

# The Impossible Secret of Lillian Velvet

By Jaclyn Moriarty



A magical book in the rich and whimsical world of the Kingdoms and Empires about a girl, a threat and a pickle jar filled with gold coins by the internationally bestselling and multi-award-winning author of *The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst*.

#### RECOMMENDED FOR

Ages 10 – 14 (Upper Primary & Lower Secondary)

#### THEMES

Magic, fantasy, myths, quests, spells, humour, courage, resourcefulness, family, friends

#### ISBN (AUS)

9781761067570



## SYNOPSIS

Lillian Velvet lives a very lonely life with her cold and remote Grandmother. That is, until her tenth birthday, when she is given a pickle jar of gold coins, along with a note with clear instructions: *don't* go out, *don't* open the door for anyone, and *don't* spend all your coins in one day.

What happens next seems impossible. The coins whisk Lillian away to a different time and place. There she meets a small boy in a circus about to be crushed to death; a lively family, each member in a distinctive form of mortal danger; a boy with a skateboard; and a girl who can Whisper. And a web of dangerous magic closing tight around it all.

Why is Lillian here? How is she supposed to help these new friends? And – most importantly – what happens if she fails?

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'While I was writing the first three books in this series I was always conscious that I wanted a child from our world to visit the Kingdoms and Empires. If there isn't a doorway or bridge or crack between worlds, how can we be sure the other world is there? One night I dreamed about a girl who was playing the piano. A key slid across the wooden floorboards. The girl's music transported her to the Kingdoms and Empires.

'When I woke I was very excited and I sat down to write her story. Only, nothing happened. I couldn't figure out who she was, or where she was (in the dream, I hadn't even seen her face), or what happened when she went to the Kingdoms and Empires or how she got back ... Nothing.

'Around that time, I was walking by the local skate park one day and saw a group of skater kids (including my own son) trying to map out a plan to track down the best skate park in all

of Sydney. That's when I decided that the first child to visit should be Oscar, a twelve-year-old skater kid skipping school.

'Once I'd finished writing *The Astonishing Chronicles of Oscar from Elsewhere*, I went back to wondering about the girl from my dream. Maybe she knew Oscar? Maybe she lived in a quiet house reading fantasy stories and heard skateboarders flying along the path outside and longed to have adventures like they did? Now, I happened to be eating a lot of pickles at this time. One of my sisters had just become a nutritionist and advised me to do so. So I obeyed her. I loved them! And I was washing an empty pickle jar one day, wondering if I could use it to store some other food. Only, of course, it was imbued with the strong scent of pickles. *The only thing you could store in here*, I thought, *is gold coins*.

'And then suddenly the girl playing the piano had her story. Her name was Lillian Velvet, she'd received a pickle jar filled with gold coins for her tenth birthday, and thus began a series of abrupt transportations into the Kingdoms and Empires for short and unexpected adventures. There, she meets various members of the Mettlesome family and Oscar the skateboarder.

'On a darker note, when I was growing up in a family of six children, my mother also fostered babies and young children who'd suffered abuse or neglect or abandonment. Mum was always determined to love each child completely as if it was her own. Their stories, and the way that they responded so quickly to this love and care, becoming healthier and brighter, was heartbreaking. I later studied children's and family law and was amazed by the extraordinary resilience of young people who'd suffered so much hardship. Lillian is a child who doesn't realise that she deserves to be loved, or how much she is suffering from the coldness of her grandmother. But, like many people who've had a difficult upbringing, she still has love and strength within her.'

Jaclyn Moriarty

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jaclyn Moriarty is the internationally bestselling author of novels for children, young adults and sometimes slightly older adults, including the (lengthily-titled) books in the Kingdoms and Empires series: *The Extremely Inconvenient Adventures of Bronte Mettlestone*, *The Slightly Alarming Tale of the Whispering Wars*, *The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst*, *The Astonishing Chronicles of Oscar from Elsewhere*, and now, *The Impossible Secret of Lillian Velvet*. Jaclyn's books have been translated into several languages, won the NSW Premier's Literary Award, the Queensland Literary Award, the Aurealis Award and named as CBCA Honour Book and Boston Globe/Hornbook Honor book. They have also been short-listed for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, the Nebula Prize and the Russell Prize for Humour Writing for Young People. A former media and entertainment lawyer, Jaclyn grew up in Sydney, lived in the US, UK and Canada, and now lives in Sydney again. She is very fond of blueberries, chocolate and ice skating.





## IN-CLASS DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### Pre-reading activity

- Examine the front cover and look for clues in the title, font, illustration, colours and focal points of light to help you answer the following questions:
  - What genre will the book be?
  - What characters and creatures will appear in the story?
  - Is the book likely to be dark and scary or fun and adventurous?
  - Where are the Kingdoms and Empires?
  - What is the girl in the foreground holding in one hand?
  - What is she doing with the other hand?
  - What do the words 'Impossible' and 'Secret' make you think about the story to come?
  - Does 'Lillian Velvet' seem like a typical name for a hero in a story?

### Report #1

- Read the opening of the book in class and discuss whether Report #1 might also be called a *prologue*. If a prologue has the following elements, can you find examples of each in the Report:
  - Foreshadowing
  - Introduction to characters and their backstories
  - Setting a time and scene.

Did each of these elements help create a particular mood? Did occasional moments of humour complement or contrast with the mood? Did you want to turn the page to find out what would happen next? Why might it be important to 'hook' a reader early in a story? Why do you think this scene is described as a Report? Do you agree it follows the rules of report writing?

## Chapter 1

- How does the *mood* change here? What is the effect of the contrast between the two sections of the story?

## Voice

- As in real life, people in novels can have their own unique way of speaking – they may use a distinctive vocabulary, sentence structure or tone that tells us a lot about them and how they see the world. Authors create a character's *Voice* and when done well a reader can immediately recognise a character by these features.  
*'You don't talk like an eight year old,' the first girl informed me.'* (Page 15)
  - How would you describe Lillian's *Voice* in Chapters 1 and 2? Carefully consider the types of words she uses and the way she forms her sentences. Did her *Voice* feel authentic? Did she seem like a happy and confident sort of person?
- What does Lillian's grandmother's *Voice* tell us about her and the sort of care she provides Lillian?
- What about Mr Turtelhaze's *Voice*? What sort of person does he seem to be? Do his actions in the Luminous Forest match his *Voice*?

## Narration

- The story is told in two different ways. Lillian tells her story in the first person, while the Reports are told in third person, both using past tense. Why might the author Jaclyn Moriarty have chosen to tell Lillian's story using pronouns such as *I* and *me*? Why might she have used the more indirect third person in the Reports?
- Report #21 does not follow the third person rule of the rest of the book and is in present tense. Why might the author have chosen to make this change at this precise stage of the novel?
- Sometimes Lillian addresses the reader (us) directly. (*'You can flip back and do it yourself, if you like, dear reader. Or wait, I'll just put the letters here for you.'*) (Page

42). What effect does being addressed directly by the narrator have on the way we read the story?

### Language Exercise: Acrostic Poems

- *'Anyhow, an acrostic is a poem where the first letter or word of each line spells out a message.'* (Page 41)

Lillian cleverly recognises the 'directions' written on the bark as an acrostic poem.

Create your own acrostic poem by following five easy steps:

1. Think of a word (it could be your favourite colour, number, season of the year or anything else you can think of.)
2. Write your word down a page vertically. Each letter should be sitting under the letter before it in the word.
3. Come up with other words or phrases that relate to your vertical word.
4. Place these other words or phrases on the lines that begin with the same letter.
5. Fill in the rest of the lines to complete the poem.

### Simile versus Metaphor

- *'After that, the day was like a flat pack. ... I mean it was like the cardboard box that was once delivered to our house from Ikea .... (To be completely clear, my day felt as if it had been broken into pieces and laid out flat.)'* (Page 58)

Highlight the words that make this extract a simile. How might you change this extract to make it a metaphor? Find other examples of similes being used in *The Impossible Secret of Lillian Velvet*.

### Heroes and Their Quests

- *'As for the boy at the circus who was about to get buried by gravel, well! In a storybook, the hero would have saved the child ... 'I want to be the hero,' I murmured.'* (Page 119)

*'I sighed. So either I'd caused terrible harm or I'd made no difference. What sort of adventurer was I?'* (Page 135)

Describe a 'typical' hero in a fantasy quest. In what way is Lillian like a 'typical' hero? In what way is she not? Is she the hero of her story or is one of the other characters?

- Extension: Study Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey theory to see just how closely Lillian's story matches.

### Theme: Families

- *'That's the thing,' she said. 'You're the most frightened person I've ever seen, yet you do not know it yourself.'* (Page 208)

Why does Astrid describe Lillian like this? Is she correct? What makes Lillian so frightened and why is it particularly sad that she doesn't even recognise her fear?

- Compare and contrast Lillian's experience of family with the Mettlestones' experience.

### Climax

- A climax is the point in a novel (or movie) where the action and excitement reach a peak. Most stories have one climax, which is then followed by a resolution in which questions/mysteries are explained. Does Jaclyn Moriarty settle for one climax in the novel? What is the point at which the story's action and excitement seem to peak and what is the point in which they *do* peak? Was the book's ending better for having two climaxes? Explain how these 'endings' might be described as a 'rollercoaster for readers'?

### Character Development

- Compare and contrast Grandmother with Mr Turtelhaze. Which of the two seemed the kindlier for much of the novel? Which of the two is a (slightly) more sympathetic character by the end? Imagine Lillian visiting her 'grandmother' in the future. How might Grandmother explain her actions to Lillian? Write a short play of the visit.

### Extension Question – Genre

- What subgenres of fantasy are there? For example, high fantasy, urban fantasy, magic realism, comic fantasy, historical fantasy, dark fantasy, fairytales, supernatural fantasy.
- Choose one subgenre to investigate further, considering its archetypes and prominent authors and their works.
- What subgenre (or subgenres) of fantasy describe *The Impossible Secret of Lillian Velvet*? What expectations might you have about the book if you consider it as part of this subgenre/s? How has Jaclyn Moriarty fulfilled or subverted your expectations?

### Extension Question - World-Building

- What is *world-building*? Why is it crucial to any story, but particularly to fantasy stories? What are some characteristics of the Kingdoms and Empires world that jump out at you? Some questions to consider:
  - How do the various people in this world interact with each other?
  - What things are fantastical to the reader but commonplace to its inhabitants?
  - What social structures do you observe in the story? (e.g. Does this seem to be a feudal society? An industrialised society? A patriarchal society? A matrilineal society?)
- What are some of your favourite worlds in books and movies?
- Build your own world. Write a short story in which you wake up in a world that is completely different to your own.