



IN DEEP DARK WOOD

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by MARITA CONLON-McKENNA

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is a fast-moving, imaginative story with plenty of action. Mythical creatures and characters sustain the interest level and it will appeal to children on a variety of levels. Although suitable for use with fourth class in primary school, this book will be enjoyed by pupils in fifth and sixth classes as well. Themes covered include:

- Growing up and developing one's own interests
- Development of the pre-adolescent personality
- Sibling bonds
- Friendship and loyalty
- Animal conservation
- Legend and mythology

SUMMARY

The story begins with the arrival of a strange old woman, who moves into the house next door to Mia and her brother, Rory. They think she might be a witch, but their parents are having none of it and tell them just to leave the old woman alone. Mia, an imaginative child, already has a great interest in the fairy stories and legends, which her granny tells her at bedtime. Rory and Mia eventually venture into the next-door garden and meet Bella Blackwell, the curious, witch-like old lady. Mia becomes drawn further into Bella's life and meets the dragonlings.

As the story develops, Bella teaches Mia how to care for the dragonlings, which are the last of their kind in the world. Bella is the Great Mage, a powerful figure from another time. However, she knows that she will not be around much

longer and has chosen Mia to be the recipient of her skills and knowledge. Mia spends all her spare time with Bella, caring for the dragons, especially her favourite, Trig. Her family becomes concerned and Granny Rose tries to intervene, to no avail. Bella persuades Mia to accompany her and the dragons to a strange land where she keeps Mia a virtual prisoner. Though she loves the dragons, Mia longs to return home.

Meanwhile Rory, who has set off in search of his sister, has been brought to this land by the legendary Shadow Hound. He is befriended by Birch, a young giant, and later by Conrad, a young woodsman. Rory overcomes the many obstacles and dangers thrown in his path by the Dragon Woman, Bella, and eventually reaches the castle. Though Mia and Rory escape, they actually go back to the castle voluntarily as Bella is dying. On her deathbed, Bella tells Mia that she must return to her mother but that there will always be a place for her in this other world as she is the new dragon protector. Conrad remains in the castle and takes his place as the next Great Mage. Rory and Mia return to Glenkilty in the magnificent flying coats that Bella has left to them. Mia brings with her the Olde Magick book, for there is still much to learn ...

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five main sections, covering six or more chapters at a time. Possible discussion points and activities, many of these language-based, are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT ONE STORMY WINDS

SUMMARY

In the middle of the night, a strange old woman moves in next door. Rory and Mia are scared of her and call her the Bird Woman, because hundreds of birds flock to her daily. They sneak into her garden to retrieve their football, but she sees them. She brings them inside for juice and a biscuit and Mia becomes her friend. Rory stays away, but Mia begins visiting Bella and eventually sees the dragons. Trig is her favourite and he chooses her as his keeper. Mia learns of the old days and the dawning of a new age – an age when dragons can once again exist in the world.

Read pp. 7–51

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read the text on the page facing the title page (p.2). This text sets the atmosphere for the book, introducing a sense of mystery and magic. What is your opinion of this device? Can you think of other novels which use a prologue in this way?
- What signs are there in the scene where Bella Blackwell moves in that tell us something strange is going to happen? (pp. 9–12)
- At first Mia is very scared of the old woman, but, having visited her house, she doesn't want to leave. Why do you think she changed her mind?
- Read p.31 again. Why do you think Bella has chosen Mia to be her apprentice?
- Discuss Bella's statement that: 'Nothing happens by accident.'

ACTIVITIES

1. PROVERBS

A proverb is a wise old saying. When Granny Rose says, on p.8, that 'Storm winds do bring change', is she just talking about the weather? List five well-known proverbs and their meanings.

2. IMAGINARY CREATURES

Mia now has a small family of dragons to look after. Make up a family of either dragons or your own invented creatures. Give them names and individual characters. Write a short paragraph describing each one. Illustrate.

3. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

The following words appear in this unit: transfixed, unflinching, eccentric, phenomenon, emphatically. Arrange in alphabetical order and write a definition for each (using a dictionary if necessary). Write a sentence for each word that demonstrates its meaning.

4. STRANGE BUT TRUE ...

Imagine that you are Mia, writing her diary on the day she saw the dragons. Write the diary entry for that day. Or say how the event might be reported in a sensationalist tabloid newspaper. You could also write the headline that would alert the readers to your story.

5. WEATHER CONDITIONS

What weather condition features strongly in the opening chapter? Find out more about the Beaufort Scale which measures wind-strength. Where would you place the scene on p.7 on the Beaufort Scale?

UNIT TWO DRAGON DAYS

SUMMARY

Mia spends more and more time with Bella. Her parents go away to a magicians' convention, leaving Granny Rose in charge. Bella decides it is time to bring the dragons to Blackwell Castle in her enchanted world. Mia doesn't want to go but, because Trig's life depends on it, she eventually agrees. Granny Rose and her friends know something is going on and rush next door, but Bella uses

her sorcery on them and changes them into the plants they are named for. With the help of flying coats, Mia and Bella and the dragons fly to the castle. Rory is left behind, but the Shadow Hound appears and carries him to the other world.

Read pp. 52–88

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think that Granny Rose knows a little about magic and sorcery? What signs are there in this unit that show this? (see pp. 55, 68, 69)
- Why do you think Mia made the decision to leave her home and family and go with Bella? Might you have acted differently?
- Even though Mia was scared and lonely in the castle, it helped her a little to have Trig to care for (p.75). Have you ever had to mind a younger child when they were anxious or upset? What were your feelings? Do you think it is easier or harder to be brave when looking after someone else?

ACTIVITIES

1. MAGICAL GARMENT

Mia and Bella wore their magnificent flying coats which enabled them to fly through the air. Imagine you could wear a magical garment which would give you special powers, e.g. football boots, special hat, invisible cloak etc. Write a story of your adventures wearing your magical garment.

2. INTO THE FUTURE

On p.61, Mia has an image of herself as a young woman, looking down on a kingdom which she ruled. Imagine yourself as a young adult and write a description of the image. Are you in a job, at college, on stage, in a uniform? Think big, like Mia.

3. PROMISES

Read the unit once more and list five reasons why Bella is not to be trusted. What do you think of the promise she made on p.64?

4. CHANGING ROOMS

'Mia looked around her bedroom, loving every bit of it ...' (p.66). What bits of your bedroom would you miss the most if you had to leave? Design your dream bedroom and illustrate.

5. REPORTAGE

Imagine you have discovered the glasshouse full of dragons. Write the report you would give on TV or in a newspaper. Act out in class.

UNIT THREE DARK WOOD

SUMMARY

The Shadow Hound brings Rory to Giants' Cave, then leaves him there. Rory is discovered by a young giant girl named Birch, who brings him home to her parents. They are kind to him and tell him of their history. They find it hard to believe his story, though, as they had thought all dragons to be long gone. Rory points out Bella to them in an old picture and Bran recognises her as the Dragon Woman. Meanwhile, Mia helps to train the dragons to fly. The giants bring Rory into Dark Wood and give him provisions and a map. Rory is attacked by a creeper but saved by Conrad before the creature bites his finger off. Conrad is a warrior boy somewhat older than Rory. He decides to join Rory on his quest.

Read pp. 89–126

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What might you do if you were left all alone in an alien land, like Rory?
- The giants seem to be gentle and peace-loving. What do we learn about their customs and ways in this unit?
- On p.95, Bran says it's 'a crying shame' that Rory is human. What do you think he means by this?
- The giants refer to Bella as a sorceress. Read p.104 and discuss the giants' fears about what she plans to do.
- Why do you think Mia has not run away yet?

ACTIVITIES

1. APT NAMES

The giants are aptly named. List the examples of giant names that we have read. Can you think of some more names that would suit a giant? List them. Then make a list of names for a family of tiny people.

2. NOUNS

Make a list of fifteen common nouns in this unit. (Remember, a noun is the name of a person, place, creature or thing which you can see, feel or touch. Common nouns take lower case letters: e.g. table, dog.) Then make a list of abstract nouns from the unit. (An abstract noun is imagined in your mind and is an idea, feeling or quality: e.g. fear, happiness, rage.)

3. TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN

Which giant has the idea of building a bridge over the swamp (p.108)? Why do you think the giants never thought of this before? Design the bridge and write a step-by-step procedure for building it.

4. INVENTIONS

On p.106, Rory tells Bran about modern inventions such as computers, television, cars and aeroplanes. Choose five modern inventions and write a short description of each, imagining that you are explaining it to someone who has never heard of this type of thing.

5. MAP-MAKING

Birch must have taken a great deal of trouble making the map for Rory. Draw a miniature map of your classroom or school building as if it were for a doll-sized individual. Label and plot a route for them to the playground, hall, library, etc.

UNIT FOUR ENCHANTED

SUMMARY

Mia has been learning more and more about the dragons and she displays a great flair for training them. Her magical powers have also improved, aided by a book, Olde Magick, that she discovers. Secretly, she has been teaching Trig how to fly, and he has progressed well. Meanwhile, Rory and Conrad are beset by fierce wolves, murderous birds and other dangers. The Shadow Hound saves Rory again and a black dragon scares away the birds. One morning, during an early flying lesson, Mia and Trig are discovered by Bella. She is furious but Mia stands her ground and confronts her. The old sorceress then removes all

memory from Mia's mind, leaving her exhausted and afraid – with no knowledge of her other life. The boys reach the castle.

Read pp. 127–164

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you think Bella plans to let Mia return home? Read p.129 and discuss the experiences of Bella's other apprentices.
- Discuss the differences between Rory's normal life in Glenkilty and Conrad's life. Why do you think Conrad might envy Rory ?
- How do Rory and Mia differ in the way they view magic and being the children of a magician ?
- In what way has Mia begun to develop as a mage herself ?

ACTIVITIES

1. IT WASN'T ME!

On p.134, Bella is livid with Mia because she allowed light into the map room and could have destroyed the valuable documents. Have you ever broken anything valuable or nearly done something dreadful? Write a short essay about it – it can be fictitious or factual.

2. MAGIC SPELLS

Make a booklet of spells that you would find useful or fun. Write at least five different spells for various outcomes. Be sure to include a list of ingredients and clear instructions as to how to cast the spell. Don't forget to give instructions as to how to undo it!

3. ACTION WORDS

Remember, a verb is an action or doing word. Read the scene on pp. 140–141 where Rory and Conrad are attacked by wolves. Make a list of all the verbs used in this scene. What effect do they have on the atmosphere?

4. ENDANGERED ANIMALS

On p.150, Bella gives an account of how dragons became an endangered species. If you changed only a few words in this paragraph, it would be true of any endangered animal today. Choose three such species and write an account of how and why they have become so threatened. You may need to contact an

environmental protection agency or zoo to obtain details.

5. MYTH AND LEGEND

Look up the legend of the Selkie in a book of Irish legends or in an encyclopaedia. Do you think all Mia's problems would be solved if she found the flying coat?

UNIT FIVE ON DRAGONS' WINGS

SUMMARY

Rory and Conrad manage to enter the castle. They hide in the banqueting hall but are discovered by Bella. Mia does not recognise Rory as she is still under some kind of spell. After many attempts, Rory jogs her memory by emitting a huge belch! Mia remembers that he is her brother and the rest of her memory returns. They escape, leaving behind Conrad who has volunteered to stay and keep Bella off their trail. They climb to the top of Crosswinds and are about to leave, when Trig flies into view. Mia cannot just leave her favourite dragon, and when she discovers a note about his neck which says that Bella is dying, they return, although Rory is reluctant. Bella makes a deathbed apology and explains her actions. She sends them home, but ensures that Mia understands that there will always be a place for her in the realm of magic and dragons. Conrad explains that he is now the Great Mage and will stay on in the castle ruling the kingdom. The children return home in their flying coats to find their world exactly as it had been. Mia has brought the Olde Magick book with her, for there is much that she still needs to learn ...

Read pp. 165–206

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Rory feels that they are stealing the boat (p.166) and is uncomfortable about it. What does Conrad think? Can you think of any situation where you might have to take something without asking?
- Why do you think it was the belch that finally jogged Mia's memory? Can you find the scene earlier in the story when

Rory did another belch? (Clue: somewhere in the first 20 pages.)

- At any stage Conrad could have fixed everything and got Mia back for Rory. Why did he not do this? (see p.197)
- Rory is surprised that his little sister is now unafraid of the dark and spiders (p.177). Discuss how she has overcome her fears.

ACTIVITIES

1. CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

Mia is being pulled in two directions on p.182 – one part of her longs to go home to her normal life and family, the other wants to stay with her beloved dragons and learn more of myth and magic. Imagine you are making that choice. Choose and then write a letter either to your parents or to Bella, giving reasons for your decision.

2. COMMUNICATION

There are no phones and no e-mail in Dark Wood. How did Bella get a message to Mia? List as many modern methods of communication as you can think of.

What real animals or birds are sometimes used to send messages?

Compose a message, place it in a bottle

and post it in the sea. Be sure to include your address in it so that you receive a reply!

3. FAREWELLS

It can be very difficult to say goodbye to people or pets that you love, especially if it will be a long time before you see them again (see Mia's farewell to Trig, p.201). Look up emigration and discuss the sadness caused by centuries of sad farewells for Irish people. Write an account of a sad farewell you have experienced, witnessed or read about. You might also read Peggy's farewell to her family in *Wildflower Girl* (Chapter 3, pp. 30–36), by the same author.

4. HOMECOMING

Imagine you are Rory or Mia. Write about your feelings on waking up in your own bed the morning after your return.

5. PEN-PORTRAIT

Write a pen-portrait of either the castle, with its moat and dragon-pens, or of your favourite dragon from the story. You might also illustrate and/or make a model.

6. JUDGING A BOOK BY ...

Compare the covers of the original and current printings below, or in the Cover

Gallery on www.obrien.ie:

In what ways are the covers similar? In what ways are they different?

Which of the three do you prefer and why?

Why do you think the publisher changed the cover?



7. BOOK REVIEW

Write a review of the novel. You might like to include the following details:

- (A) author and title
- (B) publishing details, including year of initial publication and year of reprint(s)
- (C) ISBN and price
- (D) short summary of the plot
- (E) your opinion of the book – merits and demerits
- (F) your opinion of the cover

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA



REVIEWS FOR IN DEEP DARK WOOD:

'An enchanting story with a magical touch.' SOUTHSIDE PEOPLE

'An absorbing tale of magic and dragons by one of our most popular children's writers.' SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

'... wonderful writing and vivid imagination.' DUBLIN ECHO

MARITA CONLON-McKENNA was born in Dublin in 1956 and brought up in Goatstown. When she heard a radio report of an unmarked children's grave from the Famine period being found under a hawthorn tree, she decided to write her first book, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. An immediate success, it remained in the Irish Bestseller List for over two years and has been translated into French, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, Italian, Japanese and Irish. The other two books in the Children of the Famine trilogy, *Wildflower Girl* and *Fields of Home*, are also bestsellers. Her other books include *Safe Harbour*, *No Goodbye*, *The Blue Horse* and *A Girl Called Blue*. Marita has won several awards, including the International Reading Association Award, the Osterreichischer Kinder und Jugendbuchpreis, the Reading Association of Ireland Award and the Bisto Book of the Year Award. She is married, with four children, and lives in the Stillorgon area

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM THE O'BRIEN PRESS:

O'Brien Teaching Guides, Collections 2 and 3:

Teaching Guides to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Wildflower Girl* by Marita Conlon-McKenna are available in the O'BRIEN TEACHING GUIDES, COLLECTION 2 (ISBN 978-0-86278-666-3, pb).

Teaching Guides to *Safe Harbour* and *Fields of Home* by Marita Conlon-McKenna are in the O'BRIEN TEACHING GUIDES, COLLECTION 3 (ISBN 978-0-86278-697-7, pb).

