

Teacher's Notes  
Written by Pam Macintyre

# THE *The Silver Donkey* By Sonya Hartnett

## Overview

During the First World War, sisters Marcelle and Coco, two French children, find a young English soldier in the woods. Lieutenant Shepard is temporarily blind and has walked away from a war he found too terrible to bear. The sisters hide, feed and support him. He longs to cross the Channel and return home to his dying younger brother, John, but Marcelle, the older of the two girls realises that such an escapade is beyond the girls' ability to organise and execute. Their thirteen-year-old brother Pascal is invited to join in the secret, and he hatches a plan to return the soldier to England.

During the few days that they hide the soldier, Lieutenant Shepard tells them four stories, each about a donkey. His good luck charm, given to him by his brother to keep him safe, is a charming silver donkey, and this object inspires the beautiful and poetic stories: the Bethlehem story, Simpson and his donkey, a parable set in India, and the story of the silver donkey's origin in his life.

There is much to explore in this finely crafted novel and the language is so rich and evocative that it begs to be read aloud. Reading aloud to a group or a class would allow for the leisurely exploration of some large ideas, and predictions about how the story might proceed and be resolved.

The following ideas are suggestions for stimulating response, but are not intended to be prescriptive. Rather they provide shooting off points for exploration.

## Themes

One of the major ideas in the book is that of bravery. You might like to discuss whether or not the soldier is brave, or a coward. This could be looked at throughout the book and whether ideas change during the course of the story.

- Lieutenant Shepard hides and is worried about being questioned (p19). He steals an old man's clothes hanging on the line, buries his uniform and conceals his haversack to disguise that he is a soldier. Does this suggest

- that he feels guilty, or just afraid? He is after all trying to get across the Channel to his ill young brother, isn't he?
- p22 He is a young man, lonely and afraid. What is he afraid of?
  - p54 Coco thinks the soldier is brave because he sleeps in the forest alone. Is that brave?
  - p57 Lieutenant Shepard says he would be called a coward. Why? Do you think he is a coward?
  - p69 Pascal knows that soldiers who run away from the war can be imprisoned or even shot. Does that still happen?
  - But Pascal doesn't pass judgment on Lieutenant Shepard. His circumstances make him interesting to Pascal. The morality of running away from the war is not important to the children. Why do you think that is?
  - p145 The soldier says that he has done a shameful, cowardly thing. Do you agree? Do you think he is a bad man?
  - p145-6 Is Fabrice braver than the soldier for taking the risk in rescuing him? Is Fabrice right in not judging the soldier but understanding that he has 'done his best'? Do you think the soldier has done his best or should he have stayed at the war with his men?

## Characters

The characters are vivid, lively and distinctive and belong to a different time and culture.

- **Pascal** is thirteen, **Marcelle** ten, and **Coco**, eight years old. Are they like children of today?
- It is interesting to look at their speech and discuss the formal way they speak. Do you think the author has written the dialogue like this to imply the period, and/or to imply another language? Is it successful in giving the reader a sense of another time and place?
- p28 What do you think is the relationship between the children?
- How are their lives like yours – e.g. going to school, doing chores, and how are they different?
- How would describe each of the characters, in terms of their personalities? You might like to look at what they do in the book. For example, Marcelle is the provider who finds the food and necessities for the soldier. Pascal is clever and strategic. What about Coco?
- Do the drawings in the book of the children look like what you had imagined? You might like to draw your own images of the children and the soldier.
- Coco loves the silver donkey more than the other children and is more affected by the stories. Why do you think?
- Why is Coco called Therese when she is naughty? Does that happen to you in your family?

SONYA HARTNETT

- **Fabrice** is a young man who has very little, and yet he gives much to help the soldier get home. Do you think he is a better man than the soldier?
- Why do you think the author gave him polio and weak bent legs?
- p124. Fabrice has a dream. But life is not fair. Do you think the reaction of the soldier to Fabrice's problems is fair? Are his problems more important? What does it tell us about the soldier?

### Lieutenant Shepard

- p14 Why doesn't he give his first name? Why only Lieutenant Shepard? Do you think the name 'Shepard' (a variation of shepherd) has any significance in the story or in terms of his character?
- He leaves the war, which is a serious act for which he will be punished if he is caught. Do you feel sorry for him?
- The author tells us quite a lot about him. For example, on pages 22 -23, that he was sent away to boarding school when he was nine years old. How did he feel about that? How do you think you would feel?
- p23 The author writes that *'he had been made to do what adults thought he should do, which children always are'*. Do you agree that that is true, that children have to do what adults say?
- p96 *'His eyes weren't actually blind but simply tired of seeing, and stubbornly refusing to see'*. Why is he refusing to see and what is he refusing to see?
- p120 Why do you think the soldier's sight is returning?
- p123 The author tells us that the soldier has faith in the beauty of the world. What do you think she means? Is she just referring to the green countryside and the woods, or something else?
- p15-16 What is a good luck charm? Does it work for Lieutenant Shepard?

### The soldier's brother

- p145 Do you think the soldier's brother is real, or is he, as Fabrice says, invented to disguise his shame for leaving the war? How could you find out?
- p155 Coco asks Lieutenant Shepard about his brother and he says what he will do when he gets home. Does this affect your opinion? John gave him the donkey so he must be real mustn't he?

### Narrative Construction

The rescue plan is only hinted at in the novel and working out what it might involve, looking at the various clues, is a way of exploring narrative construction.

A NOVEL FOR CHILDREN BY  
**SONYA HARTNETT**

- p95, p118. What do you think Pascal has planned? Why does he need to tell someone else? Predict and share ideas. Which is the best idea? Why?
- Why has he asked Fabrice to help? Is he a good choice? He is not physically strong.
- p147 is a good place to stop in the reading of the story and ask whether the soldier will escape or whether he and Fabrice will be caught.

## Style

The style of writing is rich in visual description and imagery

- You might like to draw or make a model of how you think the silver donkey looks from the detailed description on p15.
- You could draw or make a model of the parched land as described in the second tale, p73, 75 and then after the rain, p88-89.
- p119 describes the village tumbling down to the sea. Compare this with the vivid picture of the village at night on p175. Think about the different colours you would use to show the difference.

## Language

A feature of this story is its poetic language and rich vocabulary to explore; such as, *aggrieved, injustices, imperiously, beguiling, famished, unbreachable, bedlam*. It's also appropriate to discuss the *effect* of such words as well as their meanings – the author has chosen them carefully for particular purposes.

There is strong use of figurative language such as metaphors and similes. In terms of the children, most similes and metaphors refer to animals, such as '*wild as kittens born under stables*' (p6); '*as if the sisters were fleet butterflies*' (p6); (p7) '*stepping from the shadows like fawns*', Coco has a '*sparrow's quick eyes*' (p7) and hair '*like a black poodle*' (p8); '*following the voices as if they were birds*' (p9); the girls waited, '*tense as cats*' (p10). You might like to find many more in the story.

- How does this animal imagery invite us to react to the girls, see them? What does it suggest about them? What does it suggest the author thinks about animals and children by putting them together?

There are many other examples of figurative language not related to the children, such as the glimpse the children have of '*the fascinating silver thing*', '*gleamy as a fishhook, hidden as a jewel*' (p11), '*At night, the forest was wildness at rest*', '*swilling like a genie in a bottle*' (p20), '*A world as parched as an Egyptian mummy*'.(p73), '*Evening was creeping through the woods like a cat*'.(p142), '*Loose bolts lifted like shrugging shoulders, and sank back into their holes*' (p179).

- Again, what is the effect of this on the reader? You might like to write some of your own similes that create vivid picture in your mind, to describe your friends, favourite objects, places etc.

## Symbolism

An exploration of symbolism in the book can be explored, initially in terms of what the silver donkey means (symbolises) to each character.

- On p165 it says that *'the silver donkey belongs to the trustworthy and the brave'*. So who do you think should have it?
- What does the donkey symbolise in each story that the soldier tells about it? Children could be invited to write their own donkey story with a symbolic meaning.
- A more complex discussion of symbolism could focus on blindness. Why did the soldier go blind and why did he see white? Is it common for soldiers to go blind during war? Do some research.
- Again, the symbolic meaning of the woods, of nature could be explored as well.

## War

A discussion of symbolism would lead well into examining the ideology of the book in terms of its attitudes to war. A simple question such as 'Do you think the author thinks war is good thing or a bad thing?' should send readers back into the text for evidence.

The chapter entitled *'The Front'* is powerful and demonstrates how description of event and action reveals ideology. You could look at the author's choice of words such as *'battle cries'*, *'stank'*, *'decay'*, *'reminding soldiers of a graveyard'*, *'gouged'*, *'claggy walls'* etc.

- From reading this chapter, do you think the Lieutenant was a good soldier?
- On p98-99 he thinks about the enemy soldiers. A good related text to use here is Norman Jorgensen and Brian Harrison-Lever's picture book *In Flanders Fields* which relates a true event between enemy soldiers.
- p100 has a description of the friendship of the soldiers, or as Australians would term it 'mateship'. They would even die for each other. Why does this happen between very different people during war?
- p102 What do you think the author means when she writes *'for war is only waste'*?
- p104 is a vivid evocation of the battle – what the soldier saw, what he heard, what he felt. Does this description make you think that war is heroic/frightening/pointless?

- Consider the lieutenant's action on p111. He let Ernie be killed to save himself, didn't he? Did he do the right thing? What would you have done?
- And then he walks away from the war (p113). Why? Is it because he didn't prevent Ernie's death? Was it the death of his all his men? The horror of war? What do you think? Do you understand why he walked away?
- Details of the war have been meticulously researched and could be explored, such as bully-beef and biscuits, trenches, no-man's land, keepsakes, guns, bayonets, weather.
- Before the chapter '*The Front*', there are other mentions of the war as the backdrop for the action. For example, on p12-13, Marcelle thinks '*no one seemed to care about anything except the dreary war; nothing else seemed important anymore*'. Why do you think this is so?
- p55-57 describe the Lieutenant's idea of what he thought war would mean and his changed view in face of the reality. This could lead to a discussion of contemporary war.

## Setting

- Where is the book set?
- Find out where the narrowest part of the English Channel is between the French coast and England. Locate pictures of French coastal villages, on the web or in books.
- The story is set during spring. Why did you think the author chose that time of the year, apart from the logistics that winter would be too cold for the soldier to survive etc. Does the season of spring give any clues as to the outcome/point of the story?
- The forest is an important part of the setting too. Why do you think the soldier will miss the forest? (p154)

## Donkeys and donkey stories

These stories offer much in terms of the idea and power of stories and storytelling. You might like to start with asking why the Lieutenant told the children the stories.

- p32 '*Donkeys are clever and reliable...you can always trust a donkey*'. Is that the usual perception of donkeys?

## The First Tale

- p37 The Bethlehem story – look up the Biblical versions in the Gospels and compare with the version in this book. Discuss what you like and don't like about them, and whether they interpret events in particular ways.

SONYA HARTNETT

Listen to the recording of *'The Small One'* by Bing Crosby, for another version.

- p47 View of the king – what sort of man do you think he is?
- The author describes being *'kissed'* by a donkey. What happens when a donkey kisses a baby? (p46)
- Ruth says about being kissed then *'he'll bring some good to this world'*. Did this baby bring good to the world? (p50)
- Hazel dies – did that make you sad or do you agree with Marcelle that Hazel died happy? (p51)

### The Second Tale

- In what countries do they have monsoons, saffron, snakes with hoods? Is there such a tree as the jujube? (p72)
- This story, on one level, explains a natural phenomenon. You might like to explore others such as Kipling's *Just So* stories, and Aboriginal Dreaming stories.
- Discuss the 'message' of the story, such as the view of mankind. *'You think the entire world is yours to command'*. Is that a fair comment about the human race?
- Think about the characteristics given to each of the animals. Which ones do you admire? Elephant = arrogant; tiger = treacherous and cowardly; snake = selfish; dog = devotedly stupid; donkey = humble unselfishness? Which ones does society admire? What other animals could you add with which characteristics? E.g. wombat? Kangaroo?
- There are Biblical resonances, such as the meek shall inherit the earth. Find the Beatitudes in the New Testament. Do we still agree with the sentiments?
- What do you think of Coco's reaction to the story in which she identifies with the donkey? Is that your reaction? What do you think about the rights of the individual vs the world? Is that why the soldier says *'Coco is never silly'*? (p.90-91)

### The Third Tale

- Although the author doesn't name the stretcher bearer, she is drawing on the story of Simpson and his Donkey, 'Murphy' at Anzac Cove (p126). There is a version on page 106 -109 of the Victorian *Fourth Grade Reader*. You can find the details at <http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/simpson.htm>. Where is his statue located?
- Simpson and his donkey only worked for 24 days and 24 nights before he was killed – and he was only twenty-two years old. Why is he so remembered?
- Research the role of the stretcher bearers during the First World War.
- What is the message of this story?

- What do the different reactions reveal about each character?

### The Fourth Tale

- Is John too good to be true?
- What is the message of this story? It is like a fable, that is, a story about one thing that is really about another. Is this true of all stories? Can all stories be fables? Is *The Silver Donkey* a fable?

### Discussion ideas

- Coco asks if the story was true (p52). The soldier tells her that she will have to decide. How do you know if something is true? Are there different kinds of true? You might like to discuss the importance of truth in this book – a strong theme.
- *'The things that are most worth keeping are the things we must always farewell'*. (p159)
- *'That knowing suffering means that we don't want to inflict it'*. Discuss these ideas in terms of the book and in a wider context.
- Pascal says *'It's just a story'* (p90). What does he mean? Are stories important?

### Ending

- What did the soldier mean to them all? What effect did he have on each of them? For example, thrill, adventure, and a secret for the girls? Effective action for Pascal? Danger and risk for Fabrice? Who was affected the most do you think?
- Do you think the author means us to make connections between the beetle and the soldier? (p184 – 186)

### Illustrations

- Why do you think the illustrator chose the particular moments in the story to draw?
- Draw some other events in the story that are important to you.

### Further reading

Folktales containing donkeys:

- *'Bremen Town Musicians'* Brothers Grimm
- Aesop has many fables about donkeys, such as *'The Man, His son and the Donkey'*.

SONYA HARTNETT



- *'The Singing Donkey'* is an Indian fable from the Panchtantra Tales
- *'The Small One'* is another Bethlehem story.
- Research some more folktales about donkeys.

War stories:

- *'The Silver Sword'* Ian Serrailier
- *'When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit'* Judith Kerr
- *'The Endless Steppe'* Esther Hautzig
- *'The Diary of Anne Frank'*
- *'Young Digger'* and *'Soldier Boy'* Anthony Hill

### Find out about

World War 1

Donkey rescue societies, such as Victorian Donkey Rescue, Donkey Care. Why do donkeys need rescuing?



A NOVEL FOR CHILDREN BY  
**SONYA HARTNETT**