

TEACHER NOTES

The
Threads
of MAGIC

ALISON CROGGON

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The Threads of Magic
By Alison Croggon
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Recommended year level 4-6



An atmospheric and riveting fantasy adventure, perfect for fans of Frances Hardinge and Cornelia Funke.

Pip lives on his wits in the city of Clarel. When he pickpockets the wrong man, he finds himself in possession of a strange object – a heart in a silver casket. What's more, the heart seems to be trying to communicate with Pip, and the royal officials who lost it will stop at nothing to get it back.

Pip has unwittingly broken an ancient spell, and his theft will have far-reaching consequences for the whole city. As the ancient war between the Spectres and witches of Clarel reignites, the heart prepares to seek revenge for all it has suffered...

Alison Croggon conjures a rich, immersive world with brilliant and memorable characters in this captivating story of loyalty, courage and friendship.

Q & A WITH ALISON CROGGON

What sparked the idea for Pip's story?

The inspiration was a history book I read – the story of Louis XVII, the younger son of King Louis XVI of France and Queen Marie Antoinette, who died at the age of 10. There was a tradition of preserving royal hearts, and Louis-Charles's heart was removed and smuggled out during the autopsy by the doctor and preserved in distilled wine.

This rather gruesome story fascinated me, and eventually became the seed for *The Threads of Magic*, in which Pip discovers the heart of a prince that is part of a spell. But the story really began with the first chapter, in which Pip is running through the streets of Clarel after stealing a silver casket, which I wrote at least ten years ago. Stories always begin with characters for me.

After the success of your popular fantasy series Pellinor, what prompted you to write for this age group?

I don't really set out to write for particular age groups! That's kind of decided later, after the story is finished and sent to a publisher. I set out to write the kind of stories I like reading. In this case, there were books I read when I was young – adventure stories by writers such as Leon Garfield or Joan Aiken or Penelope – Lively that were inspirations. I loved how vivid and exciting their stories were, and I wanted to write something that created the same kind of joy, that mixed shadow and light.

What was your writing experience like for *Threads of Magic*?

This was a fun story to write. I'm very fond of the central characters, who are all very argumentative and fun, and there are also some awesomely evil baddies.

It took a long time. As I said, I wrote the first three or four chapters more than ten years ago. They sketch out the four main characters – Pip and his sister El, El's best friend Oni, who's a witch, and Princess Georgette. I often write out the opening chapters of things, which then wait until it's time to write them. Then a few years ago meantime I started an epic fantasy which I think of as my biggest failure – I wrote 700 pages before I realised I was never going to get the story right, because it was flawed deep down.

Finally I put the other story aside. But while I was working and re-working that novel, I learned how to write a story from several different points of view, and I used what I'd learned to write the rest of *The Threads of Magic*. I also pinched a few characters, like the evil cardinal. So I really had to fail at one story to write this one. It does make it feel as if I've been writing *The Threads of Magic* for a very long time...

What do you hope young readers will take away from the book?

I hope they enjoy the adventures and love the characters. I hope it's exciting and beautiful and funny. More than anything else, this is a book about friendship, what it is and why it matters. Pip, El, Oni and Georgette win the day because they work out how to be friends.

EXPLORING THE STORY

What are some of the themes in this novel? As a class or in small groups identify and list the themes. Individually write a statement of belief about each theme.

Identify the orientation, complication and resolution of the story. Ask students to try to identify this structure in other books or movies. As a class, discuss how these narrative features give meaning to stories.

Discuss the title of the book. Do you think this is a good title? Why or why not? If you were asked to choose an alternative title for the book, what would it be? Remember, a good title should capture the audience's attention and give them some idea of what the book is about.

Consider the fantasy world Alison Croggon has created in *The Threads of Magic*. What real time period do you think it is closest to? What elements in the world seem real, and what seems fantastical? In small groups, make a mind map of some of the characteristics of the fantasy genre. Consider settings, characters, events and themes.

In what ways does *The Threads of Magic* resemble a typical fantasy novel? How is it different?

Discuss the Heart that Pip carries with him throughout the book. Where did it come from? How is it a significant part of the story? How would the story have been different if Pip had never found the Heart?

How are witches portrayed in *The Threads of Magic*? Make a list of famous witches you know from other stories. How are the

witches in *The Threads of Magic* similar or different?

"Sometimes we have to do unjust acts, so even more terrible things don't happen." Page 302*. Do you think any of the choices Pip and his friends make are 'unjust'? Discuss how 'right' and 'wrong' and 'good' and 'evil' are presented in the novel. For example, you could consider the actions of characters like Clovis, Ariosto and Old Missus Pledge.

In small groups, explain how Pip demonstrates the following character traits in the novel:

- Resourcefulness
- Courage
- Resilience
- Compassion

How does the character of Clovis change throughout the course of the novel? Think about what Clovis was like when we were first introduced to him, what we know of his past, how his friendship with Pip helped him improve, and his actions at the climax of the novel.

"A coward is a person who bullies other people to do what they want, because they don't have the courage to trust... you know what's brave? Trusting your friends. That's what someone with courage does." Pip, page 247*.

Do you agree with Pip's definitions? Why or why not? How is courage represented in *The Threads of Magic*?

Make a list of things characters do in the book that you think are courageous and why.

Discuss how family is represented in the novel. You could consider Georgette's relationship with her parents (both past and present), Pip and El as siblings, or Amina and Oni's mother/daughter relationship. Why is family so important in *The Threads of Magic*, and does it go beyond just blood relatives?

Keep a "vocab journal" while reading the novel. Make a note of any words you come across that are unfamiliar and look up their meaning. Also keep track of any words or phrases that you particularly like and write a note next to each explaining why you like that word/phrase.

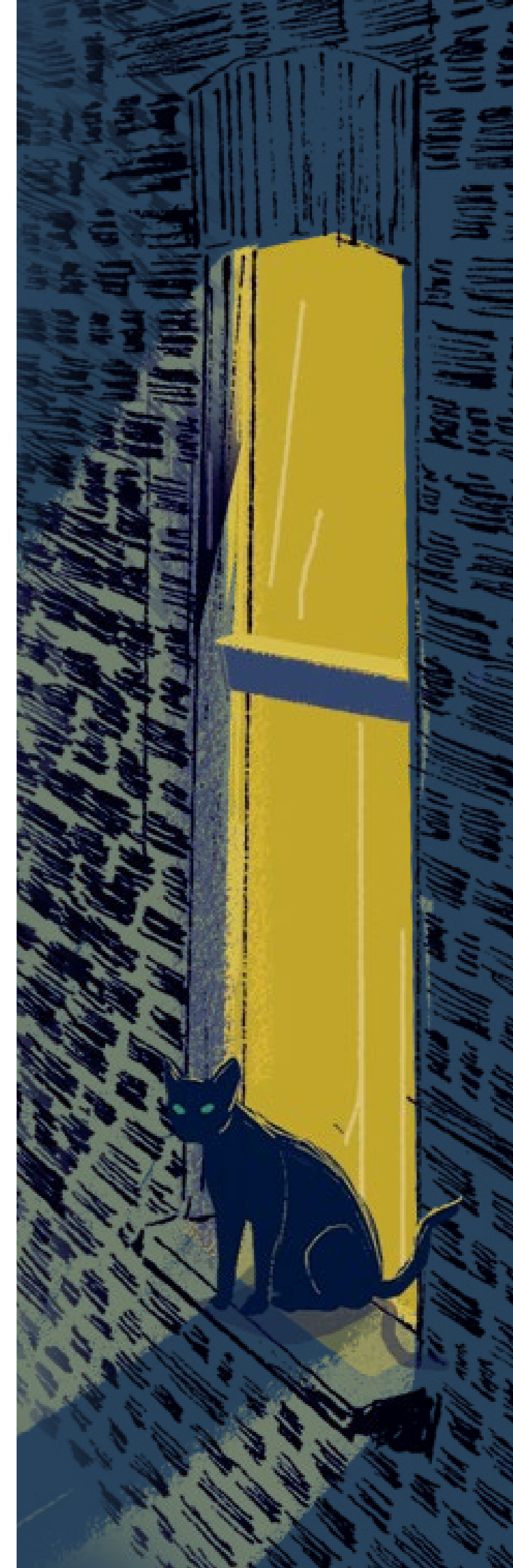
Creative Responses to the Text

Design your own cover for the book with new imagery and a new tagline that will persuade and interest people in reading the book.

A novel will describe the setting and action in words, allowing the reader to visualise using their imagination. A comic strip or graphic novel uses illustrations to show the reader the setting, action and character's emotions. Create a comic strip of a key scene from *The Threads of Magic*.

Choose a scene in the novel and rewrite it from the perspective of another character. Focus particularly on the character's attitudes and feelings, rather than simply recounting events. How might another character see and experience events differently to Pip?

Draw a city map of Clarel. Include locations referenced in the text like the Old Palace, Mascule Bridge, and Olibrandis' shop as well as imagining places of your own that could also exist in the city.



CHAPTER ONE



Pipistrel was deep in the Choke Alleys. It was black night, blacker than the inside of a cashbox, so black you couldn't see your hand in front of your eyes.

This suited Pip. He didn't want to be seen, and when he didn't want to be seen even a witch's cat would have trouble spotting him. He scuttled through tiny alleys, some little wider than his own body, making his way unerringly with senses other than sight. Up and down broken and slimy steps, through courtyards the size of wardrobes where even in summer only a few shamefaced rays of sunlight ever visited, along streets that were no more than tunnels of blackened brick and stone, past windowless walls and doorways like carious mouths exhaling rotteness.

Pip knew the Choke Alleys like the back of his hand. Better, probably: it was so long since his hands had been washed that he might have had trouble recognizing them clean.

Tonight he was proceeding with rare caution. He'd slither into a passage only when he was sure beyond all doubt that it was empty. When the rubbish stirred and snored, some drunkard sleeping off his last flagon of gin, the boy started and ran as if a demon was at his heels. A cat fight that exploded by his ear made him jump out of his skin. Any shadow that looked vaguely human made him retrace his steps and go another way.

When at last he reached his destination – a doorway which looked no different than any of the other doorways, its lintel cracked, its wood battered and discoloured – he studied it doubtfully from a distance, and decided to use

the back way. He climbed a pipe and slipped in silently through a third floor window, and stood in the tiny bedroom that belonged to him and his sister, breathing fast, his bony chest going up and down.

Bloody hells, he thought to himself. By the Ghost of the Holy Mother. That was wild.

There was no sign of El's sleeping form. She was waiting up for him, and he'd said he'd be late, he'd *said*. He didn't feel like a fight tonight, after all he had been through.

When he recovered his breath, he stole down a short passage until he reached another door. A dim light wavered through the gap underneath it. He wiped his hand over his nose, squared his shoulders and entered.

In the main room stood a girl maybe a year or two older than he was, fourteen, fifteen, it was hard to tell. Even in the kind light of the oil lamp her face looked pinched and pale, and her mouth was drawn down in two deep lines.

"Where've you been, Pipistrel?"

Using his whole name meant she was angry. Pip shrugged. "None of your business."

"Don't you give me face like that. I've been sitting here eating out my heart for hours and hours. I thought you were dead."

"You always think I'm dead." Pip shrugged past her and into the room beyond, and flung himself on one of the two rough stools which, with an old chest that served as a table, was its sole furnishing. "I'm dead tired, is all."

The girl looked at him, her lips pressed together,

her eyes blazing. Her face was eloquent with all the things she wanted to say, but instead she shut the door and sat down next to Pip.

"I don't want to fight," she said.

"Me neither," said Pip.

They sat in brooding silence for some seconds, while he pondered whether to tell El what had happened. The problem was, he was bursting with it. He had to tell someone.

"I'm hungry," said El dolefully.

"Listen, I didn't get anything to eat. I got something else. Something precious."

"Gold?" said El in a whisper, her pale face lighting up. For El, gold conveyed a picture of impossible romance and adventure. One of her ambitions was some day to make her way to the Royal Plaza in Clarel, where nobles lived in airy palaces with carriages of gold and jewels in their hats.

"I don't know. It's something precious, something very precious." Pip was leaning forward, talking low. He didn't want anyone else to hear, and the walls here were thin as hessian. "I robbed the wrong person. He didn't look like a noble, but he was." For a moment his voice rose indignantly. "Nobles have got no call going around dressing like commoners. Anyway, I reckon that if we play our cards right, we might end up eating like kings every night off plates of gold."

El, her anger forgotten, looked at Pip with her eyes glowing with hope. It transformed her:

suddenly she seemed like an angel, with her fair hair standing out all around like a halo.

Pip almost turned away. It broke his heart when his sister looked like that. She was older than he was, but he felt that he was more grown up. There was something too innocent about El. He often feared for her. Sometimes she was very like a small child, and it often took her longer than most people to understand things. But there was a light in El, the way her face would glow when she was happy or hopeful, that made your heart lift. She saw things that other people didn't, because they were in too much of a hurry. And her word was always true.

He reached into his shirt and pulled out a silver box. El's face filled with awe. The silver was tarnished and a little battered, but she had never been so close to anything so beautiful. The lid and sides were moulded with a relief design of dragons studded with purple and red gems, and in the middle of the lid was engraved a coat of arms featuring a bird with a woman's face and another dragon.

"That's a coat of arms, the signs of the nobles," said Pip. "As clear as clear."

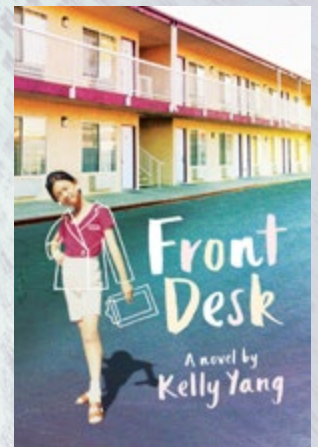
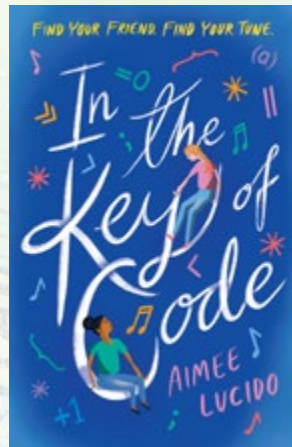
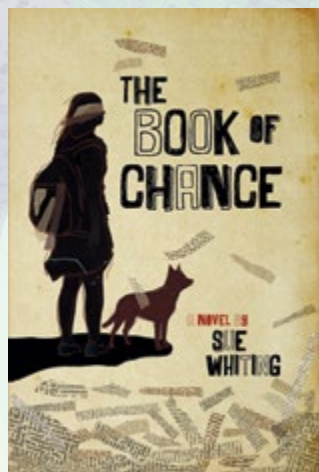
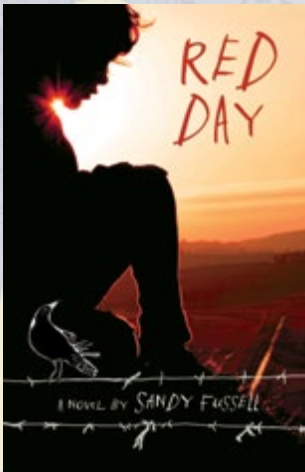
Slowly, as if she hardly dared to touch it, El reached out and stroked the lid with the tip of her finger. The metal felt smooth and soft and cool.

"What's inside it, Pip?" she whispered at last. "It must be something very valuable, to have a box like that."

"I don't know," he said.

"Let's look."

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