



G E C K O P R E S S

Teaching Notes

Mortal Fire by Elizabeth Knox



Synopsis

Sixteen-year-old Canny Mochrie has always been a little different. She has never known her father, she has always had a calculating, mathematical mind, and she has always been able to see something 'Extra'.

When she grudgingly joins her older stepbrother on a trip to research a strange coal mine disaster that happened thirty years earlier, she wanders into a nearby enchanted valley, occupied almost entirely by children all with the same surname and who can perform a type of magic that makes things stronger and better than they already are. With the help of the alluring and somewhat threatening Ghislain Zarene, who is held hostage by a powerful, out-of-control spell for his part in that mine accident long ago, Canny starts to untangle the mysteries of the valley, only to find that its secrets are also her own.



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The Author

Elizabeth Knox has published several novels for adults and children, as well as autobiographical novellas. Her acclaimed adult novel *The Vintner's Luck* (1998) was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 1999, and was made into a feature film in 2009. In 2008, her young adult novel *Dreamquake* won an American Library Association's Michael L Printz Award for excellence in young adult literature. Elizabeth lives in Wellington, New Zealand. Her website and blog can be found at www.elizabethknox.com.

Themes

This mysterious and compelling coming-of-age novel has several themes, including the importance of history, the search for identity, otherness, secrets and memories, loyalty and love.

An overarching theme in the book is that of history and the appreciation, the investigation and importance of its role in shaping not only individual characters but also their place in culture and society. For example, the Zarenes' obsession with genealogy seems an essential element in the protection of their valley with magic, Sholto's desire to study history leads him and Canny to the valley, and Sisema's public and private histories both have powerful and significant roles to play for her and her family members.

Other themes relating to history which are explored are those of relationships, loyalty, secrets, memories and love, and how they are tested in times of adversity. Many characters have been or are involved in historical and current tragic events, such as World War II and its aftermath, the Bull Mine disaster or the devastating effect of polio as an illness. Sisema and the drug-addled soldier, Alex's grisly wartime misadventure in the valley leads to a dark and guilty secret which she feels cannot be revealed without risking her lifestyle and family relationships. The death of members of the Zarene family in the Bull Mine disaster leads to an abuse of power, as in loyalty to the memory of their lost loved ones the surviving siblings secretly imprison Ghislain for eternity as revenge for the role he played. Canny's loyalty to her sick friend Marli, inspires her to try and steal magic from Ghislain in an attempt to heal her friend, which leads her to Ghislain and also to the answers in her search for her missing self.

The theme of attempting to discover one's identity and of feeling excluded or 'other' are also driving forces in the novel and bring characters in direct contact with the histories and the imprisoned secrets they contain. Canny is searching to discover why she has always felt different or 'other'. This theme of 'otherness' or exclusion is also



evident throughout the book in many characters who are attempting to negotiate their way through parallel lives and worlds: from Sisema, the migrant war hero of a different race with a dark secret to her son Sholto, the white-collar middle-class student interacting with hardened miners; from Susan trying to fit in with Sholto's dysfunctional family, to Ghislain being imprisoned in a magical house by his; or, from the Zarene children attempting to make sense of a new world when forced to leave the valley and interact with other children, to Marli forced to stay in hospital suffering in the iron lung, away from all her peers.

Canny's personal search for identity sets in motion actions which lead her to discover and accept the missing part of herself, her mysterious past, unusual present and an unsettling future. In discovering her identity she is free to accept her mother and understand the family dynamics, to lose and grieve for her friend Marli, and finally to embrace her magic and return to the valley to start a life with her romantic love, Ghislain. Her actions in turn also offer some hope of a resolution for other characters in the novels, as their histories are delved into, secrets are exposed and explored, forgiveness is sought and granted, and the possibility of freedom and a willingness to change the future is presented, particularly to the inhabitants of the magical Zarene Valley.

Further themes explored are those of both familial and romantic relationships, free will versus determinism, parallel worlds of reality versus magic, loss, betrayal, bravery, the power of naming, and a sense of belonging.

Activities

1. Before reading, discuss the title, cover illustration and genre.
2. Magical realism is a literary genre which can be defined as a blend or fusion of reality and fantasy. Do you think this novel fits into this category? Why/why not? Use examples from the book. Then, in groups, create a timeline of the main events in the book, including any dates or historical references from the book, such as those listed below:
 - Second World War (p. 4)
 - Trams (p. 7)
 - Polio epidemic (p.11)
 - The iron lung (p. 21)
 - Scott of the Antarctic (p. 30)
 - Polio immunisations (p. 397)
 - IBM (p. 412)



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3. Look at the quote at the start of the novel. Which poem is this from? Why do you think the author chose this quote? How does it relate to the novel? Write an author and/or poetry study on William Blake and the poem this quote is from.
4. The novel is written in the third person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Is it effective? Choose a passage in the book and rewrite it in the first person narrative.
5. Some of the chapters are narrated from different characters' perspectives, for example, Sholto, Cyrus, Ghislain, Lealand and Canny. Choose a passage relating to one of the main events of the novel that is written from Canny's perspective. Re-write the passage as either a diary entry or monologue in another main character's voice. Think about the kind of vocabulary your chosen character would use, and how their opinion of the event might differ from Canny's.
6. The novel has a plethora of vivid descriptions of the settings, for example, the Vaiu household in Congress Valley (p. 36), the Mount Ruth Run (p. 40), Fort Rock (p. 59), the road into Zarene valley (p. 83), Ghislain's house (p. 142) and the Massenfer Bull Mine (p. 169). Find a setting description in the novel that you find particularly vivid. Create an artistic interpretation of it. Write a brief artist's statement to accompany the interpretation.
7. The novel is full of highly-descriptive, suspense-filled action sequences, particularly chase and escape scenes, for example, Canny being pursued by the packs of Zarene children (pp.297-299), the swarm of bees chasing Canny (pp.302), Ghislain finding his 'found one' (pp. 330-333) and the powerful vignettes of the voyaging Canny (pp. 342-357). Choose an action sequence from the book. Study the language the author uses in the sequence, then write a dramatic, suspense-filled action sequence of your own about something that has happened to you. Alongside your written description also present your sequence in either a comic strip or a movie storyboard format.
8. As the book progresses we see how Canny views herself and discovers that other characters also have surprising secrets, hidden depths and similarities, such as Sisema. Discuss if, and how, these characters change and develop throughout the book? Which characters did you like/dislike the most? Why?
9. Do you think Canny is a strong female protagonist? Why/why not? Which other characters do you feel display strength? In pairs, write character studies of five of the main characters. Begin by making a chart to list the strengths



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and weaknesses of each. How do their particular strengths and weaknesses affect the part they play in the novel?

10. Based on character descriptions from the book, draw a portrait of one of the characters, for example, Iris (p. 102), Cyrus (p. 119), Canny (p. 127), Ghislain (p. 143), Mews (p. 169) or Lealand (p. 263). Then write a description of yourself and/or one of your classmates.
11. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Two examples of figurative language are metaphors and similes, for example, 'Sholto's tent became a little blister of lamplight' (p. 46) and 'Canny has a brain like flypaper' (p. 85). Find more examples of each type of figurative language from the book. Find three other similes in the novel. Use these as the first lines of each stanza in a three verse poem that tells either Canny or Ghislain's story.
12. The author particularly uses food, animal and nature imagery in similes. For example, 'the late afternoon sunlight was as thick, lucent, and golden as honey' (p. 239), 'She is like a big cat playing with a nest of little mice' (p. 264) and 'excuses were like a fog she wrapped around herself' (p. 279). Find three more examples of animal similes from the book. Then in pairs, think of six other types of food and forces of nature and create a simile for each.
13. Sholto's father, Professor Mochrie, wrote the new general history of Southland (p. 103). Imagine you are an academic or investigative journalist. Research and present your findings about one of the events from the novel, as listed below. Think about how you would publish your findings, for example, as a newspaper article, an academic journal including oral transcripts, a magazine feature, etc.
 - The Bull Mine disaster (p. 177-180)
 - Captain Young's escape to Port Morrison (pp. 53-56)
 - Sisema's trip in the Zarene Valley (pp. 351-353)
 - The funeral of Marli (pp. 400-403)
14. Susan is an anthropologist. Imagine she has studied the inhabitants of Zarene Valley and has asked you to help write, illustrate and publish a children's encyclopaedia entry on her findings. Include elements such as the Zarene creation myths, origins, folklore, genealogy (pp. 270-274), as well as their contemporary life in the valley, including their jobs (pp. 69-71), traditions of sending children away (pp. 89-90), the role of 'magic wards' and other objects like the 'Spell Veil' (p. 329), their insularity (p. 159), their locale, map of the valley, biographies and a family tree of the current family members, etc.



15. There are allusions in the novel to fairy tales and Bible stories, such as Cinderella (p. 245) and the story of Lot's wife (p. 342). Find any others in the novel. What is their significance in relation to the novel? How do these allusions help to deepen your reading experience? Compare the obstacles, moral lessons, and payments or sacrifices that are implicit in these stories to Canny's experiences in the novel.
16. Divide the class into debating teams and debate the following statements taken from the novel:
 - Mathematics could save lives (p. 4)
 - Cultures are made up of things people don't get over (p. 184)
 - If a thing is worth doing it's worth doing properly (p. 337)
17. Did you like the ending of the book? Why/why not? Either re-write the ending of the book or write a plot outline and back-cover blurb for a sequel.
18. Although excelling in mathematics Canny finds English comprehension questions difficult in her final school exams (p. 25). After a close reading of the novel, imagine you are setting two comprehension questions per chapter for an English comprehension examination using *Mortal Fire* as the set text. In pairs, ask and answer the questions.
19. What do you think is the main theme of the novel? Write an essay on your choice.
20. Margo Lanagan, author of *Tender Morsels*, states: 'This book is finely-wrought magic from start to finish. It has brains; it has heart; it has people to fear and to fall in love with, and it all takes place in a totally beguiling world full of natural beauties, glittering puzzles and earthy problems. It's a rich and satisfying read.' Do you agree/disagree with this view of the novel? Use examples to back up your opinion. Then write your own review of the novel for your favourite magazine, newspaper or website.
21. Imagine you are a film producer attempting to gain financial backing to turn *Mortal Fire* into a feature film. Write up your proposal, include one or two scenes from the novel in film script form, your choices for the soundtrack, casting, location, etc. Or imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design a suitable set, programme notes and an advertising poster for the play.