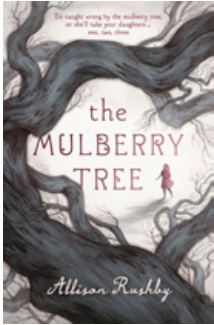




Walker Books Classroom Ideas



The Mulberry Tree

Allison Rushby
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

Do naught wrong by The Mulberry Tree, or she'll take your daughters ... one, two, three.

Ten-year-old Immy and her family run away from their storm cloud of problems to a tiny village in Cambridgeshire, England. When they find an adorable thatched cottage to begin a perfect new life in, the only downside is the ancient, dark and fierce-looking mulberry tree in the back garden. And the legend that comes with it – the villagers say the tree steals away girls living in the cottage on the eve of their eleventh birthday. Of course, Immy thinks this is ridiculous. Then she starts to hear a strange song in her head ...

Allison Rushby's new novel for middle-grade readers is a captivating, spooky mystery.

Author Information:

Allison Rushby, the daughter of an author, was raised on a wholesome diet of classic English literature. She adores cities with long, winding histories, wild, overgrown cemeteries, red-brick Victorian museums, foxes and ivy. She likes to write with a cup of Darjeeling tea by her side and a Devon Rex cat called Claudia curled up in her lap. Her first book with Walker was *The Turnkey* (2016).

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Primary years 4-6
- Ages 9+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Change
- Supernatural mystery
- Bullying
- Depression/mental illness
- Family



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

Before Reading

Before reading *The Mulberry Tree*, view the cover of the book. Identify the following:

- The title of the book
- The author
- The tagline
- The publisher
- The blurb

Based on the cover, what do you think this story is about? How do you think it will begin/end? Revisit your answer after reading the book – how close were your predictions to the actual novel?

Exploring the Text

What are 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.

The Mulberry Tree contains supernatural elements. In small groups, make a mind map of some of the characteristics of the supernatural genre. Consider settings, characters, events and themes. In what ways does *The Mulberry Tree* resemble a typical supernatural novel? How is it different?

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.

Find passages in the text that show Immy demonstrating or experiencing the following qualities and emotions

- Compassion
- Courage/bravery
- Fear
- Anger

Write a short companion story to *The Mulberry Tree* using Elizabeth as the main character. Your story should be set in the lead up to Elizabeth’s disappearance in 1945. Do you think Elizabeth felt anything from the tree like Immy did? What was her relationship with Jean like?

What do you think would have happened if Immy didn’t learn the secret of *The Mulberry Tree* in time?

Allison Rushby lives in Australia, yet she is able to paint a vivid picture of an English village with her words. Choose a country that is very different to where you live and write a short story set there. Research the area in books, online, in movies/TV, etc. to get a feel of this location. Use as much description as possible in your short story.

Allison Rushby uses the literary device personification often when describing *The Mulberry Tree*. What is personification? Find examples of it in the book. How does it enrich the story?

“There’d been whispers about those pills as well, over the last month. Her father hadn’t wanted to take them. It was all right for him to feel sad, he’d argued with Immy’s mum.” Page 36

Immy’s dad is going through depression, caused, or at least made worse, by his experience with his patient, Bob. Why do you think the incident with Bob affected Andrew so much? How does the depression affect Andrew? In turn, how does that affect Immy and her mum? What realisation does Immy have about her dad’s condition later in the book? Have a class discussion on mental illness and the options students can take if they or a friend is suffering, such as talking to parents, a teacher, counsellor, call Lifeline, etc.

“I ... I suppose I think nothing’s ever truly evil – all good, or all bad, all black or all white. Life isn’t like that, is it?” Page 110

What do you think Mrs Garland means by this? How does this conversation help Immy understand the tree and Caitlyn? Many stories present heroes as purely good and villains as purely evil. Do you think this is representative of real life? Do you believe there can be elements of both good and evil in people?

Immy is an outsider in her village, she has just moved there from Australia and doesn’t know anyone yet. Why do you think Immy and Riley connect and build a friendship? Why is it hard being an outsider?

What is bullying? Discuss the concept of bullying in reference to Caitlyn. How does she bully others? What is your school’s policy on bullying? If you are bullied or you witness bullying, what should you do?



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"Her father was still here, but he'd left at the same time."

Page 166

What does Immy mean by this? Immy thinks about how her dad used to be and how he is now. Describe your impression of both versions of him. Do you think things will ever go back to the way they were before, or will the family have to work together to create a "new normal"?

"Immy turned her attention back to the window. And that was when she saw something." Page 185

Allison Rushby employs a "cliffhanger" to end several chapters in the book. What is a cliffhanger? Find examples of this device in *The Mulberry Tree*, other books and TV shows/movies. How does this device affect the reader?

A major theme in this novel is change. Have a class discussion on how this novel deals with change, using the following points as discussion-starters:

- Immy is growing up – she is about to turn 11 and is dealing with more mature issues causing rifts between her and her parents
- The disappearances of Bridget and Elizabeth have caused the town to change from happy to somber and suspicious
- Immy's dad has changed due to a traumatic event, and he is working on changing back to his old self
- Immy's family have changed their location
- The change in the town during the resolution of the story

Is change good or bad? Why is change sometimes scary or unpleasant? What would happen if nothing ever changed?

How do hate, anger and bitterness affect the characters in this book? What are some strategies someone can use if they experiencing any of these feelings?

In the last third of the book, *The Mulberry Tree* shifts from something to be feared to something to be pitied and helped. How does Allison Rushby influence the reader into empathising with Immy's feelings about the tree?

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 novel.

Imagine that a movie was being made of *The Mulberry Tree*. In small groups, create a soundtrack to accompany some of the key scenes, thinking particularly about the mood you want to convey. You could either make a compilation of existing songs or compose your own musical pieces. Present your soundtrack to the class, explaining why you have chosen the pieces you have. Also choose your ideal cast for the movie and create a movie poster.

Create a mood board of the story including words and phrases from the text and photos and illustrations that match what you saw in your mind while reading the book.

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