



## ***Oracle***

**By Jackie French**

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**Teaching notes prepared by Chris Sarandis**

### **Book Description**

Nikko lives in a small farming village in Greece near the stronghold of Mycenae in 1200 BC. When his sister Thetis is born, Nikko rescues her from the hillside where she has been abandoned.

Thetis survives the trauma of her birth but is rendered mute until the age of five; and if she speaks at all, it must be the truth.

When the villagers try to double-cross the king's tribute gatherers, Nikko and Thetis are taken to the Mycenaean court to be trained as entertainers for the king. Their acrobatic skill dazzles the court; Nikko becomes a musician, and Thetis is hailed as The Butterfly. Even the High King is in awe of her. They meet Euridice, a horse dancer from the North, and forge an enduring friendship.

But the gift of truth can be dangerous, especially at the court of a High King. When Thetis' prophecy of disaster comes true, and Mycenae is hit by an earthquake, she disappears. Nikko and Euridice cross Greece to search for her.

Nikko eventually finds Thetis in Delphi, where she is now installed as Oracle, set to fulfil her destiny. But danger still lurks in the shape of the new Mycenaean king, who wants her back at court to foretell his future ...

Ages 10-14

### **About the Author**

**Jackie French's** writing career spans eighteen years, forty-seven wombats, over 130 books and translations into twenty-three languages. Jackie's picture books, on which she collaborates with Bruce Whatley, have proved outstandingly successful. *Diary of a Wombat*, published in 2002, gained many awards, both in Australia and internationally.

Jackie is one of the few writers to win both literary and children's choice awards, with her historical fiction appearing consistently on the shortlists for the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards. *Pharaoh* was included in 2008's shortlist for Older Readers. *Hitler's Daughter* won the CBCA Award for younger readers in 2000. *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* was named an Honour Book in 2009.

Jackie's award-winning non-fiction includes the account of the Australian involvement in the Apollo 11 moon landing *To the Moon and Back* won the CBCA's Eve Pownall Award for Information in 2005.

Jackie lives near Braidwood in the Araluen Valley, NSW.

For more information on Jackie French, go to:

<http://www.jackiefrench.com.au/>

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## **Characters**

Nikko

Aertes

Thetis

Maronis and Giannis (Nikko's parents)

Demetri Limp-leg

the village hag

Orkestres, son of Diamonedes, (acrobat at the Mycenaean Court)

Atreus, son of Pelops, High King of Mycenae

Dora, retired sword dancer

Old Sesteta

Lord Pittaneous

King Menestheus of Athens

Lord Aramae

Euridice

Sostosis

Agamemnon

the Hag at Delphi

## **The importance of character**

The creation of characters is an important aspect of any novel. Discuss whether you believe this to be true, how characters are developed and what makes the reader care about them. Then choose one of the characters from the novel and create a character profile.

### **Nikko**

In words, paint a visual picture of Nikko. Consider how his understanding of his role and purpose changes during the book, and the reasons why he protects his sister.

Look at the choices Nikko makes in the book. What prompts him? How much impact do outside events have on him?

### **Thetis**

Write a paragraph to about how and why Thetis refused to speak, and why she spoke at select times. Do you think she decided when to speak, or had no choice? Describe how speaking the truth changed her life. How did Thetis respond to the luxurious surroundings provided by the High King and how did her response differ from that of Nikko, Orkestres and Dora?

### **Dora and Orkestres**

How might life have been different for Thetis and Nikko if they had not been taken under the couple's wing? Why did the couple adopt them?

### **Euridice**

Euridice is a powerful and unusual character, especially for a woman born into a hierarchical society where women held little power. Why was Euridice so different from other girls of her time? Outline Euridice's influence on characters and events in the novel.

### **Minor Characters**

1. What did the Lord Chamberlain eventually reveal about his past and to what do you attribute his apparent compassion towards Nikko?
2. Look at some of the other minor characters (e.g. the Hag, the King) and assess their importance to the story. Are they there only to keep the story moving? Rewrite a relevant scene *without* them in it – what happens?

### **Themes/issues to discuss**

- Time and Place
- Myths and legends
- Sacrifice, ritual and religion

- Trade, slavery and economic issues
- Government and hierarchy
- Society, domestic life and food

### **Time and place**

Ancient Greece, Mycenae at its peak (1400-1200 BC)

1. Find a map of Ancient Greece and locate the following cities and other places of importance: Athens, Tiryns, Thebes, Orchomenos, Epidaurus, Pylos, Delphi.
2. Which of these are still in existence today? Consider reasons they may/may not have survived.
3. Look at a map of Greece which shows geographical details. What aspects of the locations of these cities would contribute to their prominence? What aspects might hinder economic expansion? Compare these locations with modern cities today, and consider what aspects of locations are of importance to us. Are any of these the same/different?
4. After 1000 BC, cities were destroyed or abandoned and written language and much else lost. Conduct some research on the causes of this, and compare with similar destruction in more recent times.

### **Myth and legend**

1. Select a number of myths to discuss with the class. What things do these myths have in common (e.g. content, theme, life cycle, geographic and climatic phenomena etc.)?
2. Describe the effect of culture/geography on the myth chosen. What might happen if you translated a myth to another culture, e.g. modern day? Consider a way where a myth or legend has been presented in a way other than straight re-telling. (Books, film, mime, art, music, patchwork quilts ...)

### **Trade, slavery and economics**

1. The Mediterranean at the time this story is set was a thriving hub of trade, upon which empires were based. Do some background research on one of the major cities in the region co-existing with Mycenae at this time.

2. Investigate trade routes, commodities, etc. What goods seem to have been valued the most – and why? What other things (e.g. religion, language, customs) might have been transported along with goods and slaves?
3. In an age when local villagers didn't have money, how were economic exchanges conducted? (Consider the value placed on unusual talents, for example.)
4. Discuss the practice of tribute and the role of tribute gatherers. What is our modern equivalent?

### **Sacrifice, ritual and religion**

1. In Ancient Greece, and in some cultures to this day, unwanted babies were left to die. Discuss the reasons behind these practices. (Consider economics, population control, traditional, financial – dowries for daughters etc.).
2. How does modern society go about moderating these 'traditional' influences? (E.g. education, legislation.)
3. Rituals serve a number of purposes in society. Take one example of a ritual from this story, e.g. Thetis's strange sword dance before the High King. Who instigated it? What was the reason given? Do you think this is the only reason? What was the result?
4. Describe what happened at Orkestres' funeral – what aspects are similar to our funerals?
5. Look at a modern religious observance or other ritual – e.g. sports. Again, consider what the stated purpose is – and whether there might be other purposes behind it (e.g. obedience to authority, community cohesion).
6. Draw up a 'Who's Who' of ancient Greek Gods and other mythological beings. What might be the advantages of a polytheistic vs monotheistic religion – to people personally, and to society/government?
7. What is the significance of earth tremors throughout the novel in religious terms?
8. What is the significance of animals as part of religious observance in Mycenae?
9. What is the significance and importance of the Oracle and Delphi in ancient Greek (and later, Roman) history?

### **Prophecy and magic**

1. The practice of 'cold reading' is one in which a clairvoyant claims to have the power of prophecy, but in reality is picking up cues from the subject's comments or body language. E.g. most people will have a dead relative whose name starts with 'A'. Or be in close contact with a child, or have some connection with study or travel, no matter how tenuous. Choose another member of the class and ask them three questions. Then devise a 'cold reading' for their current circumstances. How close did you get?
2. Thetis' gift for accurate prophesy was seen as magic. How true do you think this was? Choose one of her prophesies – and write a different interpretation based on the words she uses.

### **Truth, lies and whistleblowing**

1. Nearly everyone has told a lie at some time or other. Give some reasons why people might lie to each other.
2. What happens to those people who, like Thetis, are congenitally unable to lie? (E.g. sufferers from some forms of Asperger's Syndrome). How do other people in our society deal with this?
3. Consider the personal cost of 'whistleblowing'. Give an example how this has affected someone in recent years. What they did, why they did it, what were the outcomes, both for them, and the organization or person they blew the whistle on?
4. Most societies accept some form of 'lie', for various reasons, some for individuals (e.g. to be polite.) At other times, this is more organized. Use a dictionary to give a definition of propaganda. Give at least one example of information you might consider to be propaganda and say why you think this is so. (e.g. tobacco companies on smoking, political parties on immigration, various groups on climate change, the environment, child soldiers etc.). Is there an opposing viewpoint? Based on research, give your verdict as to which is closer to the truth.

5. Look at groups like the Skeptics, Choice and the Cochrane Collaboration. What is their purpose? Do you think they are successful?

### **Society, domestic life and food in Ancient Greece**

1. These days we eat foods from around the world. Our recipes, plants and animals have been transported from their native lands. One of the great revolutions in eating came at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Europeans started to bring South American foods back home. Since then, food and cooking has become global through the spread of European colonialism to Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Chart the cultural and geographical transportation of ten different foods we eat daily.
2. The foods in Nikko's village were more limited in range than ours: barley, honey, goat's meat and milk, pine nuts, olives, olive oil, oregano, thistles, sorrel and other wild greens. Plan a day's eating using these foods. Make up recipes, consider how you would cook them with no oven, no metal frying pan, no wok, no fridges or freezers. Make the barley bread on pg. 340 of the novel.
3. Based on research, describe/draw a plan of Nikko's house and village. Was there a hierarchy in the village? How is this expressed or shown in the story? How were decisions made in the village?
4. Now look at the lifestyle, clothes, decorations, etc. of those inside the King's palace. Again, give examples where hierarchy is clearly indicated through non-verbal means.
5. Pick an artefact, or a fresco from one of the palace walls and research the story behind it.
6. Girls and women in ancient societies tended to be useful mainly for having children and maintaining domestic life. They had very little political power, unless through family connections (in this case, the King's sister), or through religious authority, such as the Oracle at Delphi and the Temple of the Mother. How much has this changed in modern society? Collect some opinion pieces from the local media, or films or books, and discuss.



7. Nikko's father thinks he is entitled to beat his children for disobedience. How have attitudes towards discipline changed?
8. How was history preserved in Mycenae? Compare this with modern methods (including archaeology).

### **Government in Ancient Mycenae and its modern counterparts**

1. How did the King maintain power in Mycenae? (As well as through the army, consider some not-so-obvious aspects of control, e.g. religious mandate and ritual, methods of punishment meted out to 'criminals', keeping the populace in economic control, ceremony, tradition and overt display of wealth as a sign of power.)
2. How do modern societies maintain control over their citizens? Give examples, and rate the effectiveness of this.
3. Do some research into different types of societal management – e.g. dictatorship, communist, socialist, democracy, anarchy.
4. We live in a democracy, and have free speech. But how free are we to say what we believe? And can 'free speech' hurt others?
5. Look at Australia's defamation, copyright, terrorism, blasphemy, trade practices, obscenity and sedition laws. How necessary are they to protect our society? Do we need other laws or stronger laws to stop false claims being made deliberately?
6. Investigate one example of a trial where these laws are used.

### **Conversation starters and points of interest**

1. Discuss the novel's dramatic opening. How might you script a play for this? Investigate ancient Greek plays, and limit your props to things they might have used.
2. Discuss the predicament facing Thetis when she is compelled to speak the truth. How is it eventually resolved?
3. How did Thetis and Nikko deal with the fact that they were given up by their family?
4. What impact did Orkestres and Dora have on Thetis and Nikko's lives?

5. When Nikko found his sister and held her in his arms, what might he think the eagle represented?
6. Why did Thetis's mother take her to the hag in the village? Outline the mixed blessing that Thetis's newfound ability to speak unveiled.
7. How important in this story are premonition, warnings and gut instinct? Are these still important?
8. Choose any of the following incidents. From whose point of view is it written? Rewrite it through the eyes of another character who is taking part.
  - The scene between the Hag and Thetis' mother
  - The discussion between the Lord Chamberlain and Nikko about Nikko's freedom (Chapter 19)
  - The first meeting between Dora and Nikko and Thetis
  - The first performance by Nikko and Thetis before the King.
  - The banquet in Athens at which the snake appears (Chapter 23)
  - Thetis' acceptance as the Oracle.
9. Analyse the difference in meaning between the prophecy Euridice was requested to give and the actual one. Page 243 'Atreus the High King and the Lion House will live forever.' Page 254 'The House of the Lion will stand as long as men remember!'

### **Quotes**

Find the following quotes in the novel and discuss their meaning and significance in context of the speaker and what they refer to.

Pg. 85: 'His family's betrayal was still raw: a knife wound that would reopen many times in the years ahead. But he did, nevertheless, miss what was familiar.'

Pg. 149: 'The King's soul will be safe while the Butterfly dances.'

Pg. 154: 'You will need that strength. We will all need it...'

### **Notes on the text**

Read the notes at the back of the book for further clarification of the author's research and presentation of historical information. The notes include information on how the author has used her research to build a fictional version of events as seen through her own eyes. Of particular interest is her description of how the story unfolded and '...wasn't the book [she] meant to write.' pg. 330

### **A full list of the author's titles**

<http://www.jackiefrench.com/>

### **Stories and non-fiction titles on Ancient Greece**

- *Ride the Wild Wind* by Jackie French
- *Stories of the Ancient Greeks* by Charles D. Shaw
- *Black Ships Before Troy* by Rosemary Sutcliffe
- *Greek Myths for Young Children* by Marcia Williams
- *Troy* by Adele Gears
- *King Midas and the Golden Touch* by Charlotte Craft
- *Greek Myths* Usborne
- *Illustrated Guide to Greek Myths and Legends* by Cheryl Evans and Anne Millard
- *Food and Cooking in Ancient Greece* by Clive Gifford
- *Atticus the Storyteller 100 Stories from Greece* by Lucy Coats

### **Web links**

#### **Ancient Greece**

[http://www.ancientgreece.com/s/Main\\_Page/](http://www.ancientgreece.com/s/Main_Page/)

<http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk> Warning: this site from the British Museum may contain nudity and other material that may be offensive.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient\\_greeks/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient_greeks/)

<http://www.mythweb.com/>

<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/greeks/>

<http://www.greeklandscapes.com/greece/mycenae.html>

<http://ancienthistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/themightymycenaeans>

<http://www.greeka.com/greece-stone-bronze-age.htm> Warning: images on this site contain nudity and may be offensive.

**Slavery, superstition and sacrifice**

<http://kidipede.net/learn/greeks/religion/sacrifice.htm>

<http://kidipede.net/learn/greeks/people/slaves.htm>