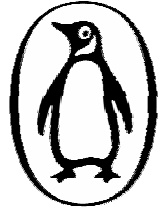


Teachers' notes
written by Pam Macintyre



The Ghost's Child

by Sonya Hartnett

On a particular afternoon, an elderly woman, Matilda, returns home from walking her dog, Peake, to find a strange boy with 'eccentric etiquette' sitting in her lounge room. She offers him tea and biscuits, warmth and conversation, and then prompted by his question about a photograph of a girl on a boat, the story of her past: her solitary childhood as '*...a jigsaw piece cut wrong*' (p38); her journey round the world with her father in search of the answer to '*what is the world's most beautiful thing?*' (p27); her love of Feather, the wild young man she finds on a beach – '*the one she had been waiting for*' – and the loss of that love; her sea journey in the Albatross to find Feather and ask him the question to which he knows the answer. Occasionally, the boy comments on Matilda's narrative, before accompanying her on her final journey.

There are many ways into this captivating novel brim full of wisdom: to read it as a dissertation on love and loss, as a fable, as a book that poses fundamental questions about being human, to enjoy the richness of its language, to trace its allusions to traditional tales and mythology, to follow a life well-lived, loved and loving.

The following are suggestions only, and to be selected from.

Style of telling

- From the opening page, the reader is aware that this story is going to be revealed in unusual ways, ones that invite the reader right into the lounge room and life of Maddy. That first page is intriguing. What kind of story do you think this is going to be?
- There is pattern to the story such that it is not only what happens that is significant, but the way it is told is central to understanding the meanings behind the words.

For example, on page 6 we are told – '*And yet, although it was completely peculiar to sit in her chair and see a fussy boy sitting opposite her, Matilda somehow felt that things were as they should be*'. This suggests both a subtle foreshadowing, and that there has been a previous connection between Matilda and the boy.

Setting

The interactions between Matilda and the boy take place solely in her lounge room (apart from her visit to the kitchen to make tea) much like a theatre set (p8, p39). While the author describes the room's contents, the boy is most aware of its scent: *'Your house smells like old people...Like coats in mothly cupboards...Like cold porridge in a bowl. Like taps dripping for years'* (p9).

- These similes provide rich models for writing. Try describing in three similes, the scent of a boy's/girl's bedroom, a movie theatre, a birthday party, a football/netball change room etc.
- Pp2-3 the author paints vivid, detailed word pictures that create vibrant mind pictures. How do you imagine the boy and Peake to look? Express how you visualise them in any way you want.
- Also consider that much of this detail gives us a sense of time as well of place. When is this story set? There are clues throughout the novel. You might have to know about a World War to decipher all of them.
- The vocabulary gives us clues too: *'gas heater'*, *'brougham'*, *'pound'* (p18); *'fret the fate of mites in Foundling Hospitals'* (p19); when Maddy and her father travel overseas they go on *'a steamer'* and she has a *'trunk'* (p30).

Grief and loss

The heart of this story is love and the consequences of its loss: Feather, the fay, and Maddy's father (p164).

- Is one felt more keenly than another?
- P113 *'She had loved hugely, and lost what she had loved. This was damage that could never fully repair'*. But life has gone on for Maddy – and it has been a rich and purposeful one. What remains unrepaired?
- P54 *'Vulnerability is what love is.'*

Love

The following excerpts deserve discussion – in general – and/or also how they relate to other literature, films or plays the students have read/viewed/seen. Jane Austen and Shakespeare come to mind, for example, as does *Bye, Beautiful* by Julia Lawrinson. Students might like to suggest other relevant texts (not necessarily only print texts).

'Love can be horrible for those who aren't in it. Sometimes it's even horrible for those who are. Love isn't always a good thing, or even a happy thing. Sometimes it's the very worst thing that can happen. But love is like moonlight or thunder, or rain on a tin roof in the middle of the night: it is one of the things in life that is truly worth knowing' (p57).

'The world changes when something in it is loved...And the heart that loves wonders how it lived, in the past, without loving – and how it will live now, now that it loves' (p58).

P146 'Sometimes...love is not the strongest or the most important thing in the world.' What is the significance of this in the story? In a wider sense, do you agree with this statement?

Genre

The Ghost's Child, like other Sonya Hartnett books, such as *Thursday's Child*, does not fall into easy genre classifications.

It might be interesting to consider definitions of particular genres to which the book could belong:

- Romance: uses elements of allegory and psychological exploration.
- Fairytale: Tolkien's definition seems most appropriate to this story: *'The realm of the fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of birds and beasts are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords'* (Tolkien, 1964, p1).
- Magic realism: *'...when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative'* (Lodge, 1992, p114). Lodge goes on to say that most writers in this genre *'have lived through great historical convulsions and wrenching personal upheavals, which they feel cannot be adequately represented in a discourse of undisturbed realism'*. This might make a valuable perspective from which to consider the book's examination of the loss of love. Could it have dealt with its themes as well in a purely realistic mode?
- Fable: a tale that conveys a moral lesson. Is this book about a 'moral' lesson? It is not concerned with right and wrong is it? Discuss what 'lessons' are found in *The Ghost's Child* if it is read as a fable.
- Other possibilities are to identify the elements of each that are found in the story, or propose different readings of the novel depending on which 'frame' is put around it, and compare how particular readings highlight aspects of the telling.

Fairytale/Fable/Myth

Nargun

- What do you know of this creature from Aboriginal Dreaming? Why do you think Maddy seeks the 'hideous' Nargun as friend? Does it give her good advice? (p24)

References to fairytales

- Consider the fairytale references that are found in *The Ghost's Child* and what the author is inviting us to think about.
- P42 Maddy says *'I knew I wouldn't live a fairytale life...I had to have faith in myself, just as does a princess in a fairytale'*. Aren't fairytale princesses usually rescued by a handsome prince? What does Maddy mean?

- P63 the boy understands something *'to which everyone else seems ignorant and blind'*. This recalls Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Talk about how this affects the picture we are building up of the boy and his place in Maddy's life and story.
- P75 Maddy and Feather live in a *'quaint cottage in a forgotten field far from town, a place in which nobody had lived for many years'*. This evokes the timelessness and placelessness of the fairy tale. The cottage is surrounded by pines rather than gums, which suggests its 'otherness' in this otherwise Australian landscape. Pines are European trees, Europe being the location of the origin of many of our fairytales.
- P86 *'They sat together at the table in sorrow, the lonely fairytale princess and the wondrous being chained to the ground'*. End of the fairytale? No happily ever after? So was it a true fairytale?
- P99 *'Through the murk and knotty weeds she glimpsed a seal's sleek skin, the arrowheads of a wing'*. This 'transformation' of Feather strongly suggests the selkie folktale. What understandings of Feather's nature does reference to this tale imply?
- P111 *'I lived like an old crone – or maybe like a fairytale princess who's been cursed.'*
- P156 *'She was not, after all, Snow White.'*
- Maddy dismisses the Nargun, no longer needing its protection. Why?
- P163 *'... and sometimes she thought that the fairy stories were right, that there must indeed be easier ways of living happily ever after...'* What do you think about 'happily ever after'? Does it happen only in fairytales and not in real life?

Other epic/fantasy texts

- P116 Maddy names the boat 'Albatross' which suggests *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *'Alone, alone, all, all alone/Alone on a wide wide sea!'*
- P131 Maddy's encounter with the scrawny viperfish with teeth too big for its head is reminiscent of Alice's encounter with the Cheshire cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Like Alice, Maddy asks questions. Do the 'hallucinations' also seem Alice-like?

Classic Mythology

- P128 Zephyrus is the god of the west wind from Greek mythology. Find out about him and discuss his choice in the story.
- P131 Kraken (giant octopus) versus the Leviathan (a ruthless and fearless fire breathing sea monster). What is the purpose of their battle? Does it underscore the epic nature of Maddy's quest, the significance of the question, for example?
- P60 Maddy sees Feather *'resting like Pan in a bed of leaves'*. What does this association suggest about Feather – that he is hybrid figure like Pan? Not completely human? Consider that on p62 he swallows a sardine that a kestrel brings him. (This brings to mind, the character Skellig in the eponymous novel by David Almond.) And does Feather exhibit some of the characteristics attributed to Pan – ingenuity and creativity, but also secretiveness and selfishness?

- P76 Maddy has a little cat in the cottage in the forest she names 'Perseus'. What do you know about this Greek hero? Why might this name have been chosen for the novel?
- Joseph Campbell has analysed the hero's journey of renewal and return across cultures, mythologies and religions. '*Destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his [sic] spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown...*'
- In this analysis Campbell has identified central features of the hero's journey: the call to adventure by a herald who summons the hero to cross a threshold; the hero's lesson (psychological/spiritual); the return – recrossing the threshold into the real world bringing the new knowledge. This framework might open up valuable ways of looking at *The Ghost's Child*.

Characters

Maddy's parents

- What do her parents value? What do they represent – the voice of 'reason', mainstream society, outdated notions? (p65). Whom does the author approve of and whom does she not approve of? How do you know?
- P21 Maddy says she knew that she was loved as much as they could manage '*under the circumstances*'. What are those circumstances?

Mama

- In keeping with the fairytale motif, she can be seen as the wicked witch/stepmother character – beautiful and ruthless. Or is she just the realist to balance Maddy's romantic view of the world? She says: '*The world is not a beautiful place. Everyone is out to snatch what they can, and they'll shove you in the dirt if you're in the way*' (pp67-68).

Papa

- There are two Papas: at home he is the '*iron man*' who '*irons money*' and exhibits '*lofty imperiousness*' (p17). Travelling with Maddy, he is another person – '*happy-go-lucky*', adventurous, appreciative and patient (p32).
- His ambiguity is further exhibited in his reaction to meeting Feather for the first time (p71).
- There are two fathers, but do you agree that the dominant aspect of him is that he has Maddy's interests at heart? (p162)

The Boy

- Read his description on pages 5-6. This is not how characters are usually introduced in stories. What sort of character is this boy going to be? What role is he going to play in the story?
- Sonya Hartnett often uses animal images to evoke her characters: p6 'He was like a strong bold bird that had flown into the room and, finding itself cornered, was bored, but unafraid.'

Peake

- Consider how Matilda describes what sort of dog he is (p3). Describe your/a pet in a similar way.

Feather

- Maddy chooses this name for the wild young man she meets on the beach. Why did she choose this name? What does it suggest about him?
- What sort of creature is he? (p53)
- Is he real/human? – *'He left no footprints in the dunes, no messages dug into sand'* (p59).
- Has she conjured him, or, at least what she wants him to be? For example: *'His silence made Feather the smartest and most mysterious person Maddy had ever known'* (p53).
- What do you make of his repeated phrase *'This is how things are meant to be'* (p80)?
- What do you make of Feather's Island? Why is it so desolate to Maddy and so green and peaceful and beautiful to Feather? Have they always seen the world so differently? (p143) How do you think the island might be operating symbolically?
- P146 Does the eternal peace that Feather wanted diminish him in our eyes – make him seem weak, life-denying? Why is he so different from how he was when we first met him?
- Consider that he never speaks for, or about, himself. He only replies to Maddy, and is presented to the reader through her.
- Perhaps write or act out an encounter between Feather and Maddy from his perspective. Alternatively you could 'hot seat' Feather and question him.
- Does this change your view of him? And Maddy?

Matilda/Maddy

This is Maddy's story and she recollects vividly, particular stages in her life:

Childhood:

- P18 When she throws away her toy giraffe what does she discover about herself?
- P19 She vows *'...that for the rest of her life, she would hold tightly to what she loved'*. This theme is reiterated on p33 when she thinks of her father *'preserved like a flower pressed inside a thick book'*. Is this planting in the reader's mind that she will be controlling and conservative in her relationships?
- P21 *'Maddy was an overlookable child, doubtful and reluctant in her dealings with others, mousey as a mouse. She was easily hurt, deceived, dispirited. Left to her own devices, however, she was inventive and independent, and smart for her age.'* Like her father, she too is multifaceted and ambivalent.

Adolescence

- At sixteen-years old she is *'beginning to unfurl'* (p30).

- She feels a *'proper person'*, that is, knows what she likes about herself, but is socially isolated still and vulnerable to her mother's disapproval (p44).

Living with Feather

- What happens to Maddy in this domestic sphere? The cottage becomes a site of toiling and sleeping: Maddy had no time for anything that wasn't necessary and real. She begins to *'bustle'* (p 81).
- With the best of intentions Maddy starts to adapt Feather to her environment (p76-77) and imprison him: *'his throat and wrists bound by collars'*; his skin is fading, his hair darkening.
- *'He walked around the garden as if the pickets were a row of steel bars'* (p 89). Maddy thinks of zoos but won't open *'the prison of her heart'*.
- The author builds a strong sense of unease about this life – its *'wrongness'*. It is a shock when Feather wields an axe against a tree, and then against the neck of a rooster.
- There is also a change of seasons to winter, and the fence stands *'militarily straight'* (p82).
- Feather replies to Maddy's question of whether he is happy with *'I am happy that you are'* (p 82).
- P84 Maddy recognises that Feather is pining and resents him for it. Does she want to own him? Is this what often happens in relationships? That what was the original attraction becomes what is resented?

Adulthood

- Matilda becomes a respected and expert physician. What is the significance to the themes of the book, of her being an eye doctor, specialising in the loss and restoration of sight?

Central Questions

- What is the most beautiful thing in the world? What do you think of Maddy's first answer? Maddy's father's answer? What would you answer?
- P52 Feather says *'There is nothing that's more beautiful than everything else in the world...'* Do you agree?
- P61 Ultimately for Maddy the answer is Feather: *'Cathedrals were ruins, compared to him. Stained-glass windows were mud'*. Does she choose wisely?

The journeys

- When she was sixteen, Maddy and her father journey around the world for two years, seeing man-made and natural wonders.
- She embarks on her search for Feather, on a voyage full of magic and strange creatures much like Alice's world. How do you interpret what is

happening here? Is it an ascent into the world of the imagination?
(p125)

- She continues to have a sea journey annually throughout her adult life. Why are her journeys important?

Language

This is a book that can be enjoyed for its language alone, and there is much to explore and examine, for the pleasure in the words. Students might enjoy exploring the literary language of metaphor and simile, personification and analogy, and will surely be inspired to try writing their own. Here are some examples, but students can find which ones they enjoy.

Use of simile and metaphor

- P9 '*...her emotions which had grown grand as a symphony in an instant, fell down like skittles...*'
- P11 the old woman that Maddy is frightened of as a child is '*...like an abandoned nest you find in a bough, tatty and disintegrating to dust*'.
- P16 As a girl '[s]he was like a wildflower...like piece of glass that has been tossed in water for a long time: mysterious but simple, without sharp edges, and not as fragile as it looks'.
- P94 '*In her mind hulked a truth like massive, rusty, untolling bell.*'
- P46 '*...bellbird calls link the eucalypts like silver neck chains.*'
- P66 '*...this woman like a redback spider, stylishly clad and venomous.*'
- P151 '*They talked like two old soldiers with not much in common once the battlefield stories were done.*'
- P55 '*Every day, the first glimpse of Feather on the shore was like the taste of honey on hot bread.*'

Allusions to animals

- P22 '*Nervy as a foal.*'
- P34 '*His royal spirit, disturbed winging like a dark bat into the sky.*'
- P95 '*He was a kestrel, an eel, a lacewing.*'
- P103 '*...dining like foxes in the forest.*'
- P113 '*The boy sprawled like a retriever on the settee...*'
- P147 '*Her love had been a hawk.*'

Personification

- P23 '*...bull ants marching off to battle.*'
- P60 '*She saw the ocean romp up to him...the waves licking his hands...*'
- P120 '*The ocean and the sky demand vigilant study, for both can be prankish and unexpectedly enraged.*'
- P142 '*They were also very quiet trees...as if they had spied, and disliked, and agreed to be frosty towards her.*'

Vocabulary

One of the pleasures of reading is expanding our bank of words.

- P30 antimacassars; samovars, tikis

- P54 taciturn
- P135 rotating maw; maelstrom; oblivion; vortex;
- P161 indomitable, traumatic
- P163 aloofness; adversaries;
- P165 barbarous

Old Age

- What does the Boy think about age?
- Why do young people find it so distasteful and readily able to be criticised and mocked?
- P10 has the Boy's description of old age and Maddy's. Which is more powerful?
- *'It is strange that oldness is so hard to love or forgive.'* Is this universal, or are their cultural differences in the way that age is perceived in society?

Ideas to talk about

- P8 *'...bad news is part of being alive and should not be resented.'*
- P11 *'Everything that's young is troubled by what is old.'*
- P17 *'...most important things are also frightening.'*
- P22 *'...shyness often looks like haughtiness.'*
- P22 *'...strangeness among children is despised.'*
- P25 *'Yet how...does one craft sturdy happiness out of something as important, as complicated as unrepeatable and as easily damaged as a life?'*
- P38 *'...but the truth is that a memory is hardly ever good enough to console a heart.'*
- P40 *'Objects remind people of their lives, I suppose.'* Invite students to share the objects are important to them. Perhaps suggest a class display of them.
- P41 *'Is that what a life is – settling for what you can get, if you can't have what you really want?'*
- P93 *'With its hard laws and complicated outcomes, the grown-up world was not a good place for children.'*
- P117 *'...whether you're a child or an adult, there are things your parents need never know. And throughout your whole life, there are things you must do without help or advice, things you can only do by yourself.'*
- P139 *'Every journey must be finished.'*
- P155 *'You know that life is for going, not stopping.'*
- P173 *'But life is not a story, and things don't always turn out as you'd prefer. That doesn't mean you have failed though.'*
- Consider that the journeys throughout the novel are really the preparation for the final one: what is the meaning of that final journey?

Central question

- Is the central question 'What is the world's most beautiful thing?' (p27) or is it 'How can you know love, and lose it, and go on living without it, and not feel the loss forever?' (p150)
- Mama says the answer is easy – 'Victory is the world's most beautiful thing. There's nothing uglier than defeat, and nothing prettier than winning.' (Who in the world do you think adheres to this view?)
- Do you agree with Papa's answer?

Drama and Readers Theatre

There are rich opportunities for drama responses to parts of the books, such as mother, father, Maddy and Feather on the beach; the interactions between the Boy and Matilda in the living room. They are dense with subtext.

Related reading

- Greek myths – epic life journeys
 - Fairytale – fantasies, the magical
- Other Hartnett novels:
- *Thursday's Child*
 - *Forest*
 - *The Stripes of the Side-Step Wolf*

References:

Joseph Campbell (1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.
David Lodge (1992) *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin Books.
JRR Tolkien (1964) *Tree and Leaf*. London: Unwin Books.