

TEACHING NOTES

THE HISTORY OF MISCHIEF

REBECCA HIGGIE

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YEAR LEVEL: Y9+

ABOUT THE BOOK

Following the death of their parents, Jessie and her older sister Kay move to their grandmother's abandoned house. One night they discover *The History of Mischief* hidden beneath the floor: it is like no book they have ever seen. From Ancient Greece to war-torn China, from the Ethiopian Empire to Victorian England, the pages reveal a world of mischief and mystery, adventure and adversity – stolen bones and fiery dragons, feisty philosophers and tempestuous tyrants, shape-shifting trees and scorched scrolls. But not everything is as it seems, in the book or in her life, and Jessie is determined to find the truth. The *History* has a history of its own. Unravelling its secrets might be the biggest mischief of all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Higgle is a writer from Perth. Her whole life has been spent in the company of books, with careers in libraries and universities. Formerly an academic at Curtin University and Brunel University London, she has published research on satire and politics. She has worked in the stacks of the State Library of Western Australia and fostered childhood literacy as the Library Officer at Guildford Primary, Western Australia's oldest public school. Her creative work combines whimsy and play with extensive research and critical insights. Her stories and poems have appeared in publications such as *Westerly*, *Stories of Perth* and *Visible Ink*. Her novel *The History of Mischief* won the 2019 Fogarty Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript.

THEMES

- Family relationships
- Friendship
- Grief and loss
- Magic and play
- Libraries, books and reading
- World histories and cultures

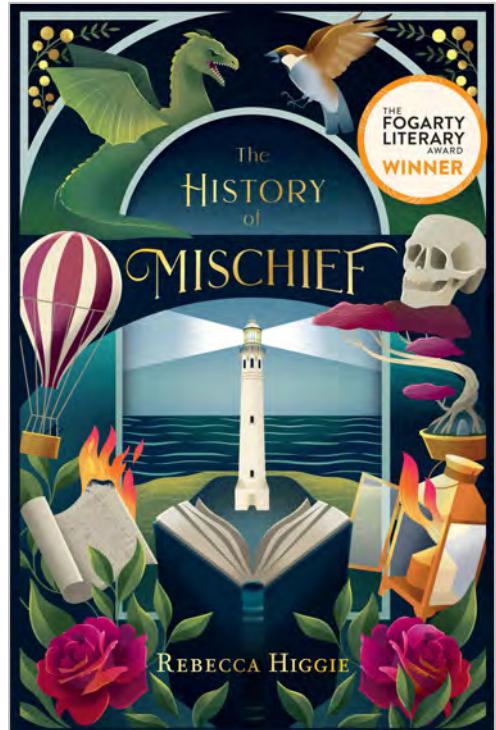
AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y9+ English

Y9+ Humanities and Social Sciences (History; Geography)

Y9+ Health and Physical Education (Mental health and wellbeing)

Y9+ Art



USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rebeccahiggle>
- Author interview on the Fremantle Press Podcast: <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=371895>
- Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation – Grief: <https://headspace.org.au/young-people/dealing-with-grief-and-loss-and-the-effects-on-mental-health>
- Youth Beyond Blue – Grief and Loss: <https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/understand-what's-going-on/grief-and-loss>
- Reachout – Grief and Loss: <https://au.reachout.com/tough-times/grief-and-loss>

CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. How would you describe the book's main narrator, Jessie? How does her character change from the beginning of the novel to its end?
2. *Mischief was something these sisters used to escape their grief. It was what Kay and I used too.* (p. 368) What is the role of grief in the story? How does *The History* help Jessie heal from her own loss?
3. What is the significance of Jessie's friendship with Theodore? How do they help each other?
4. Consider all libraries mentioned in the story, from ancient times to now. What role do books, libraries and reading play in the novel?
5. Each of the A. Mischiefs has different powers, applied in different contexts. Do the Mischiefs have anything in common? In what ways are they different? Why might the author have chosen these particular stories and narrators?
6. What effect does the inclusion of multiple narrators have on your reading experience?
7. Who is your favourite character in *The History of Mischief* and why?
8. What does the term 'folklore' mean? What are examples of folklore featured in the novel?
9. What challenges does Bezawit's point of view as narrator pose to British perceptions of Ethiopia? Consider, in particular, the book's treatment of the matter of Prince Alemayehu's bones.
10. Many of the characters in the story are charged with caring for others under difficult circumstances (e.g. Kay for Jessie, Yingtai for Hu, Feliks for Serafin, Lou for Chloe). What does this suggest about the nature of love?
11. How is the notion of morality made complex in the novel? Are there times when readers are not positioned to identify with one character but rather to reflect on several ways of seeing a situation?
12. What did you think of the story's final chapters? How did the revelation of Grandma's real history change your understanding of earlier chapters?
13. Reread the last two paragraphs of pp. 362–363. What do you think the narrator means? How do we use storytelling to make sense of our experiences?
14. What does the novel have to say about truth-telling in our own lives?
15. How are notions of redemption and 'making good' explored in the novel?

History and geography

1. *The History of Mischief* references scrolls, papyrus and the codex. Research the evolution of the book. Present your findings in an illustrated report, and list all sources consulted.
2. Choose one of the following topics to research. Present your findings in a report and list all sources.
 - a. The history and philosophy of the Cynics in ancient Greece, including Diogenes of Sinope.
 - b. Aristophanes of Byzantium's life and his contributions to the field of orthography.
 - c. The history of China's Northern Wei dynasty.
 - d. The Wieliczka Salt Mine.
 - e. The history of Jewish people in Poland.
 - f. The Franco-Prussian war and the 1870–1 Siege of Paris.
 - g. The history of ballooning.
 - h. The Italo-Ethiopian wars, including the role of Balcha Safo.
 - i. The Battle of Maqdala, including Prince Alemayehu's history.
 - j. The River Thames frost fairs.
 - k. The history of Sister Kate's Children's Home in Western Australia, or another Stolen Generations history relevant to your area.
 - l. The history of forced adoption in Australia.

Mental health and wellbeing

1. What is grief?
2. What are some of the ways we can constructively deal with our grief?
3. What help is available for us as we deal with grief?
4. How can we help those around us who are dealing with grief and loss?

Critical thinking

1. *I find many mistakes online. Wikipedia says Diogenes met Alexander in a place called Corinth, not Athens ... 'Wikipedia is wrong,' I tell Neil. He laughs. 'Yes. You can't trust Wikipedia!'* (p. 97)

- a. Why can't we trust all information we read online? What reasons are there for information to be incorrect (e.g. poor research, poor editorial standards, propaganda, advertising)?
- b. Why do misinformation and disinformation spread especially fast online?
- c. How can we establish whether or not a source is credible?
- d. Visit a reputable myth-busting/fact-checking website (such as snopes.com) and check the validity of a claim or a quote you've seen online. For example, did Steve Jobs really say 'the non-stop pursuit of wealth will only turn a person into a twisted being, just like me'? Did Sweden really 'ban Christmas lights to avoid angering Muslim refugees'? Why did people make up these false rumours, and how did they spread around the world so quickly?

Creative writing

1. Write your own history in the style of *The History of Mischief*. Name the place and date of your story, and name your narrator 'A. Mischief the [number]'. Remember to research the historical period in which your story is set to make it as convincing and detailed as possible.

Art

1. Choose a scene from *The History of Mischief* and illustrate it in a medium of your choice.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Describe the genesis of *The History of Mischief* – how did you come to write this book?

When I turned 18, my parents changed their will so I would become the legal guardian of my siblings if they both died. It made me imagine what it would be like, to care for my siblings while also grappling with my own grief and the legal issues that come with a deceased estate.

This combined with my love of books, magic and play. I loved the idea of a book that speaks of magic hidden under the floorboards. I have always been enchanted by unseen surprises, by leaving gifts or notes for people and then scurrying away. Mischief, as a magical thing, was inspired by this.

I also have a great fondness for the town of Guildford. When I first visited in 2005, it felt like a different world entirely. It felt natural for the book to be set there.

Your book explores many places and eras in world history. What kind of research did you undertake in order to write about these?

I searched for every resource I could find: books, academic articles, souvenir guides, fictional accounts, radio programmes, documentaries, government reports, poetry, plays, memoirs, newspaper articles and quality online sources. I used my local library extensively to order books via inter-library loan, just like Jessie. In fact, all of the books and research materials that Jessie references in *The History of Mischief* are real!

Where possible, I also visited the places where the histories were. For instance, I visited Augusta in Western Australia many times, and I went to local libraries and historical societies to do research.

What was the hardest thing about writing *The History of Mischief*? What was the funnest?

The research was the hardest part. Sometimes I would spend months researching something that only ended up being a sentence or two in the book. Many of the resources I wanted also didn't have English translations, so I had to find other works that talked about those works, or find different sources.

The funnest thing was definitely writing Jessie's parts. Jessie is a lot like I was at that age, except a lot more fearless and bold. I enjoyed imagining I was a 9-year-old on a mission, and I enjoyed being a kid. I found her voice fun to write.

TEACHING NOTES

Books and libraries play a central role in your novel. Why is that?

I have always loved books, and I love books *about* books. There is something very special about a good book. It has the ability to change how you think and feel. Books I read as a child still impact me today. I therefore believe that libraries are magical places, full of possibilities.

I also used to work in the stacks of the State Library of WA, just like Kay, and saw the beautiful old books of the rare book rooms.

What do you hope readers will take away from The History of Mischief?

I hope readers will think about how all of us experience loss and grief, and how small acts of kindness can make a big difference. Empathy is very important to me, so I hope the book will encourage readers to be more empathetic. I hope they will be inspired to see the magic in everyday things, like a book, a lump of salt, or a square piece of paper. I hope they will see that beautiful things can come out of dark places.

And, of course, I hope they will conduct their own loving mischief.

What does it mean to you to have won the Fogarty Literary Award?

Winning the Fogarty Literary Award was very surreal. Still today, when I see the 'Winner' certificate I got at the award ceremony, I laugh out loud in disbelief. It means I get to be something I've wanted to be all my whole life: a published author.

The History of Mischief took 12 years to write. While I was doing a lot in those 12 years, including a PhD and working overseas, it was hard grappling with a novel for so long. I kept going because I was determined to finish. I was passionate about the story and I loved my characters. I wasn't sure if it would ever be published, but I needed to tell the story, even if it was just to myself. Winning the Fogarty meant that all the mischief could finally escape to the world. The prize has brought recognition and affirmation after a long period of doubt.

What other projects are you currently working on?

At the moment, my major project is being a mum! My baby boy keeps me very busy, so I don't have much time for writing. However, I have an idea for my second book and have been thinking about it for some time. Often, my stories start with images and feelings. The next book features the following: blue whales swimming through cities, a hanged criminal and a world leader, immense longing and constant searching.

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