short preface by Dr Watson where he introduces himself, the reason for his writing the story and how he first came to meet Sherlock Holmes. He finishes by forebodingly telling the reader, "it is no exaggeration to suggest that they (the contents of the story) would tear apart the entire fabric of society," if released in their proper time, and so they are being placed in a vault for 100 years to prevent them being read too early. The reader then, is placed in the position of holding the last Sherlock Holmes story taken directly from the time it was written, and left wondering what is to come.

Sherlock Holmes is introduced to the reader through the lens of Dr Watson, who continually eulogises about Holmes' great intellect and capacity for solving crimes. There are numerous points where Holmes tells characters he has just met intricate details of their life and history, and then shows them what gave it away through minor details in how they look, the books in their study, the tan lines on their face and so on.

The plot itself begins with an art dealer coming to Holmes and asking for his help with some paintings that have been stolen, but then quickly escalates to his investigation of two murders (one of which he himself is partly culpable), and his discovery of "The House of Silk," an organisation shrouded in utmost secrecy. The story canters along taking Holmes and Watson around the world, through several death-defying moments and numerous chances for Holmes's detective skills to be employed. Horowitz writes this all with a great deal of excitement, and draws the reader into a world of subterfuge, violence and high London society.

I really enjoyed *The House of Silk*, and felt that Horowitz combined a compelling narrative with some quite adult themes to great effect. His long descriptions of London and various shady characters could be easily utilised in a classroom to look at aspects of language analysis, however the length of the novel may hinder its use for a whole class. If I were to use this with a class I would probably use *The House of Silk* to inform the reading of the original Sherlock Holmes books rather than read it in its own right.

Suggested Further Activity

- Compare extracts of *The House of Silk* with the original novels, and see if anything has changed.
- Explore themes of drug use, child poverty and slavery in book, and see how they relate to today
- Have younger students come up with their own fictional character they describe through a third person perspective

Suitability: A gripping example of historical fiction for young teenagers and especially teenage girls (12-15 years). Jago brings the Elizabethan world to life through a mixture of vivid, detailed description of setting combined with fast-paced plot; a world seen through the eyes of thirteen-year-old Cess Perryn. The opportunity for young readers to visit Montacute House near Yeovil in Somerset means that Jago's book has great potential to excite the interest of budding historians. Reading *Montacute House* would be a valuable complement to studying the Tudors or to working on Shakespeare's Elizabethan and romance plays.

Cess's adventure draws the reader into an Elizabethan reality which was genuinely dangerous and colourful; often as fantastical as fiction. The narrative begins when Cess finds a precious pendant from Montacute House in the chicken pen where she works. The implications of this are as dangerous for Cess as such a find would have been for an Elizabethan woman at court. The discovery that same day of the body of a boy, black and blistered, sparks off the terror of the plague that Elizabethans really faced and sets up an arresting puzzle which the plot unravels: What is the connection between Cess and the dead boy? Jago creates an exciting story out of thrilling realities of Elizabethan life: superstition, ambition, passion and murder.

Setting the novel at Montacute House and in the surrounding village allows Jago to explore a wide variety of different experiences and perspectives that existed in sixteenth century England. She draws sophisticated connections between the lives of the poor and the rich through intriguing characters that are both complex and credible. Poverty motivates scheming behaviour just as powerfully as greed does: Cess's cousin, Amelia, is like a peasant version of Anne Boleyn, vying for a rich man's attentions in order to gain power and wealth. Drax Mortain, the villain of the book and son to the Earl of Montacute is an alcoholic like Joliffe the farmer. While Joliffe is dishevelled in appearance, however, he is revealed to be a good man at heart; where Drax, despite his good looks, is rotten underneath.

In creating an exciting romance story, Jago chooses to simplify certain historical realities. Catholic churchmen in the book are depicted as villains in order to motivate reader loyalties, while witchcraft is treated as a fantasy element of the novel, even though the label of 'witch' was actually used as a means to oppress women. It is worth encouraging young readers to investigate the historical truths that Jago uses and alludes to and those aspects which she chooses to alter in order to create a more thrilling romance: How is romance like reality in its many-layered complexity? In what ways does romance depart from a 'realistic' plot? Is the idea of magic in the book a means to recreate the Elizabethans' experience of reality, since people genuinely believed in the supernatural?

Suggested further activities:

- ❖ Visit Montacute House, (a National Trust property), and explore Montacute village.
- ❖ Draw and label a map of Montacute in the sixteenth century.
- ❖ Draw portraits of various characters in the novel as examples of 16th c. peasants and nobles.
- ❖ Investigate witchcraft, assassination plots, courtly life, poverty and plague in 16th c. England.
- ❖ Write a diary entry detailing events from the point-of-view of a different character from Cess.

Jeff Kinney (2010) *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth*. London, Penguin. 217 pages.

ISBN 978-0-141-34082-1

Suitability: KS3 and older reluctant readers. Good for KS4 students who struggle with literacy. This book is a useful text up to GCSE level, where the largely simple sentence structures can be examined and compared to more challenging exam texts, functioning as an effective language teaching tool.

Themes of feeling alone, awkwardness, of struggling with growing up and trying to do the 'right thing' despite peer pressure will appeal to girls and boys alike.

The 'comic novel' style – part diary, part comic strip - with its engaging line drawings, will draw in book-shy students who will then encounter some sharp insights into the human condition, all under the guise of laugh-aloud humour.

Suburban Americana is given an appealingly comic twist in this latest tale about disaster-prone anti-hero Greg Heffley. We meet him on the hunt for a new best friend in time for the start of the school year, Greg having fallen out with former sidekick Rowley. Greg suffers from having a more daring older brother, a far cuter and attention-grabbing younger sibling and a mother who meddles in his fledgling attempts at pre-adolescent independence. Kinney is adept at making a reader root for Greg who, with all his faults, greets each challenge to his dream to become a popular, successful video-gaming Grade A student with infectious enthusiasm.

The complexity of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* lies in its truthful subtext of how things really are for most children of Greg's age. The vocabulary, though based in American life, uses a range of techniques to subvert expectations: parents don't do what Greg expects them to, his plans are constantly foiled and a young Year 7 or Year 8 reader will be drawn into familiar struggles with what do about events unfolding in unexpected ways. These conceits in the text can be highlighted for curious readers and Kinney's technique explored in order to develop readers and writers who can attain higher levels of literacy if given a sufficient confidence boost.

The main question for Greg is whether he has what it takes to win back the affection of his friend, whose company he lost in morally-murky circumstances in a previous novel. Greg's world and the dilemmas he faces are entirely believable and curious pre-teen readers will unwittingly absorb the technical aspects of skilfully-written prose, becoming hooked before they know it. Kinney is a word-wizard sent to cause reluctant readers to fall in love with books and stories and should be required reading for all.

Suggested further activity:

- Students who previously refused to read novels but who like Jeff Kinney's writing could be directed to Mark Lowery (eg. *Socks Are Not Enough*) to encourage a new-found love of reading and progress beyond the 'comic novel'.
- Cross-curricular: the travails of Greg Heffley would be a useful resource for PSHE teachers, since Greg encounters most of the social, physical and psychological challenges of being a young person.

Ali Lewis (2011) *Everybody Jam*, London, Andersen Press 283 pages.

ISBN 978-1-84939-248-8

Suitability: For KS4 and 12 years and over teenagers. The language is accessible throughout, although rich in Australian slang. The protagonist is a 13-year-old boy called Danny Dawson. Although it is presented through a young narrator the story deals with adult themes as death, racism and teenage pregnancy, and could be considered a 'coming of age' story.

Everybody Jam is set on a cattle station, Timber Creek in the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory of Australia (the outback).

Danny Dawson and his family are mourning the death of his eldest brother, Jonny, who died in a sudden accident on the farm. The rising temperatures and physical harsh conditions lie parallel with the tension that is raised when the family finds out that Danny's 14-year-old sister, Sissy, is pregnant to an Aborigine, which is later nicknamed as her 'mongrel'.

When the cattle station looks to be in jeopardy, Danny's mother hires Liz, an English backpacker to help on the farm. Liz, the 'Pommie' initially creates chaos with her lack of domesticity, however as time passes she becomes the family's emotional catalyst and helps heal their grief.

The annual muster, where cattle are selected for slaughter is the biggest event of the year on the cattle station. Ravaging through the heat and drought, the beauty of the natural landscape and open space is a playground for masculinity where Danny tries to fill his late brother's shoes. Gender and racist issues lie alongside a controversial society whilst feral cattle, obstinacy and heroism are battled with throughout this debut novel.

Everybody Jam is an interesting and compelling read that is told convincingly and subjectively by a confused teenager who is fighting for understanding and identity in a troublesome context and harsh environment. Despite the raw reality and serious issues addressed, the story remains humorous and entertaining whilst simultaneously proving poignant and sensitive. The author draws you in effectively with realistic characters, Australian language and an honest portrayal of prejudices compound in a convincing knowledge of life in the outback.

Suggested Further Activity:

- ❖ Investigate the history of Australia and the influence of the Aborigine.
- ❖ Link the issues of racial tension to South African literature.
- ❖ Compare and contrast this 'coming of age' story to that of *A Portrait of An Artist As A Young Man* by James Joyce
- ❖ Study the language and formality of its use within the novel

Karina Lickorish Quinn (2011) *Shrinking Violet*. 128 pages.

Available via Amazon as a Kindle e-Book: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Shrinking-Violet-ebook/dp/B008PS0GYE>

Suitability: KS4 and young adults. The language is easily accessible and the abundant use of magical imagery is sure to engage young teens. The book has more serious undertones and explores the effects of mental illness and therefore is suitable for mature adolescents. Teens can easily relate to the themes of adolescent insecurity and the frustrations of finding one's identity.

Violet is an abnormally tall teenage girl living in a cramped and crooked house situated between two watering holes in Oxford. Her family is overbearingly eccentric and Violet is strikingly ordinary by comparison. Violet is faced with constant criticism from everyone around her, and the internal monologue which interrupts the narrative illustrates her stark insecurities. Her family's most recent criticism, and the one which begins her journey, is that she has lost her 'spark'. Concerned, Violet turns to Julius, her confidant and grandfather.

Julius, a best-selling novelist who has since claimed permanent writer's block, is Violet's only source of solace. Julius' incessant writing eventually infuriates Violet's grandmother so much that he is kicked out and moved into the confines of Violet's basement. He leaves scrawls of haikus on paper about the house and obsessively cuts out newspaper clippings which Violet frantically seeks to preserve. In a surreal narrative constructed by the fanciful, imaginative view of a teenage girl, Julius' perceptions of the world around him are just as whimsical. In spite of the uncertainties Julius faces, he retains a confidence in himself which Violet lacks. But as Julius' Alzheimer's deteriorates and his sharp insight into life disappears, will Violet manage to find her spark without him?

Shrinking Violet is a heart-warming and beautifully written novel that takes inspiration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* with reference to the white rabbit, dodo, jam tarts and chess. The language evokes the curiously imaginative minds of Violet and Julius and bursts with haikus and magical imagery. The narrative is surreal and portrays the inquisitive adolescent mind which questions everything as readily as it accepts any answer. Violet is eager to please and is sensitive to adult's opinions in particular. Her literal interpretation of adults' comments is heart-wrenchingly touching and it is difficult not to sympathise with Violet's social clumsiness. Although there are tear-jerking moments, Lickorish Quinn's portrayal of the all-too familiar modern-day dysfunctional family is sure to provide comic relief. An inspirational and imaginative read that delicately explores finding who you are and how love can preserve the identity of a family member.

Suggested Further Activity:

- * Explore genre of magical realism.
- * Make inter-textual links with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.
- * Investigate the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease

Geraldine McCaughrean (2010) *The Death-Defying Pepper Roux*

ISBN 978-0192756039

Suitability: Ages 10 and up

As a book to inspire interest in reading, *The Death-Defying Pepper Roux (Pepper)* makes an interesting choice. The circuitous plot which follows the adventures and misadventures of the young Pepper: the nickname 'le pauvre' mispronounced 'poivre' French for Pepper, seems designed to involve readers at the level of language as well as the plot. The French setting gives a feeling of exoticism to the text whilst feeling familiar and relevant, introducing readers to the society of France and especially the importance of Roman Catholicism within French religious life.

The story focuses upon the young boy Pepper-Roux whose Aunt Mireille has predicted his death at the age of fourteen since the day of his birth. Aunt Mireille claims she received a vision from St. Constance and her devotion to her faith demands that Pepper says prayers and learns the last rites above all other daily concerns. This plot takes on the issue of religion in the life of a society and a family, who concede to Mireille's demands and questions not only the usefulness of devotion but also the potential motives of those who claim special insight. The novel demands therefore, a certain level of engagement with issues beyond those simply seen in the text itself. If there is one problem that *Pepper* faces, is that it tackles these complex issues with a subtlety that might not be appreciated by all young readers. For this reason, *Pepper* in terms of its subtext would more likely appeal to a more accomplished and confident reader but would be a useful text to challenge an intermediate reader.

Pepper takes an episodic structure. This would certainly work to its advantage if the book was being read out loud over several lessons, or was being read by a less confident reader. Manageable chapter sizes allow encouraging progress to be made through the novel and the frenetic pace of plot insures that interest can be sustained over the course of the entire narrative. As Pepper moves from one identity to another and one location to another, the plot can appeal to lovers of boy's adventure stories and the fantasy genre in the imagination with which McCaughrean describes her settings. The fact that the reader follows Pepper through his story can also work to the books advantage for younger readers by introducing a hero who is to some extent relatable and able to fulfil childhood hopes of becoming someone else in the most stupendous game of dress up.

Pepper is a novel that can appeal both to male and female young readers. Its themes and subject matter contain levels of complexity, which will appeal to students that are more confident, but is not so obscure as to alienate other readers. Its dynamic plot holds the attention and episodic structure promotes periodic reading rather than sustained attention. *Pepper* is by no means a perfect novel but its blend of fascinating characters and persistent escapism make it one that is difficult not to be charmed by and hard to forget.

Michael Morpurgo (2012) *A Medal for Leroy*, London, HarperCollins, 223 pages

ISBN 978-0-00-748751-6

Suitability: Year 7. Accessible language, informative illustrations and well sized and spaced words make the book unthreatening and simple looking. In this guise, Morpurgo has addressed some complex and uncomfortable themes (death, racism, war) in a narrative that is enjoyable and digestible but maybe not sophisticated enough for older learners.

Dipping in and out of different times and narrative voices, the book spans both World Wars and is based on the true story of Walter Tull, the first black soldier to serve in the British army and whose courage in saving three other men went unrecognised by higher ranks due to racial prejudices.

Growing up in 1940's London, Michael is not so bothered that the other children call him 'Poodle' on account of his frizzy black hair. This probably has something to do with his mother being French. She came over in the war while her own country was occupied by the Germans. Most of the differences between him and the others have to do with the fact that his mother is French. Except one. The big one. The others have dads. Michael does have a dad; he's the man in the smart pilot uniform behind the glass of the photograph on old Aunt Snowdrop and Aunt Pish's mantelpiece. Always polished, always perfectly positioned. Like the medals his dad won for bravery in the war. His Scottish Aunties are a bit odd and very old, but they adopted his dad as a baby and grieve his loss still. So does Michael's Maman. Nobody talks about him much and Michael doesn't want to upset anyone by asking.

Although death is not new to Michael, it is strange and upsetting when old Aunt Snowdrop dies. She leaves Michael the photograph of his father which he discovers is not alone in the frame- a thin notebook lies behind it! Opening it up and beginning to read, Michael learns about his past and who he really is for the first time from the voice of his Aunt Snowdrop and her retelling of her love with a black British soldier in the first world war. Michael's Grandfather.

The novel presents resolutions reached as family secrets are unearthed, delivers posthumous recognition of extreme bravery and addresses the injustice of prejudices on both race and gender levels that still survive today. Important ideas of acceptance and diversity are presented well 'I was from Barbados, from Scotland and from France. How rare was that! How special was that!' as well as interesting ideas of what constitutes a 'normal' family. The relatively brief and light treatment of war is grounded very well by the real life context given in the informative, factual 'Afterward' and works to add depth to the likeable characters in the fiction.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Investigate the racial diversity of Britain in 1918. Who had come from where? Why had they emigrated? What were the common attitudes and how did they manifest in day to day life?
- Compare how elderly women are portrayed in other texts
- Discuss how the themes of mixed marriages/relationships and/or illegitimate children are presented today in books/films/TV

Jojo Moyes (2012) *Me Before You* London: Penguin Books 481 pages

ISBN: 978-0-718-15783-8

Suitability: KS4. The language is very accessible, with simple vocabulary. However, the book discusses issues around disability, euthanasia and rape, therefore making it more suitable for mid-older teens, rather than a younger audience. The text offers an insight into 'the other' in society, in this instance a quadriplegic man.

The book is set in contemporary Britain. Jobs are hard to come by and money is tight in the Clark household. Lou Clark is both the protagonist and narrator in this first person narrative. It is her experience caring for Will Traynor, a car accident victim, which forms the story. Lou is not a trained carer, and so the reader grows alongside Lou in the previously unknown territory of quadriplegic life. We follow as the story unfolds and Lou finds out Will's wish to die. Lou believes in life and living, and makes a plan to change Will's mind. The reader joins her on this mission, and the rollercoaster of events that follow. Can she do it?

We see the world through Lou's eyes, which may put off some male readers, however do not be fooled by the pink cover on this book. This is a story about what it is to live. It questions our rights and our wishes. Lou's life has been defined by an event that happened in her past, just as Will's life is defined by an event in his life. Their circumstances are entirely different, yet they manage to teach one another to feel again. It is a narrative of many layers, a combination of romance, a bildungsroman and a commentary on disability and euthanasia in society today.

This book is unusual in focusing on a quadriplegic, and raises a fascinating perspective for young people to consider. Think back to the last time you saw someone in a wheelchair, what did you do? Did you look away, or glance over, perhaps discreetly to the side. Or did you make eye contact and smile? After reading this book you will think about wheelchair users in a different way. Rather than see the chair, or the disability, see the person.

Suggested further activities:

- Research euthanasia, exploring specific cases and the legal structure around it.
- Debate the outcome of the book – argue for/against.
- What is disability – explore denotation and connotation.

Andy Mulligan (2010) *Trash*. Oxford, David Flickling Books 224 pages

ISBN: 978-1849920568

Suitability: Upper KS3 and KS4 students. Mulligan's writing is accessible, the story is broken into short sections, and the vocabulary is appropriate for KS3 students; however, this novel does describe incidents of national corruption and adult violence towards children which might be unsettling. The story centres around the actions of three boys (Raphael, Gardo and Rat). Whilst the storytelling could ensnare a reader of any age, it is particularly suitable for a young adult audience, drawing stark contrasts between the experience of western life and the everyday realities of growing up on a dumpsite in the developing world.

Mulligan draws upon key elements of traditional adventure story and fairy tale, building suspense and dramatic tension as the overlooked heroes of this modern-day fable uncover a mystery that promises to elevate them from their humble beginnings and restore justice as they claim victory over their oppressors. However, as the preface to this novel reminds us, the Behala dumpsite is no 'once upon a time', it is based upon the author's personal encounters in the Philippines. The adventures of Raphael, Gardo and Rat might be fictional, but their lives are representative of thousands of children who live the real world, in the 21st century.

Trash explores how a chance discovery can change a life. After a lifetime of searching for value in the things that other people throw away, Raphael happens upon a bag that propels him and two other 'dumpsite boys' into a dangerous adventure across their city.

This novel is at once shocking and enthralling, presenting its reader with an experience of harrowing poverty through the eyes of the charismatic Raphael, protective Gardo and quietly enterprising Rat. These characters describe their situation with an acceptance that highlights all that is unacceptable in the world around them. The story is fast paced and frequently switches perspective with chapter openings such as 'Raphael again' telling the reader who is relating each section. The central characters follow clues, break codes and uncover secrets as they rush to discover the truth of what they have found. We too piece together their personalities and allegiances from the sections of narrative relayed by each individual.

This is a mystery novel unlike others. It tackles questions of poverty, wealth, justice and truth whilst propelling us towards an astonishingly cinematic climax. Mulligan forces his young readers to search for their own beliefs and formulate personal opinions about the events and situations he describes. Will Raphael, Gardo and Rat find the answers that they crave? Are the methods that they employ acceptable? Can they possibly triumph in a world where that has discarded them amongst the trash?

Suggested Further Activity:

- Further investigate the lives of children living in cities across India and South East Asia.
- Explore the ways in which Mulligan gradually reveals details to create a mystery story; compare this to classic treasure hunt stories such as Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Treasure Island' and Arthur Ransome's 'Swallows and Amazons'.
- Create a mind-map to show which parts of the story we learn from which characters. Why does Mulligan tell us this story from many different perspectives? For example, how might our experience of Gardo and Olivia's journey to the prison have been different if this had all been told from the boy's perspective?

Patrick Ness (2012) *A Monster Calls*. London, Walker Books Ltd 215 pages.
ISBN 978-1-4063-3934-5

Suitability: Mature KS3 and early KS4. The language is largely accessible however the issues are complex and disturbing. Knowledge of the class[es] in question is necessary to ensure that no pupils are distressed by the subject matter. The main protagonist is a 13 year-old boy. However the issues of loneliness, bullying, love, illness and loss are wide-ranging enough to appeal to a larger audience.

13 year old Conor has a recurring nightmare. Then, one night he is woken by a monster outside his bedroom window. However this isn't the monster from his dreams, this is an entirely different monster altogether. The monster has come to tell him three stories, and in return it asks that Conor tells it the truth of his nightmare; or it will eat him. Meanwhile, Conor attempts to live as normal a life as possible whilst his mother undergoes treatment for cancer.

Conor is old for his years, having to look after himself due to his mother's illness. At school he is bullied by a group of boys and alienated from his peers (and also his teachers) who do not know what to say, or how to relate to him, following his mother's diagnosis. He distances himself from his only friend as he blames her for spreading news of his mother's illness. He exists in a world of loneliness, spending days in only his own company.

Conor's parents are divorced and his father lives in America with his new family. Conor loves his father but his involvement in his life always ends up in rejection. Conor also has a difficult relationship with his grandmother who he has to stay with when his mother is in hospital. His familial relationships further imbed his loneliness and sense of alienation and lead him to rely further on the monster that has come to help him.

The monster is a kind of 'Green Man' creature, transfigured from a yew tree in Conor's garden. He is as old as time and as wise. The stories he tells Conor are complex; although they do relate to Conor's situation they are not directly moral tales. They are a comment on the complexity of human life and that nothing is ever black and white. The monster is attempting to educate Conor so that he can share his own complicated tale, but has the monster done enough? And what does telling the tale mean for Conor and his mother?

One cannot fail to be moved by *A Monster Calls*, as it deals with an emotional storyline sensitively and imaginatively. The decision to portray this through the eyes of a 13-year old boy and to include a fantasy element does not take away from the seriousness of the subject matter but allows it to become more accessible. The story is never unbelievable or far-fetched, but subtle and beautiful. Choosing to teach this novel will need forethought and preparation, but I feel that the scope and rewards will make it worth it.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Investigate the idea of the 'Green Man'
- Create own stories with unexpected endings (like the stories the monster tells)
- Character empathy – opportunities to write diary entries/letters etc from Conor's and other character's points of view

Sally Nicholls (2012) *All Fall Down*, London: Marion Lloyd Books/Scholastic, 256 pages.

ISBN 978-1-40712-172-7

Suitability: KS4, although some mature KS3 students who have strong reading skills would enjoy reading this book. It was actually recommended to me by a top set YR 9 student. The language is accessible but the book is quite dense and it may put off some weaker readers who struggle to read for sustained periods of time.

Synopsis: It's 1349. A 14 year old girl called Isabel tells the story. She lives with her father, stepmother Alice and younger siblings Ned, Margaret and baby Edward. The story takes place in the village of Ingleforn, Yorkshire. The family are serfs working within the feudal system of Medieval England; this means they are tied to working the land of the Lord's manor before they can work their own. They have limited freedoms displayed in the fact they are prevented from leaving the village without permission.

A year earlier rumours had arrived in the village of a terrible sickness taking hold of other parts of the country namely Bristol and London. The village of Ingleforn is remote and the community thinks that this remoteness will keep them safe as the plague starts to move north. They believe God will only strike heathens or the ungodly of which they are not.

Isabel is nearing womanhood and she hopes to marry Robin, her childhood sweetheart. Despite the hope of the villagers the plague eventually arrives and people start to die. Most flee the village but Isabel, her family and Robin stay behind. Gradually the disease takes the lives of Isabel's parents and she and Robin take on the role as parents to the younger siblings. With no Lord to order them to work they take the opportunity to go to York with a merchant who has lost his own family. Isabel finds it difficult to adapt to city ways and longs to return to her village, but now as a free woman.

This book is well researched and presents a version of the plague successfully. It discusses and presents an experience of feudalism in Medieval England and how the plague brought massive societal change within this system. Nicholls really captures the apocalyptic devastation that the plague brought and does not omit the horrific details. Although historical fiction, the character of Isabel feels contemporary with the idea of growing up, focusing on her change from teenager to adult which is a relatively new concept. This gives the book many interesting layers to keep readers interested and ways to relate to the protagonist.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Link to History with investigation of the feudal system. How it worked. How might it have felt? Compare and contrast with modern society.
- Identity and growing up. Use the character of Isabel to map and explore how she changes.
- Apocalypse. Could this happen now?

Jeff Norton (2012) *Metawars*: Orchard ISBN: 1408314592

Metawars is a fast and furious addition to the cyberpunk genre, which combines two of the greatest aspects of young adult entertainment; reading and video games.

The novel features a teenage protagonist called Jonah Delacroix, a boy who has already lost his father and quickly loses his mother early in the narrative. Sounding familiar so far? You haven't read anything yet. Aside from being a teenage orphan Jonah lives in a dystopian version of London, falls into unrequited love in the first chapter and has a secret destiny. These are all staples of the recent trends in the young adult genre, especially after the success of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and are by no means only re-used by *Metawars*. However tired these tropes are, they still appeal to the novel's target audience by allowing them to empathise with the protagonist and the strange situations he finds himself in. What *Metawars* does do is place this generic structure into an intelligent and referential setting, one that uses many current worries and technology advances to great effect.

Metawars' planet earth is a dark world where the majority of people live in burned out buses and steel constructs, one ravaged by the lack of fossil fuels and global warming. The way Norton integrates contemporary real world issues into the narrative is inspired, especially as they are relevant to the story and affect the characters throughout. He uses teenagers' love of video games and technology to great effect, as most people in the novel's world choose to live in another reality altogether: the metaverse. This virtual network, where people can live second lives as all kinds of bizarre avatars, is a main character in of itself. As the story progresses it becomes more and more entrancing, especially considering recent worries in the media about addiction to both video games and social networks such as Facebook. It is undoubtedly Norton's greatest creation in this book, a look into the future of our society that is both fascinating and terrifying. By surrounding a work of fiction with real aspects of life and highly believable concepts for the future, *Metawars* implements a concept that has (surprisingly) not been explored in popular fiction since the early days of the cyberpunk sub-genre. It has stagnated recently, mostly because the ideas of connectivity and mobile technology so often deemed futuristic in the early novels of the genre (such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*) have since become a reality thanks to Apple's portable devices and the internet. However, the metaverse achieves the same thing but in a far more advanced, and perhaps jaded, present where we are all becoming more and more reliant on the internet for maintaining relationships but lose more and more grounding in reality.

Slightly less inspiring is the plot of the novel. It is a typical adventure romp through various locations worldwide, both virtual and real. Explosions abound in almost every chapter, fire fights and chase sequences only slightly less common. There is even a romance between Jonah and a girl he meets early on, though it is never allowed to interfere with the constant action and become a central part of the plot. If this is sounding like a review of a Hollywood summer blockbuster, that's because that is exactly what this book is. The characters race from crisis to crisis, never more than half a chapter away from the next one even after they've barely managed to survive the one previously. The reader is never allowed to breathe because of this exhausting pace, which makes the book both exhilarating and addictive to read but lacking the substance it promises with its excellent concept of the metaverse. If more emphasis had been kept on this creation, and it being a metaphor for the modern world's dependence of technology and reliance on colossal corporations such as Microsoft and Apple (who are represented by the two warring factions in the book, the Millennials and the Guardians, rather transparently) rather than action movie-esque action sequences, *Metawars* could have been an immortal piece of narrative rather than just a very decent book. That being said, it has ignited a renaissance for the cyberpunk genre and provided a much needed shot in the arm for stories set in near-future settings that have more believability than pure sci-fi texts.

Metawars is fast, frantic and fun, and Norton shows a real talent for making reading exciting by throwing plot twists at the reader every few chapters. It brings the razzle dazzle of movies and video games to the page, allowing teenagers and adults alike to rekindle their passion for reading by borrowing certain elements from those other contexts. However, when reading with a critical eye it is hard not to be slightly disappointed by the unrealised potential of the many great ideas in the story.

Annabel Pitcher (2011) *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece*. London, Indigo 221 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-78062-029-9

Suitability: KS3 and older teens. The novel is narrated by ten year old Jamie. It deals with a range of harrowing issues that may be quite sensitive for younger pupils to explore but because the story is told through the perspective of a ten year old, the language is accessible and allows the reader to instantly become part of Jamie's world. The power lies in the subtlety and consequently is worthy of deeper analytical study at KS4, should it complement other schemes of work.

Meet Jamie. He is ten years old. He has a cat called Roger and loves football and Wayne Rooney. He has a wonderful pair of football boots but they are too small for him so every time he plays in the park they turn his feet blue (but sssshhhh, he doesn't want to seem ungrateful so he doesn't tell anyone). Immediately after reading the first page there is a sense of intrigue. The reader is aware that Jamie's sister died five years ago and that she now 'lives' on the mantelpiece. It does not become clear straight away how Rose died but clearly it was not from an aggressive case of flu judging from the particularly grim details that are revealed at the start. Gradually over the course of the novel more details emerge and this has two effects: the reader is taken on a journey by Jamie and with each detail it seems like he himself is coming to terms with the reality of the situation; it is also an effective tactic to hook the reader whereby a number of questions emerge and answers are rarely divulged to the reader in a straightforward way.

It transpires that Jamie's family were torn apart by a London terrorist attack which killed his older sister Rose, twin to his older sister Jasmine. His father is an alcoholic and his mother abandoned the family to live with her 'support worker' lover called Nigel. As a result, Jamie, his Dad, Jasmine, and the urn that contains Rose's ashes, try to make a fresh start in the Lake District. Just when you think it can't become more traumatic and that potentially the family might actually make headway, Jamie starts a new school only to be bullied by a strangely satanic ten year old. Jasmine develops an eating disorder and the pair of them enjoy a lifestyle of packing away vodka bottles and eating microchips. But then there is a flash of hope when Jamie makes a new friend at school... Sunya: a Muslim.

Whilst Pitcher deals with grief and loss experienced by children, the novel does not at any point become overly sentimental or a morality tale; issues are treated with sensitivity and honesty. The relationship between Jamie and Jasmine is particularly beautiful and at crucial points offers hope within the novel. Whilst at times upsetting, *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece* is a story about the love and loyalty between a family and the treasure of a true friend and it is this that makes it a worthy read for children, teens and adults alike.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Draw parallels with *To Kill a Mockingbird* and in particular link the use of a child's perspective to illustrate problems with racism in society and the 'childishness' of adulthood.
- Explore Islamophobia and reactions to terrorism – can be used when studying media (e.g. Looking at bias in journalism and emotive language in articles)
- It could inspire creative writing work. Pupils could focus in on Jamie's bullying and use it as a stimulus to create their own anti bullying literature.

Philip Pullman (2012) *Grimm Tales For Young and Old*. London, Penguin 421 pages.
ISBN 978-1-846-14026-6

Suitability: As in the title, this book could be read by anyone, and certainly anyone at secondary school. Its broad appeal is due to every tale finishing with a brief note on the text from Pullman: whilst younger reader would probably skip these and focus on the stories, they may well be the most interesting part of the book for older readers. The book is an anthology of Grimm's fairy tales re-written by Philip Pullman. As such a summary of the plot(s) here would be impossible. That said, there are certain similarities in all the tales, so a look at one of them, 'The Three Snake Leaves' (86) would be worthwhile.

The story starts with a poor young man distinguishing himself in battle, and as a result marrying the princess of the kingdom. The princess, however, has made it a condition of marriage that he who marries her must, if she dies first, then kill himself - 'After all, if he really loves me [...] why would he want to go on living?' as she says (86). Predictably, she then dies, and the young man is locked in her tomb with her, left to starve to death. At this point, a snake slithers into the tomb, which the prince kills in defense of the corpse. After a while, another snake arrives, puts some leaves on the wounds of the first snake, thereby bringing it back to life, and they slither off together. The prince realises the power of these magic leaves and uses them to resurrect his dead bride. Unfortunately, however, now she's back to life she no longer loves him. She conceals this fact until they go on a sea voyage, before strangling him to death, aided by the captain of their ship. Her plan is to return to the king, her father, and both explain away the death as accidental and commend the captain such that the murderous pair can be married. Do they get away with it?

This tale is typical of the type in several ways. Firstly, as a fairy tale, it is short on details - we are never given names for any of the characters, for example, and the events described above are told succinctly in just over five pages. It also features the key characters of young man, princess, king, and what we could call a 'working man' (be in ship's captain, as here, or miller, cobbler, tailor, etc.). At least one of these, and usually more, appear in almost every tale in the book. Furthermore, there is the improbable plot twist: the arrival of the three magic leaves, and the way they are introduced, is fairly standard for a fairy tale but from an objective point of view seems quite bizarre, and all the more so for the matter-of-fact way it is written. Finally, there is the happy ending. One can rely on the tales to end with the wicked characters dying (often in a quite unusual way - in this story they are put to sea in a leaky boat in a storm), and the good characters living happily ever after.

As for whether or not to recommend the book, there is certainly other fiction on the bookshelves more likely to grab a reader than this. Under 'suitability' I wrote that older readers would enjoy the commentary by Pullman, and younger readers would enjoy mainly the tales themselves. Let us say here, then, that if a secondary school student does not enjoy the commentary addendums then they are unlikely to enjoy the book as a whole a great deal. Put briefly, this book would be good for someone who enjoys reading quite a lot already. For the less voracious reader some of Pullman's other work (recommended below) is much more immediately gripping.

Suggested further activity:

- Read one of the original fairy tales by the Grimm brothers and compare to Pullman's retelling.
- Read some of Pullman's other work - *The Ruby in the Smoke* or *Northern Lights* would be good starters.
- List the conventions of a fairy tale and use them to write your own.

Bali Rai (2011) *The Gun*. Edinburgh, Barrington Stoke Ltd

ISBN: 978-1-84299-858-8

Suitability: KS4 and older teens. The target audience for this book is teenage boys. The accessible language makes it especially suitable for both dyslexic readers and teenagers who struggle to read or get really stuck into a book. While this is very much a teen novel, the dark themes of gun crime, violence and gangs make this a harrowing tale with a serious message for a more mature audience.

Jonas, Binny and Kamal have been best friends for as long as they can remember. The three teenage boys have been growing up on the same inner city estate like brothers, them against the world since they were kids. There's nothing and no one that can break them apart.

But the city they live in is riddled with gangs and criminals. Jonas is street wise enough to know that these are the kind of people he needs to stay away from, yet when he witnesses a shooting on the street with his two best friends, it's curiosity and curiosity alone that leads him to check on the mysterious rucksack that has been left at the scene of the crime. Inside it is the thing that is about to change his life forever...the gun.

The Blackmore Massive Dem crew, are the gang in the boy's neighbourhood. Known on the streets as the BMD, the gang is big, scary and always looking for a fight with the three boys.

Jonas and Binny are not so sure when Kamal suggests that they use the gun to scare off the BMD. But they are his best friends, his brothers, so they have to stick together. Of course he will not use the gun. This is just a way of making sure the BMD are out of their lives for good.

But as the story unravels, Jonas begins to realise that Kamal is different to him. Very different. When Kamal's family first came over to England they were poor and he was bullied for wearing charity clothes. His father was stabbed to death by a white racist and as a consequence of this dark past Kamal is angry with the world and wants to get even. When Kamal holds the gun he feels powerful for the first time in his life. But this is an evil power, a corruption that is taking over something deep inside him. There is a glint of madness in his eyes and Jonas and Binny are terrified. Do Jonas and Binny stand by their life long friend or do they do something before things spiral wickedly out of control?

This book cleverly uses the youthful perspective of Jonas, a likeable boy, but who like many other teenagers in our society is born and then driven into a world of crime. First through naivety and then through terror, Jonas ends up as another statistic on the wrong side of the law. This thought-provoking story allows us to enter this world of youth crime and asks us – What would you do in Jonas' shoes?

Suggested Further Activity:

- Research gun crime in Britain- how is our society trying to tackle it? Are there any campaigns that you might be interested in joining?
- Do you think Jonas is a good or a bad character? Why? Recommend this book to some friends so that you can create a debate together.

Meg Rosoff (2011) *There Is No Dog*. London, Penguin, 243 pages.
ISBN 978-0-141-32717-4

Suitability: KS3 and older teens. The language is accessible throughout, and the plot reasonably easy to follow. However there are moderate references to sex, virginity, and some bad language, which would not be suitable for younger teenagers. The themes of the book are love, fate, and the existence of God.

The story world in *There Is No Dog* is set in present day (or near future) and could be in any English speaking country. A young woman called Lucy says a small prayer, asking God to send her someone to fall in love with. The immortal (but still adolescent) God, witnesses her beauty and the earnestness of her prayer, and falls in lust with her. So begins the quirky love story of Lucy and Bob.

Bob was offered the job of God when his mother won it for him in a poker game. Due to his youth, he is not left to perform his holy duties on Earth unsupervised; he has support in the form of his loyal but long suffering assistant Mr B. Mr B's takes a cynical stance towards Bob's romantic pursuit of mortals because historically Bob's infatuations always subside. Mr B details the Almighty's failings: his vanity, laziness, cruelty, self-obsession, and preoccupation with the opposite sex. There are moments of brilliance in Bob's career too, the many species he created on earth, and the hilarious experiments he tried along the way: in the early days of the creation the entire planet was lit by chandeliers. Despite his flashes of genius, Bob is generally a melancholy and destructive being, his moods being reflected in the weather, a constant rain that produces a flood of biblical proportions.

In addition to Bob's infatuation with Lucy, his mother, Mona, is a source of conflict. Mona has a gambling habit and in one alcohol fuelled poker game has gambled and lost Bob's rare pet, the Eck, to a vicious immortal, Mr Emoto Hed. Mr Hed plans to collect the debt, and eat the Eck. Mr Hed's daughter, Estelle, who has witnessed the many ups and downs between her father and Mona over an eternity, has a plan of her own. She plans to protect the Eck and bring about a momentous change on earth.

Bob's attempt to woo Lucy is met with some success. He persistently turns up at the Zoo where she works, until she agrees to go on a date with him. Lucy plays hard to get, so Bob seeks out her mother to request her hand in marriage. Despite questions about Bob's sanity, Lucy is fooled into thinking Bob's love is genuine, and eventually gives in to her physical lust for him. Bob then, preoccupied with the planetary chaos his flood has caused, forgets to call, leaving Lucy feeling used. Refusing to give up on their love so easily, Lucy goes to see Bob, only to find him rambling and raving about the plight of the whales.

Overall Rosoff's novel is upbeat and funny, but all of the characters have their flaws. The immortals are presented as indulgent game players who are rather spoilt, and disconnected from the reality of the worlds that they create; the mortals naïve and rather needy. The only character who shows any genuine empathy for the inhabitants of the Earth is Mr B, who gallantly tries to get Bob to focus on helping those whose prayers need answering.

Further Activities

- Consider the phrase 'be careful what you wish for', how does this relate to the characters in Meg Rosoff's novel? Discuss.
- Research task: over the last 100 years choose three inventions or events that you consider to be modern day miracles. Explain your reasoning behind each choice.

Marcus Sedgwick (2010) *White Crow*. London: Orion. 262 pages.

ISBN 978-1444001495

Suitability: Mature KS3 and older teens. The language is generally very accessible throughout, but with some higher-level vocabulary. Despite the shifts in narrative style and non-linear features, it is not uncomplicated and would allow the reader to make the necessary connections. Bound within the genre of Gothic horror, the book deals with the notions of good and evil, life and death, and as such the subject matter is dark, terrifying and more suited to a mature teenage readership.

In the present day, a girl named Rebecca arrives at the sleepy and decaying seaside village of Winterford to stay with her father. She dislikes the place immediately and the fact that it is slowly being consumed by the ocean gives the story a sense of foreboding as if Winterford itself is one of the book's characters. Rebecca's father is a policeman with a past that drives a wedge through their relationship.

Although Rebecca is the central character in the book, her story is narrated in the third person and is punctuated by the mysterious local girl, Ferelith, who is one of the book's three narrators. Rebecca describes Ferelith as the 'strangest-looking girl she's ever seen', whereas Ferelith describes Rebecca as beautiful, saying that they will grow to love one another. Rebecca befriends her and is introduced to the deepest secrets of the village. Their relationship ultimately becomes the driving force of the book.

The third perspective through which the story is told is the diary entries of a man of the cloth who is rector of the church in 1798. This tells of the time when a Dr Barrieux came to Winterford, a physician with a keen interest in the afterlife. After receiving an invitation to dine with Dr Barrieux at Winterfold Hall, the rector is plagued with visions of hell. We also learn of the Dr Barrieux's fascination with what people see in their dying moments – angels or devils? Rebecca, too, is mildly intrigued a pub called 'The Angel' and 'The Devil'.

The book interweaves the three narratives and ultimately brings these perspectives together as the past collides with the present. It also throws up many questions through the mysterious characters and their relationships. What is the significance of angels and devils in Winterfold? Does Ferelith seek a genuine friendship with Rebecca or does their relationship serve a more sinister purpose?

From a reader's perspective, the book marries the past and the present within a narrative that encompasses multiple intelligences. One of the strongest themes revolves around religion, and in particular, having a faith in something. Sedgwick has produced a book full of the nightmare horror of traditional Gothic horror, with elements of thriller and supernatural fiction that teenagers will identify with and be challenged by.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Investigate ideas relating to death, the afterlife and the macabre at the turn of the 18th century.
- Link the characters focusing on their literal and thematic relationships to each other in a mind map.
- Compare similar Gothic fiction across the literary eras that have an element of the supernatural.

Ruta Sepetys (2010) *Between Shades of Gray*. London, Penguin Books, 352 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-0142420591

Suitability: Higher attaining KS3 to KS5. The main themes in the novel encapsulate all of the horrors of war, particularly from the perspective of a family enduring torture, loss and captivity. Even though the language in the novel is accessible, the content is dense and harrowing, and as a result, it is more suited to a mature and capable teenage audience.

In 1941, Lina is just like any other Lithuanian teenage girl; she laughs, she cries and she has crushes on boys. The daughter of a University Provost, she likes to spend her time painting, drawing and enjoying her comfortable and genial upbringing.

When Stalin decided to annex Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and some of Finland, he rounded up all potential dissenters, had them labelled as immoral criminals, and sentenced them to twenty-five years labour in Siberia. Lina's Father was one of these dissenters and one night Lina, her Mother and her brother, Jonas, are torn from their beds by Soviet Guards. Thrust into filthy, crowded cattle trucks and separated from their Father, their heart-wrenching journey across Russia begins.

The story portrays the family's slow and arduous journey north, crossing the Arctic Circle, and expectantly heading for a gulag or work camp in the freezing depths of Siberia. When there, ordered by Stalin, they are forced to dig for beets and struggle for survival in atrocious conditions.

Lina is a determined and courageous protagonist. She finds solace in her art and documents her emotional and physical turmoil through her drawings, in the hope that they will find their way to the prison camp where her beloved Father is held captive. The harrowing sequence of events spans many years and thousands of miles but Lina's unwavering hope and love ultimately lead to her survival.

Reading like a memoir, *Between Shades of Gray* is based on first hand accounts of individuals involved in the atrocities of Stalin's dictatorship. Ruta Sepetys describes the hardships endured by the victim of wars, in agonizing and gruesome detail, whilst emphasising their strength and the love they held so dear with acute sensitivity. Sepetys' Lina is a powerful teenage heroine that will inevitably be compared to Anne Frank. At times hard to read, this novel's distressing depiction of war will shake even the most brave and defiant of pupils.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Draw comparisons between Anne Frank and Lina, with close examination of two passages of text.
- Write diary entries or poetry based on Lina's experiences or choose a member of her family.
- Create a timeline of events leading to Stalin's occupation of the above Eastern European countries, commenting on the effect it had.

Alex Shearer (2012) *The Cloud Hunters*. London, Hot Key Books, 279 pages.
ISBN 978-1-4714-0018-6

Suitability: Early KS3. The narrative is written in simple language and is easy to follow. Although during the adventure-filled plot the protagonist faces persistent obstacles, these tend to veer clear of being too ominously threatening. The chapters are quite short and tend to end in resolution, so will be easy bite-size stories for younger children or slower readers. The book touches on themes of religion, prejudice and morality, which could be explored further by older or more sophisticated readers.

In Christien's world, the earth's core has exploded, blasting broken shards of earth around the sky. The floating islands are inhabited by different people: on Christien's, he and his family have a big house by the coast, with a water pool in his garden. In Christien's world, the atmosphere is so thick that fish, whales and jellyfish swim around the sky. And water is a luxury – the reason that his pool is only half full. When it rains, dehydration is not a hazard. But when it is dry, people rely on the Cloud Hunters.

Cloud Hunters are a group of nomads, excluded from society and marked by two scars running down their cheeks. In boats, they sail the skies, finding clouds and sucking the moisture into their tanks. This water is shared between the islands, keeping the inhabitants alive. They are a fickle group, strange, undependable and unpredictable. And Christien has fallen in love with one of them.

Jenine, a cloud hunter girl, is new to his school. She lives on a sky-boat with her mother and their crew of one – a man named Kameesh. Rumour has it that her father was killed in a storm. Jenine hates the scars on face, but Christien thinks they make her more beautiful. And when she saves the life of a dog who is about to be killed by a fleet of jellyfish, her bravery impresses him even more.

One summer, Christien is invited to go cloud hunting with Jenine. After fighting rival hunters for a cloud, and battling an outbreak of giant lice, Christien must face the biggest challenge of all, finding his courage and integrity along the way. He discovers that rumours cannot always be believed. And that the truth is sometimes even more incredible. . .

Shearer has created a dreamlike post-apocalyptic world. Although the imagery of it is vivid, its density means that the description is never complete. This adventure story almost takes a back seat to the fantasy setting, so that the reader has to wait for nearly 100 pages for the action to begin. The characters are all likeable and justify empathy, but Christien's dreamy, detached narrative prevents the reader really becoming involved with them. However, subtle diversions down the avenues of bravery and prejudice, and the beauty of a universe where islands float in the sky, ensure that this book is a pleasure to read.

Suggested Further Activity:

- Describing an imagined post-apocalyptic world.
- Discussion of prejudice in the novel and other literature, e.g. *Othello*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- Identifying religious language and the reason for this in the novel.