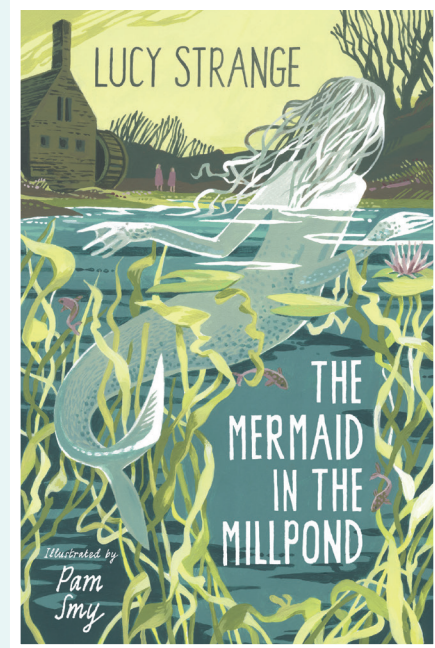




Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM RESOURCES



THE MERMAID IN THE MILLPOND Lucy Strange

- PART 1** Synopsis and Themes
- PART 2** Suggested Questions to Develop Reading Strategies
- PART 3** Creative Exercises

PART 1 SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

This guide has been produced to provide ideas for guiding young readers through Lucy Strange's *The Mermaid in the Millpond*, a brilliantly atmospheric short novel with powerful themes. The guide is written to be used after reading the full text in order to discuss the book and its overarching themes as a whole.

A synopsis is followed by quotes from the book with suggestions for discussion points designed to help young readers engage with the topics the book covers. The questions assigned to each quote are intended to further understanding of the text and provide opportunities for classroom discussion or written work. There are also suggestions for creative writing exercises and a brief author biography.

We hope you enjoy using these resources with your class.

Bess has left the London workhouse behind for a job at a rural cotton mill. But life at the mill is hard and cruel – a far cry from the fresh start Bess hoped for. The only way to survive is to escape, but the mill is like a prison with no way out.

Meanwhile, rumours are spreading about a vicious creature that lurks in the millpond. Bess is sure it's all nonsense, until one night she sees something stir in the murky water.

But is it really a monster that lives in the depths of the pond? Or a creature trapped and alone, just like Bess, desperate to escape ...

The Mermaid in the Millpond is written in an accessible style whilst remaining a powerful story that covers a wide array of serious and moving topics. This book is perfect for classroom discussion and cross-curricular studies as it is set during the industrial revolution and sensitively explores the realities of child labour at the time, covering themes of friendship, freedom, loss, and power.



PART 2

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO DEVELOP READING STRATEGIES

Discuss the Industrial Revolution:

You may want to use the library or your computer to do some further research on this topic. Your teacher will be able to help!

- What was the Industrial Revolution and when did it take place?
- What were some of the defining aspects of the Industrial Revolution?
- What was life like for the working class, and particularly working class children, during the Industrial Revolution?
 - Would you have wanted to be a child during this period of history?
- Do you think the Industrial Revolution was a good thing? Is it as simple as that?

“I am to work as a piecer here, like most of us who came from the London workhouse. It means I have to watch for when a thread snaps and fix it fast – before the great metal frame of the spinner comes clattering back towards me. [...] Still, I think, I’d rather do this than Dot’s job. Dot is a scavenger. It means she has to squirm about on the floor under the big clanking machine, gathering up all the fluff. Several times I catch my breath, thinking Dot is about to be crushed to death by the machine. But she always wriggles out of the way just in time, quick as a lizard.” [page 13–14]

Think about the background of the Industrial Revolution and life at the mill:

- Do you think the author creates a realistic image of life at the mill?
 - Can you find an example from the book that highlights this?
- Do the illustrations help you to picture life in the mill?
 - Can you find examples of photographs from the time that share similarities with the illustrations in the book?
- How do you feel about the adult characters in the book? Do they treat the children at the mill well? Do they treat them fairly?
- How do Bess and Dot’s jobs differ? Why do you think they were each assigned these particular roles?

- Why do you think children, rather than adults, were chosen for these types of jobs at the time?
- Do you think any of the children had a choice in coming to the mill?
- Do you think there are still children in the world who are put to work like Bess and Dot?
 - If yes, why do you think this still happens in the 21st Century? What industries are likely to use child labour? How does that make you feel?

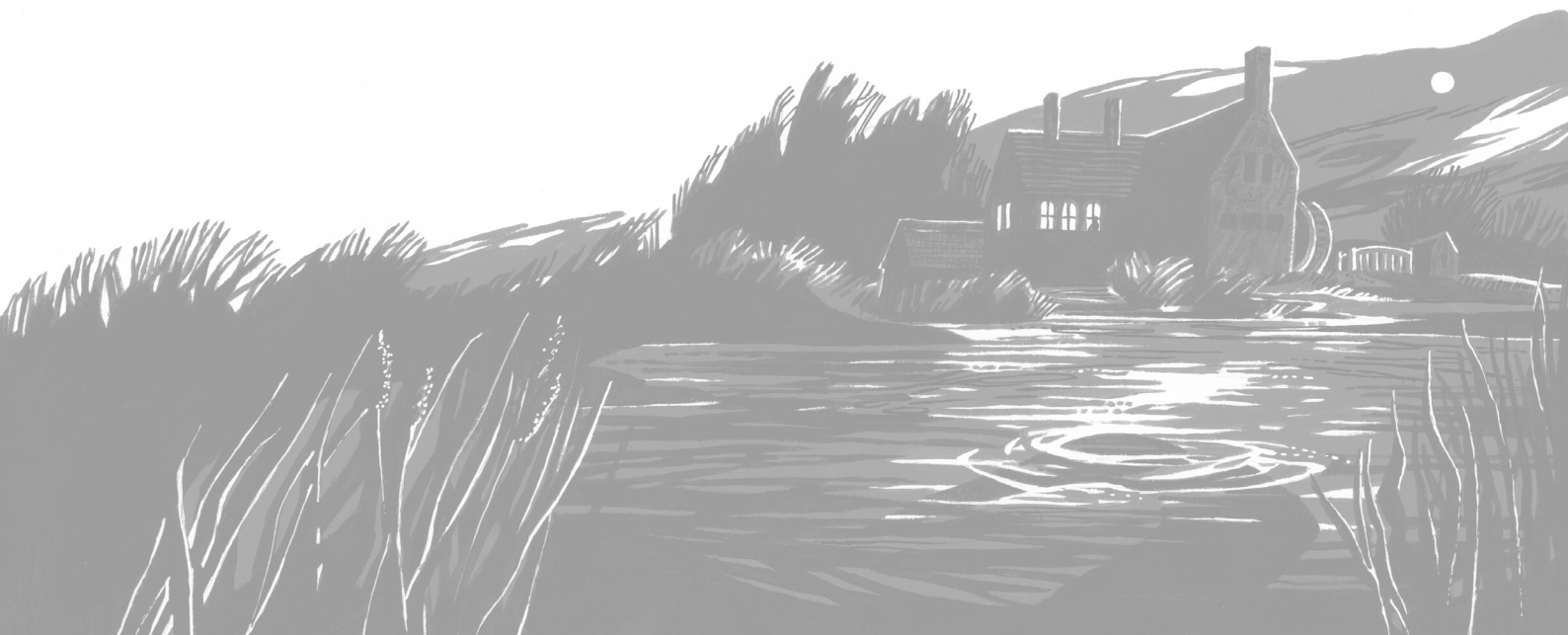
Kindness won't get you anywhere, Bess, I say to myself. You reach out to people and they just drag you down with them. That's all there is to it. [page 8]

[...]

I think about the vow I made to myself – to be selfish, never to help others again ... It was a vow I made when I was angry and grieving. There's a reason I've found it so hard to keep. It's not in my nature to be like that. It doesn't feel right. [page 65]

Explore Bess' feelings and worries:

- How does Bess feel about making friends?
 - Why do you think she feels like this? Why is it difficult for her to accept kindness from someone like Dot?
 - How does this change throughout the book? What makes her change?
 - What do you think the author is telling us about Bess with the phrase "It's not in my nature to be like that"?



I cry into Dot's neck, and she holds me tight. A few days ago, I would have hated her for such kindness. I would have hated myself too – for not being tough enough.

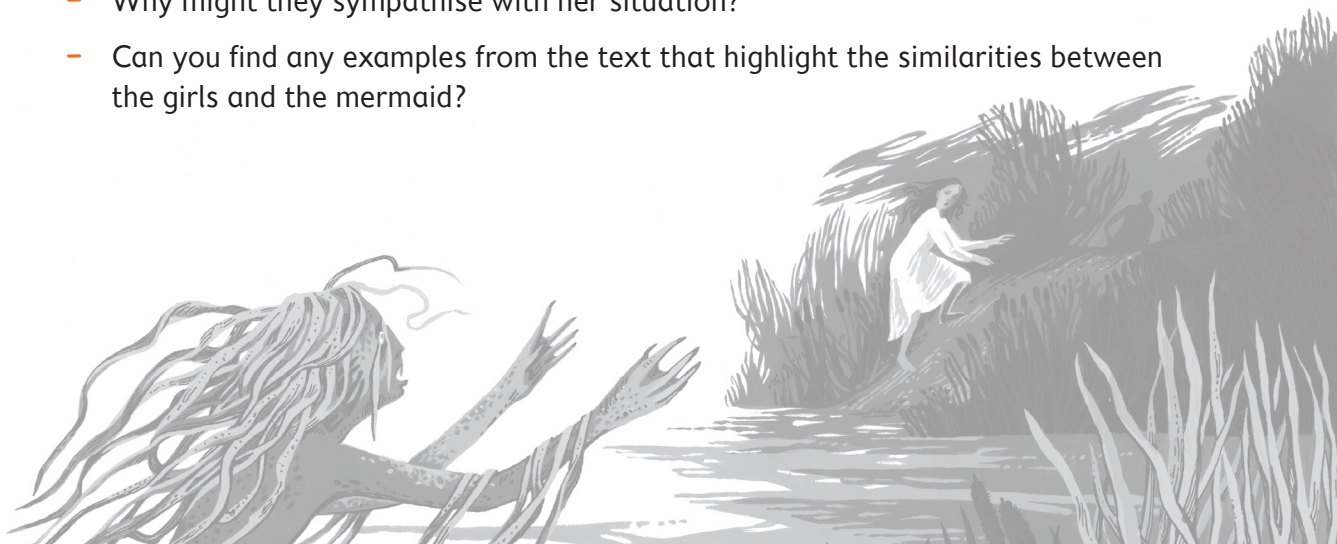
My heart hurts. It's been clenched tight for so long but is now letting go at last. It hurts so much to feel things again. [page 64]

- Can you find other examples in the text where Bess shows anger or sadness?
 - Why does she feel like this in the above example or in the example you find?
 - How does the author show that Bess is sad or angry?
 - What language is used?
 - What images does the author create?
 - How do you feel about Bess when reading these passages?
 - Do you think Dot or the other children at the mill ever feel the same way?

It is an odd thing to see – such a large creature swimming fast around such a small pond. It reminds me of a caged animal, or a falcon flying on a line, or a predator pacing in a pit ... [page 50]

Discuss the mermaid:

- Why do you think the author blurs the lines between myth and reality?
 - What does this add to the story?
 - Do you find it effective?
- The mermaid isn't described or illustrated in a way that we would usually expect. Why do you think the author chose to create a mermaid like the one in the book?
- Do you think Bess and Dot have anything in common with the mermaid?
 - Why might they sympathise with her situation?
 - Can you find any examples from the text that highlight the similarities between the girls and the mermaid?



PART 3 CREATIVE EXERCISES

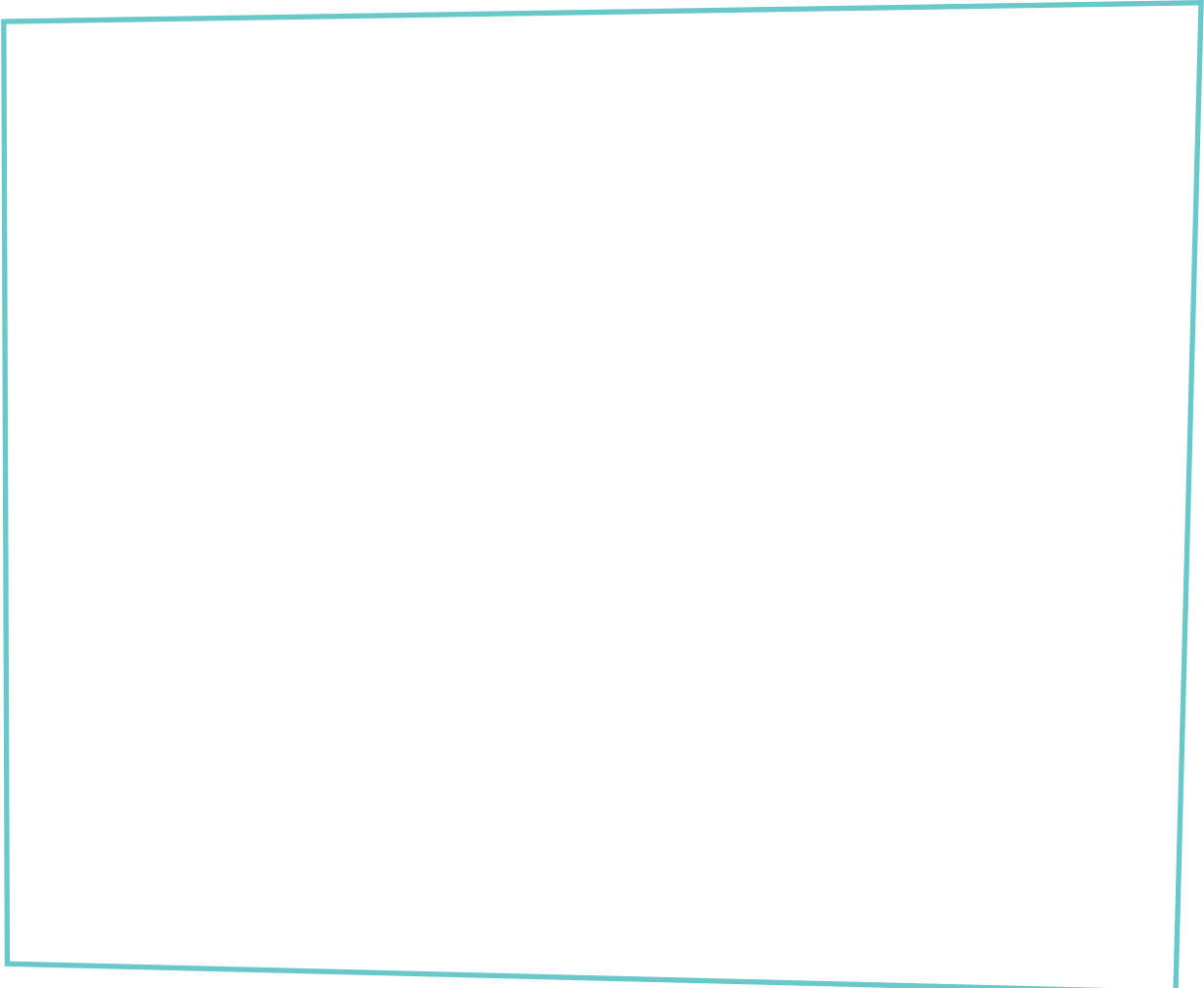
Write about what happens next to Bess and Dot

Do you think Bess and Dot make it to Manchester? Is it everything that they had hoped it would be, or is there more trouble in store?

“She’s half submerged in the water - scrawny, strange, with wide bulging eyes. There are gaping gills on her neck, and she has grey scaled skin.”

The mermaid is described quite differently to how we often see mermaids in books and films. Think about similar kinds of mythical creatures, like fairies, elves and gnomes. Can you imagine what a ‘monstrous’ version of these might look like?

Draw your hair-raising new creature in the space below.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Claudine Sinnett

Lucy Strange is the bestselling children's author of titles including *The Secret of Nightingale Wood* and *Our Castle by the Sea*, which was nominated for the Carnegie Medal, shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, and chosen as the first ever Independent Booksellers' Children's Book of the Month. Lucy lives in the Kent countryside with her family.



Photo © Zulfiya Wilde

Pam Smy studied Illustration at Cambridge School of Art, where she now lectures part-time. Her first novel, *Thornhill* was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the UKLA Book Awards, the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal 2018 and won the 2018 British Book Design & Production Award for Graphic Novels. Pam has also illustrated titles for award-winning authors including Julia Donaldson and Lucy Strange.