



## **THE APPRENTICE WITNESS**

Written by BREN MACDIBBLE

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 9–13 YEARS OLD (UPPER PRIMARY YEARS 4–6, LOWER SECONDARY YEAR 7)**

**GENRE:** Middle Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Climate Fiction, Contemporary Fiction

**THEMES:** resilience, climate change, pandemic, adventure, family, friendship, survival, sustainability, community, care, forgiveness

### **CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Civics and Citizenship
- Cross-curriculum priority: Sustainability

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Bec Kavanagh

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## INTRODUCTION

In a near-future world, young orphan Bastienne Scull is the Apprentice to local Witnesser of Miracles, Lodyma Darsey, who bears witness to the everyday miracles in the lives of those around her and weaves them into stories. Bastienne and Lodyma are as close to a family as you can get, although grief keeps them separate – Bastienne still remembers her mother succumbing to a contagious sickness, and Lodyma was forced to send her teenage son, Osmin, into the hills to live with the mountain men to try to ensure his survival from the same sickness.

When Lodyma and Bastienne are called to witness a miracle several days' walk from their small community, the last thing they expect to find is a child. Children are precious in their world. And none more so than a child who looks like Lodyma herself. Could this child be the answer to the greatest mystery of Lodyma's life: what happened to Osmin? And, if Lodyma does find her answer, what will become of Bastienne?

## PLOT SUMMARY

This is a world of women. When the sickness came, it mostly killed full-grown men, so now men keep to themselves, hiding out in the hills for most of the year. Children are precious in a world like this, and many women grieve the sons they had to send away.

Lodyma is a witnesser, a woman with a striking purple eye, who bears witness to all the miracles that take place in the town. She grieves Osmin, the son with the special green eyes she sent alone to the mountains years ago, hoping to spare him the death that found his father and elder brother. But Osmin has never returned, and none of the men who come back have any news for her. Basti is Lodyma's apprentice, and the closest thing to family Lodyma has.

When Eld Byst calls Basti to witness a miracle, she's expecting something a bit more miraculous than a malleefowl, come to lay its enormous eggs in Eld Byst's chook pen. But Basti dutifully notes down the story and takes a photo. Even an everyday miracle can be good for a story at the market. Later, at the markets, where Basti sells the peanuts she collects from Eld Croak's farm while Lodyma weaves everyone's miracles into captivating stories, the two witnessers are approached by Bliss Bohnic, who wants them to come and see a miracle she's found – a drone that drops brightly coloured shoes from the sky. Minutes later, two young boys approach asking them to come and see a miracle at the monastery.

The next day, Basti and Lodyma set off on foot to undertake the journey to the two miracles. The journey to the ruins of Cairns is uneventful. They see the drone before they see Bliss. It's a sight to see, staying up like a bird on a wave of warm air before dropping a box of shoes into the open field. Bliss isn't interested in how the miracle has happened, but Lodyma has always said that miracles are more like mysteries, and so she and Basti chase down the source of the drone. They find a woman – Monalissa Swoops – who lives alone in

the automated factory that has been churning out shoes since before the sickness caused civilisation to collapse. Lodyma shows Eld Swoops how to power down the machine, and they work out a system of trade for the future before saying goodbye.

Basti and Lodyma journey across a mountain range to the monastery, run by Lodyma's old friend, Abbot Clarity Seagrave. Abbot Seagrave is the same age as Lodyma, and she knows how deep Lodyma's grief for her family runs. When she reveals her miracle to Lodyma – a wild-haired child with the same startling purple eye as Lodyma herself – Lodyma doesn't know how to react. Does this mean that Osmin is alive after all? And, if so, does he hate her so much that he's stayed away from her all this time?

Lodyma reluctantly agrees to take Raveena home, but Basti soon resents all the work she's expected to do to keep the child in line. And, what's more, when they return to the marketplace with their miracles, it's Raveena who's introduced as Lodyma's apprentice, not Basti! Basti almost wishes that Raveena would disappear back into the forest where she came from, but she knows it would break Lodyma's heart to lose her family again. So when Raveena runs away to find her father, Basti follows her, in one final attempt to bring Lodyma's family together again.

## **AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION**

'I have spent the last few years putting my thoughts and stories into action. I'm trying to live a kinder and gentler life. I only fly once a year (as I have family in Melbourne and NZ, and trips across the Nullarbor are so long!), I am vegan, I drive a fully electric car and have installed solar and battery to generate most of my power. I can't tell you the joy of aligning so many of my values into my life, and while two of these were expensive I am saving loads of money on flights and by eating only plant foods, something anyone can do. I feel kinder, more in love and delighted by animals of every kind, but also my body feels amazing. I can't believe it took me so many years of average health to figure that out. I'm also enjoying living regionally far from the belching diesel fumes and artificial world of cities. I'm loving the great outdoors and being exhausted at the end of the day from hiking or swimming rather than just lugging myself home from work on the train through swathes of tired people struggling to live in a world that demands they spend spend spend. I don't even care about fashion now. Give me a sunset on the beach in an old t-shirt and shorts rather than a drink in a trendy pub in a dress any day. I am just more ME!'

Bren MacDibble

## BEFORE READING

- Look at the elevation of Atherton and other towns in that area. How much higher above the sea are they compared with Cairns? What elevation is your school? Where is the nearest elevated land to your school?
- Compare the land your school is on now to the same land 100 years ago. 200 years ago? 500 years ago? Discuss some of the things that can change land over time. Make predictions about what might happen to the land your school is on in the future and why.
- Read this article on climate change <https://theconversation.com/its-not-game-over-its-game-on-why-2024-is-an-inflection-point-for-the-climate-crisis-221497>
  - Why is 2024 described as the 'turning point'?
  - What are some of the things contributing to climate change?
  - What are some of the ways that we can reduce our carbon emissions? Categorise these as things we can do as individuals and things we need our governments to do.
  - Use this article to imagine what the future might look like – discuss your predictions.

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### ENGLISH

#### LITERATURE – CURRICULUM LINKS

##### Engaging with and responding to literature

*Year 5 'present an opinion on a literary text using specific terms about literary devices, text structures and language features, and reflect on the viewpoints of others.'*

*Year 6 'identify similarities and differences in literary texts on similar topics, themes or plots'*

*Year 7 'explain the ways that literary devices and language features such as dialogue, and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts'*

##### Examining literature

*Year 5 'recognise that the point of view in a literary text influences how readers interpret and respond to events and characters'*

*Year 6 'identify and explain characteristics that define an author's individual style'*

*Year 7 'identify and explain the ways that characters, settings and events combine to create meaning in narratives'*

## Creating literature

Year 5 'create and edit literary texts, experimenting with figurative language, storylines, characters and settings from texts students have experienced'

Year 6 'create and edit literary texts that adapt plot structure, characters, settings and/or ideas from texts students have experienced, and experiment with literary devices'

Year 7 'create and edit literary texts that experiment with language features and literary devices encountered in texts'

## LITERATURE – ACTIVITIES

### Vocabulary

- Research and discuss the meaning of these concepts found in the book. Make a list of 3–5 additional concepts that are new to you as you read.
  - Witnessing
  - Refugees
  - Bartering (or trading)
  - Closed loop systems
- Write your own definitions for the following, Using the context of the book to help you:
  - Old tech
  - The great collapse
  - Miracles
  - The sickness
  - Mouse deer

### Comprehension Questions

- Why is the work that Lodyma and Basti do so important? Why do you think people want them to witness their miracles?
- How is the world of the story similar or different to our own world? What decisions are we making right now that might be leading to the kind of future that the author explores in the novel?
- How does Lodyma describe the 'plastic layer' of the earth?
- Lodyma says 'half the time I'm more detective than witnesser' (p94). What does she mean by this? Why is witnessing like an investigation?

- Basti says 'it's not usual to eat eggs' (p30). Why do you think this is? What else do you notice about what people eat in the book?
- Why do you think Lodyma finds it hard to open up to Basti? What makes her finally let her in?
- What do you think has happened to the planet in the years leading up to the events of the book?
- Why do all the men live in the hills? How has this changed the way they behave in the world? How do you think they feel?
- How do the other characters describe Raveena? Why do you think they struggle with her wildness? How would you describe her? Where does she feel most at home?
- How would you describe the relationship between Lodyma and Basti?
- Why do you think the author has created a 'world of women'? How is life different in Basti's village of only women from a 'typical' farming village in our time?
- How does Basti feel when they find Raveena? How do you think you would feel in this situation?

### Compare and Contrast

- Read Kirsty Murray's novel, *Vulture's Gate*, also set in a speculative future. In the world of *Vulture's Gate*, a plague has destroyed human's ability to conceive females, and Bo might be the last girl on earth.
  - Discuss the way both books explore the role of gender in community.
  - There is danger in both books – where does it come from?
  - How are adults represented in the two novels? How are children represented?
  - What do you think each of the authors is trying to say about the future?
  - These two books were published fifteen years apart. Does that surprise you? Why/why not?

### Write Your Own

- Choose one of the following prompts to write a short story set in the world of the novel.
  - Write a short story/chapter set during the time of the novel, but from the perspective of a man or boy.
  - Write a short story/chapter from Raveena's perspective that explores the time between when her mother leaves her and when she arrives at the monastery.

- Write a short story/chapter set five years before the novel.
- Write a short story/chapter set ten years after the novel.

### Mapping the Story

- Draw a map for the world of the book. How will you show the difference between the world of women and the world of men? Make a note of where the key events take place, and show the journey that Basti takes in the book.

## LITERACY – CURRICULUM LINKS

### Texts in context

Year 5 'describe the ways in which a text reflects the time and place in which it was created'

Year 6 'examine texts including media texts that represent ideas and events, and identify how they reflect the context in which they were created'

### Interacting with others

Year 5 'explain characteristic features used in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts to meet the purpose of the text'

Year 6 'analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text, and engage and influence audiences'

Year 7 'use interaction skills when discussing and presenting ideas and information including evaluations of the features of spoken texts'

## LITERACY – ACTIVITIES

### Write a review

- Read the following review of the book:

'Bren MacDibble has become well-known for her unique and heartfelt adventure novels ... and *The Apprentice Witnesser* is no exception... She is particularly astute at writing timely and inventive stories exploring the impacts of climate change. [There are] plenty of twists for younger readers who enjoy a good dash of marvel and intrigue with their adventure stories. MacDibble's use of language is unparalleled, and she illustrates hope and resilience through her characters.' *Books & Publishing*

- Do you agree with the reviewer? Why/why not?

- Write your own review of the book, trying to identify the elements you enjoyed, and considering what kinds of readers would enjoy it.
- Consider elements such as where/when the book is set, who the book is about, what makes it interesting.
- How would you describe the book in a single sentence?
- Swap your review with a classmate and edit each other's work. Try to imagine that you're the reader – do you understand what the reviewer is trying to say?
- Read your reviews aloud in class and discuss each other's opinions

### Understanding genre

- Discuss the different types of genre students are familiar with (mystery, romance, adventure, comedy etc). Explain what is meant by a 'genre convention' (specific elements that readers expect to find in certain genres – for example a detective in a crime novel).

*The Apprentice Witnesser* is an example of speculative fiction or, more specifically, climate fiction. Speculative fiction uses 'what if' questions to imagine a reality similar to our own but different in some key ways. It is often used to imagine what might happen if we don't change our actions or behaviour (or to imagine the different outcomes if we did).

- Climate fiction, or 'cli-fi' is similar, but deals specifically with what-if questions that explore climate change.
- Make a list of what-if questions that are explored in the book. How does the novel answer them?
- Use one of the questions as a prompt for your own piece of writing.
- Does the book cross over into any other genres? Which ones? Why do you say this?
- What do you think some of the conventions of 'speculative fiction' might be? Where do you see these conventions being used in the book?

### LANGUAGE – CURRICULUM LINKS

#### Language for interacting with others

*Year 5 'understand that language is selected for social contexts and that it helps to signal social roles and relationships'*

*Year 6 'understand that language varies as levels of formality and social distance increase'*

*Year 7 'understand how language expresses and creates personal and social identities'*



## LANGUAGE - ACTIVITIES

- Read the following passage from the book aloud:

*Weird to think there used to be so many more people and they all lived so close to each other and on top of each other and right on the edge of the wild, wild sea. The cities was falling into the sea since long before I was born, pushing people inland, pushing them together, pushing them into areas with no decent plumbing. That's what my ma said made them all sick. Lodyma says that's only part of it. She says humans upset the balance of nature with the amount of us. The demands of us and all the livestock what used to come with us. Apart from Eld Byst's chooks and a few pack ponies and donkeys, I dunno anyone who keeps livestock no more.*

*Looking down on these ruins of the before times, I dunno why they didn't just stop before it was too late. Lodyma says they was all better educated than us, yet still they didn't have the sense to stop? We do just fine without all the stuff they had. She says they thought that was the way you had to live and they didn't wanna change, but look at the change that nature brought to them. Sea where there once was a city! It's too complicated. Every time someone tells more about the past it makes less sense. There's so much to try and understand about how our world came to be.*

*Bliss points to an area above the smashing waves, of old buildings the storms haven't got to yet. 'That's where we're going', she says, and looks up at the sun. 'One o'clock on a Thursday, that's when you'll see the delivery. It's a miracle if I ever saw one! Flying robots!'*

*'Drones,' Lodyma says. 'Flying delivery bots were called drones.'*

*Bliss shrugs. 'You's older than me, Eld Darsey, you enjoyed them cushy times of bots what delivered everything to your door. I only known struggle and getting by.' (pp88-89)*

- How does the writer explore the relationship between people and place in the book? Think about the way that Lodyma describes the people of the past – what do you think is her opinion of them (of us?), and why?
- What kind of language does the author use to describe place and creatures in the book? How does this reveal their position in the world of the story?
- Rewrite this passage from the perspective of someone who doesn't respect the land. How would the language change?

## CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP – CURRICULUM LINKS

Year 7

*Government and democracy 'the characteristics of Australia's democracy, including freedom of speech, association, assembly, religion and movement'*

*Citizenship, diversity and identity 'how values based on freedom, respect, fairness and equality of opportunity can support social cohesion and democracy within Australian society'*

*Communication 'create descriptions, explanations and arguments using civics and citizenship knowledge, concepts and terms that reference evidence'*

## CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP – ACTIVITIES

- Australia is a democratic society. What does this mean? How do people get to have their say in a democracy?
- Would you describe the society in the book as democratic? Why/why not? What does it have in common with a democracy?
- Discuss the differences in the way that the women in the novel run their community against the way the men behave in the forest. Does either group use any democratic principles?
- How would you describe the laws or 'rules' of the society in the book? What do you think the consequences of breaking those rules are?
- What are the consequences of breaking rules in our society?

## ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: SUSTAINABILITY

- Scientists are calling 2024 a 'turning point' for climate change. And although governments and corporations need to take the most responsibility for building a more sustainable future, our own individual actions and choices play a big part. Cutting down our consumption will play a large part in building a more sustainable future too. The following activities will help you to reflect on your own relationship with waste, consumption and the environment.
  - Lodyma teaches Monalissa Swoop how to set up a 'closed loop system' in the book. What is a closed loop system? In small groups, explore closed loop systems currently in place and prepare and present a poster that shows one in action.
  - Grow your own chickpeas or peanuts on a sunny windowsill. Keep a diary every day noting your observations over time, and then write a short reflection about your relationship with food and consumption.  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8jarjvHWxk>)
  - Make a poster using all the advertisements you can find for a particular product. It could be anything: an appliance, a piece of tech or fashion. How could you reuse something for this same purpose instead of buying something new? Make a list of ways that we can reuse or mend existing objects rather than buying new things.
  - Design a stall for Atherton's future market – what product would you grow or create and how much would it be worth? Will you sell it for money or for other items? What would you use instead of plastic to wrap your products?
  - Cut some squares from old white cotton t-shirts and try to dye them with things from nature (beetroot, turmeric, gum leaves, tea leaves, grass clippings, red grape skins, dirt, blueberries). Try tying the cotton around things, or pressing it down on leaves etc to make patterns. Make a collage of the market by cutting clothing shapes out of the dyed fabric for the people to wear.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BREN MACDIBBLE** was born in Whanganui, New Zealand, where the black sand beaches burn feet all summer long. Her parents worked farms all over the central North Island, moving often, and she and her three brothers worked with them, and spent many hours wandering the countryside and bush with their dog like a bunch of feral creatures. They were always on the lookout for sheep tracks on steep hills to use as slides, good trees to climb, hay barns to play in, fruit trees to feed them and creeks to swim and fish in. Of course, there was always farm work and schools to interrupt their fun, but at school they could borrow books. Bren has always loved science fiction and thinking about all the possible futures, and wrote stories to entertain herself.

After high school, Bren went straight to work in a legal office and then a stevedoring company. She quit in her mid-twenties and backpacked around the world, through South East Asia, China, Russia and Europe, and then down the east coast of Africa. She stopped off in Melbourne and never quite made it home to New Zealand. When she had her own children, she started creating stories again and dived straight back into her love of science fiction. She wrote short stories for children, young adults and adults. In 2004, Bren was accepted into the inaugural Clarion South, an intensive six-week workshop in Brisbane for speculative fiction writers. Bren mostly learns about writing by cramming as many well-written books into her head as she can. There are so many, and life is far too short to read them all!

Bren's children's books set in environmentally changed future worlds have picked up many awards, including two New Zealand book awards for Junior Fiction, a Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year, a NSW Premier's Award, and an Aurealis Award, as well as appearing on multiple shortlists and being twice nominated for the CILIP Carnegie Medal in the UK. Bren's YA novel (which she published under the name Cally Black) was launched by the Ampersand Prize and has also picked multiple awards.

Bren still likes to travel. In 2014 she rode through the American Midwest on a Harley-Davidson, and in 2016 rode through Florida and along the coast to New Orleans. In 2018, after a house fire, Bren left Melbourne and lived and worked in a bus travelling around Australia until Covid hit. Bren currently owns and runs a small holiday villa business in Kalbarri, WA.

## IN THE WORDS OF THE AUTHOR

In this book I wanted to explore a society that wasn't about consumerism but about community. It's set in a marketplace and there are hints of consumerism past there but it's mostly about community coming together to meet and swap produce and be entertained. I wanted to explore a society that wasn't about power struggles and greed, where women were safe to live and travel alone.

I read something about how much cheaper it was for young men to backpack around the world. Young man puts on backpack, now he is ready to walk, ride local public transport, hitchhike, sleep under trees. Young woman puts on backpack, finds a travel companion for local public transport, rents cars, rents rooms and makes sure to arrive there before dark. It seems terribly unfair to me that young women don't get to have the adventures they'd enjoy because of the behaviour of some men. So obviously I wanted to explore a world where women could just be themselves without fear in the way men are just themselves.

The world in this book is mostly about exploring a different way of living (even if it was forced upon people after the collapse of cities and consumerism due to sea level rise, pollution and disease). The only lessons if there are any, are about forgiveness and love. The way Osmin forgives his mother for sending him away, and the way Basti forgives Lodyma for being so guarded with her heart, and acceptance of family no matter what form they come in, born or brought together through circumstances. And no matter what state the world is in you can still have a good life through your connections to people.

### ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

**Bec Kavanagh** is a writer, literary critic and academic. She has had fiction and non-fiction published in a number of publications including *The Guardian*, *The Big Issue*, *Mascara* and *Review of Australian Fiction*. She writes teachers' notes for a number of publishers including Allen & Unwin. Bec is a PhD candidate and sessional tutor at La Trobe University, where her research focuses on the representation of female bodies in literature. She is the Youth Programming Manager at The Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas, and in 2021 was one of Regional Arts Victoria's Creative Workers in Schools, developing a creative writing zine with a group of students from Coburg High.

## OTHER RESOURCES

### Democracy

'Parliament Explained: Democracy'

[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/House\\_of\\_Representatives/About\\_the\\_House\\_News/News/Parliament\\_Explained\\_Democracy#:~:text=In%20a%20democracy%2C%20the%20people,a%20'representative%20democracy](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/About_the_House_News/News/Parliament_Explained_Democracy#:~:text=In%20a%20democracy%2C%20the%20people,a%20'representative%20democracy)

### Sustainability

'Pioneering the circular economy' <https://closedloop.com.au/>

'What Is Circular Economy' [https://www.circulareconomyfnq.org.au/blog/what-is-circular-economy-and-how-does-it-save-the-planet?gad\\_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCCQjwIZixBhCoARIsAIC745Dr-l5O6PoXzyjDpjz3o-g2KSDXcG-drGCerrHK-RSUylhjYblhqMaAtwxEALw\\_wcB](https://www.circulareconomyfnq.org.au/blog/what-is-circular-economy-and-how-does-it-save-the-planet?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCCQjwIZixBhCoARIsAIC745Dr-l5O6PoXzyjDpjz3o-g2KSDXcG-drGCerrHK-RSUylhjYblhqMaAtwxEALw_wcB)

'The Circular Economy Explained to Kids' <https://kids.earth.org/life-on-land/the-circular-economy-explained-to-kids/>

### Climate Change

'It's not game over – it's game on'

<https://theconversation.com/its-not-game-over-its-game-on-why-2024-is-an-inflection-point-for-the-climate-crisis-221497>

'Rethinking humanity'

[Rethinkx.com](https://rethinkx.com/)

'Youth in Action' <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/youth-in-action>

'What teenagers are saying about their role in fighting climate change'

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/learning/what-teenagers-are-saying-about-their-role-in-fighting-climate-change.html>

'Youth Survey shows the need for action on impact of climate change concerns on youth mental health'

<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/media-centre/media-releases/youth-survey-shows-need-for-action-on-impact-of-climate-change-concerns-on-youth-mental-health>