

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary and lower secondary (11+ years)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- English
- History, society and culture
- Science

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Story Forms: Dystopian Future Fantasy/ Adventure/ Romance
- How an author constructs voice and character
- First-person accounts
- Building vocabulary
- Structure
- Values: fortitude, trust, bravery, friendship, kindness, resilience, morality

THEMES

- Power and rebellion
- Rite of passage
- Ethics and art of war
- Hope

PREPARED BY

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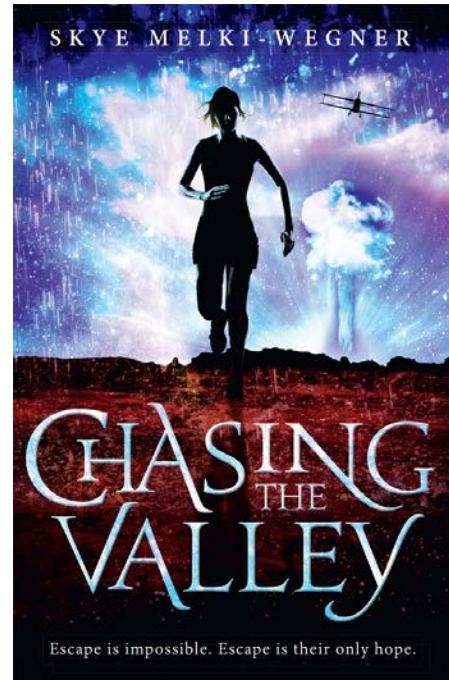
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Chasing the Valley

Skye Melki-Wegner

INTRODUCTION

'I've been cold. I've been alone. But I've survived it all, and I'm not prepared to die tonight. The king's bombs took my family. I won't let them take me too.' (p. 8)

This riveting dystopian fantasy adventure is set in the country of Taladia, and opens in a town called Rourton, where sixteen-year-old Danika Glynn is working in a bar called the Alehouse when bombs begin to fall. This is not the first time she has experienced such an incident; at the ages of four and nine she had experienced air raids, and the last one took her family. Her life as an orphaned 'scruffer' is poor and bleak, but she sees no way out of it. She knows that at eighteen she will be conscripted to fight in King Morigan's army for five years. And although she's heard whispers of refugees escaping the city to find the Magnetic Valley, she can't imagine how a group of teenagers would survive, given that their magical proclivities are not yet fully formed.

This is a novel about power and rebellion; about growing up and finding your real talents; it's about the ethics of war and conflict; it's about hopes and dreams; it's about survival.

PLOT SUMMARY

After the bombs fall, Danika leaves her drunken co-worker Walter hiding, and escapes to the sewers where she joins four teenagers – the stubborn Radnor (who seems to be their leader), the confident and cantankerous Clementine Pembroke ('a richie'), her shy but knowledgeable twin Maisy, and Teddy Nort (the 'famous pickpocket'). She later meets the fifth member of the group, the huge Hackel (a smuggler). They initially reject Danika, but when their plan to escape on beasts known as foxaries hits a snag, she saves them from the king's guards by shooting a stolen flare as a distraction. When they meet up in the forest they come across a hunter who is killed by Hackel. They then discover a bi-plane wreckage – the victim of Danika's flare – and hide in an 'illusion' conjured by Danika. After discovering two dead hunters, they head for the river in pursuit of Hackel, who has become separated from them. They are followed by another two hunters who die in a deadly conflict which also takes Radnor from them.

During Danika's night watches she discovers Lukas, a boy whose proclivity is bird. He's escaping from Norville and has been shadowing her group for protection as they follow the river. When they finally get to the town of Gunning, where Hackel had told them to meet him, Hackel proves to have double-crossed them, and they also discover Lukas's real identity. A fire is set, and they escape in a train called the Bird of the North. The train guards locate Danika's crew and they have to escape the train. They cross the mountain below the Midnight Crest and head for the smugglers' passage known as 'the Knife'. On the way, Teddy tells them of overhearing some richies talking about trading in 'Curiefer', a volatile substance that can de-activate magnets. This is the reason the train line has been built: to carry this deadly material and to destroy the Magnetic Valley. The crew hatches a desperate plan to detour to the Wastelands in order to prevent the Curiefer being used, but find that Sharr, the evil niece of King Moriggan, is waiting for them and that she has captured Lukas.

How will they escape, and can they save the Magnetic Valley?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skye Melki-Wegner is an Arts/Law student from Melbourne. She has worked as a saleswoman, an English tutor and a popcorn-wrangler (at a cinema). In her spare time, she devours a ridiculous amount of

caffeine and fantasy literature. *Chasing the Valley* is her first book. She is currently writing the second and third books in the Chasing the Valley trilogy. You can contact Skye at <http://www.skymelki-wegner.com>

WRITING STYLE

Dystopian future fantasy

This is a work of fantasy and as such relies on the conventions and tropes of fantasy writing. It also falls into the sub-set of dystopian future fantasy.

Activities

1. A successful fantasy or secondary world is created by narrative 'sleight of hand'. The author sneaks references to the world into what appears to be an ordinary or realistic narrative and thus makes the extraordinary 'real' for the reader. For example:

'The markings on Walter's neck reveal his magical proclivity is Darkness, and I bet he could manipulate the shadows into moving if he wanted.' (p. 2)

'These are alchemy bombs. They do the fire and smoke thing too, of course, but they're loaded with spellwork and magic tokens that burst like confetti through the streets.' (p. 4)

'And people's proclivities don't develop until the end of puberty – which is why a teenage crew would never work.' (p. 13)

'I'm not very good yet; my personal record is about three seconds. Hardly anyone has the ability to cast illusions – it's just a freak genetic thing, like having blue eyes or being a fast runner – but I've always tried to keep my ability a secret. The authorities don't like it when scruffers show signs of unusual powers, so it's safer to pretend to be as average as possible. And unfortunately, since the whole point of an illusion is deception, it's the sort of ability that makes people suspect you're up to something dodgy.' (p. 19)

Discuss with students how they perceived the world which is being created here. At what point in their reading did they realise that this was no ordinary world?

2. Magical powers (e.g. alchemy, magnets, illusions, spells) and magical creatures are other devices which are prominent in fantasy. For example:

'But alchemy isn't a natural power like proclivities. It's a created art, shaped and expanded by human hands. Now alchemy is used to taint metals with magic – and sometimes, to hurl down that magic from the sky.' (p. 10)

'Foxaries are great, coarse beasts that resemble massive foxes but are ridden like horses.' (p. 40)

'Alchemy charms, I realise with a start. I've never seen them up close before, since only the wealthiest of richies can afford such trinkets. The charms have spellwork imbued into the silver, ready to be deployed against the bearer's enemies.' (p. 78)

'The wall is imbued with picture spells: a magical surveillance system for the city's edges.' (p. 37)

'You can use them to amplify your illusion powers,' says Radnor. 'The magnets should trap your magic, you see. If we set them up around our camp, and the magnetic energy bounces your power between each plate . . . ' (p. 107)

What other magical devices or creatures did you discover in this text?

3. The trope of a Journey is commonly used in such fantasies. Read the text carefully to trace the journey taken by the teenagers. Make a list of the various places included, such as Rourton, the forest, the river, Gunning, The Wastelands, Midnight Crest, the Knife. Then create a map of the locations they visit.
4. Discuss the notion of a dystopian future world in which cities are in lock-down, and daily curfews are observed. How would you cope in such a world?
5. Discuss the conventions of writing dystopian fiction.
6. Compare this novel to other works of dystopian fiction such as *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* (2009) by Glenda Millard, *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins, The Chaos Walking series by Patrick Ness, *The Giver /Gathering Blue/ Messenger* by Lois Lowry , The Uglies trilogy by Scott Westerfeld, *Feed* (2002) by MT Anderson, *Vulture's Gate* by Kirsty Murray (2009), *Scatterlings* (1991) or The Obernewtyn Chronicles by Isobelle Carmody, *How I Live Now* (2004) by Meg Rosoff, *Brother in the Land* (1984) by Robert Swindells or *Genesis* (2006) by Bernard Beckett. Older students might read Anthony Burgess's *The Clockwork Orange* (1962), or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or Oryx and Crake trilogy.

Questions

1. Does this 'dystopia' have any similarities to our contemporary world? Is our society entirely free? Is poverty a problem in parts of Australia, and in other so-called western countries?
2. What other classic tropes of fantasy did you notice in the telling of this tale?
3. Were there any commonly used fantasy tropes that weren't evident?

First-person accounts

First-person accounts of any narrative action are always necessarily slanted towards that character's view of the events. Such accounts also lend immediacy to the action, since the reader is given such a personal insight into a rapidly occurring sequence of events.

Activities

1. Danika tells this story in first person. Imagine if the story was being told by Teddy instead. Write an account of their first meeting in the sewer from Teddy's perspective.
2. Re-write a sequence in the novel as if it is a poem in a verse novel. Study some contemporary verse novels in order to prepare for this exercise.

Questions

1. Is Danika a 'reliable narrator'? Or are there things she keeps hidden or even obscures deliberately?
2. What might change if this novel were told in third person? Examine one scene in the novel, and how it would be cast if it were told at this remove from the action.

Literary devices and symbols

This novel employs a range of literary devices and symbols to cement themes.

Activities

1. Identify the literary devices used in the following three quotations: 'Moonlight sneaks in the window' (p. 2); 'The building is gone, but broken books and papers flock like seagulls in the night.' (p35); 'I'm a fish, yanked from the river by a hook.' (p. 178)

Answers: Personification, simile, metaphor.

2. Identify three other quotations and the literary devices employed in them in this novel.

3. Secret Codes are often used in fantasy adventures to lead the protagonists in their journeys. In this novel the folk song gives the group a 'map' to follow to reach the Magnetic Valley:

*Oh mighty yo,
How the star-shine must go
Chasing those distant deserts of green.*

*We shall meet with the tree-lands
Then bet with the stream's hands
As star-shine's fair pistol shall gleam . . .*

Invite students to write a similar verse describing a secret path and destination in their own neighbourhood, and to challenge fellow students to decipher it.

Questions

1. What were the literary devices that seemed most evident in this text?
2. The novel's title refers to the world outside the country, which is a symbol of hope for the future. Did you notice any other persistent symbols or motifs in this text?

Characterisation

Danika is the focus character and her teenage friends Radnor, Clementine, Maisy and Teddy are also major characters. Sharr Morrigan plays the villain, and Lukas the romantic hero. There are also a range of minor characters such as Walter and Hackel.

Activities

1. Teddy Nort is a pickpocket but Danika suspects that he's not all bad. 'I bet he's good at reading people, and he's not as stupid as he likes to pretend.'(p. 64) How would you describe Teddy? Is he a reliable person, despite his thievery? Can one be a reliable thief?
2. Danika's perception of each of the characters in the novel changes in some way in the course of the narrative. For example, she has the twins pinned as spoilt rich girls and as opposites: Clementine the feisty one, and Maisy the mouse. How does her view of them change by the end?
3. Lukas, as the son of a king, is used to people perceiving him in a certain way. How much are people prejudiced by a person's standing in society to see them in a particular light?

Questions

1. Which character did you engage with most, and which least? Why?
2. 'But when I look at Lukas Morrigan, I don't see the son of the king. I see a boy with green eyes and gentle hands, flying a kite beneath the moon. I don't want to kill him. I want to forget he ever existed.' (p. 357) There is more than a hint of romance to come in the sequel. How might a 'scruffer' and a prince make a life together?

Structure and suspense

Structure in a work is created by the larger or more 'global' aspects of plotting and planning, the thematic cohesion of the work, and by the way the novel is arranged in terms of the minutiae of style.

Activities

1. The novel is arranged as a sequence of events so that each chapter contains a problem, a resolution and then leads to another problem again. This creates narrative tension and ensures that the reader's interest is maintained. Examine these aspects of style.
2. What thematic threads run through the work and how do they influence the structure?
3. To create a suspenseful narrative, the beginning and ending of any chapter needs to be tightly written. This narrative offers excellent models for student writing as these sentences are so well-executed. For example, the novel opens: 'It's a quiet night when the bombs fall.' (p. 1) Strong 'openings' can be created by using, for example, a question, a rhetorical statement, or a quotation. Choose a chapter beginning or ending and re-write it in an equally exciting way.
4. Analyse the Book Trailer for *Chasing the Valley* at <http://youtu.be/SvqzfnnYg2k>. Which plot elements does the trailer focus on to create suspense? Create your own Book Trailer based on the novel's structure.

Questions

1. What other devices does the author use to maintain suspense?
2. Was there any point in the narrative where you felt the suspense was particularly gripping? Analyse the devices used by the author to achieve that effect.
3. What might happen in the sequels to this novel?

KEY STUDY TOPICS

Several **historical, social and environmental** topics are raised in the book. Students might further examine any one of them.

Power and rebellion

This novel is about a battle between the powerful and the disempowered; between rich and poor; between evil and good; between King Morrigan and his subjects.

Activities

1. The king's supremacy relies on the poverty and subservience of most of his 'scruffer' citizens.

'When you're struggling for survival, it's easy to forget who put you there. I've focused on filling my belly, not wasting my energy on fury.' (p. 217)

Is political unrest generally stimulated by poverty or are the poor generally too tired to care? Should any ruler have the complete power that King Morrigan seems to have over his citizens?
2. Rulers with absolute power find it difficult to separate their public and private lives. 'But the king famously expects his younger kinsmen to serve their country for several years: military command, perhaps, or alchemy. It's supposed to set an example to the rest of us, proving the ultimate might of the king.' (pp. 151–2)

The king also expects his only son to act as a bomber pilot and considers him a coward for refusing to drop any bombs. This conflict, and his reaction to the news of his son's supposed death, highlights the corrosive and desensitising effects of power. Discuss.
3. Read the king's advertisement for Danika's capture (pp. 218–9) and compare it to the language used by governments and the media in chasing so-called terrorists. Examine newspapers online to find examples of such rhetoric. How much can we trust those in power to give us full knowledge of a situation?
4. The classical Greek philosopher Plato defined the five types of regimes or government as: Aristocracy, Timocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy and Tyranny. Discuss these concepts in relation to this novel and also with regards to contemporary governments. Debate their benefits and disadvantages.

5. Rebellion is a fraught concept, since inevitably the ruling class and often the media will condemn rebels as traitors, troublemakers and even criminals, whereas their followers might define them as heroes. 'Those people stood up against their king,' Teddy says. 'They burned his prison to the ground.' (p. 327) When might a rebellion be unavoidable? Discuss this in the context of contemporary events.
6. Lukas has been a 'conscientious objector' in challenging his father. Discuss the notion of peaceful rebellion, using examples from recent history.

Questions

1. What are the powers that give Morrigan such control over his people? For example, secrecy is one tool he uses to quell any unrest.
2. How useful is peaceful rebellion? Base your answer on famous exponents of such a philosophy, such as Mahatma Ghandi, who once said: 'I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you how to bow your heads before any one even at the cost of your life.'

Rite of passage

This novel might be interpreted as a novel about growing up and maturing from childhood to adulthood, which is a common theme in works for young adults.

Activities

1. Finding your 'proclivity' as Danika does, is akin metaphorically to going through puberty: 'My proclivity mark is starting to develop. This is not a good time to develop my powers. The process can take days, weeks or even months – but those itchy bumps are always the first sign. I know that I'll soon feel tired and cranky, which isn't going to help me survive the journey to the Valley.' (p. 148)

Is becoming an adult generally about finding a special power or skill?
2. 'Those teenagers haven't earned the right or gained the maturity to declare their proclivities to the world.' (p. 14) Do teenagers have to earn the right to be considered adults? Or is this a prejudiced view promoted by adults to maintain control over their teenage children? Discuss.

Questions

1. Does Danika mature in the course of this narrative? Choose quotes to support your answer.
2. Which other characters also develop new maturity in this novel?

Ethics and art of war

Activities

1. 'Sometimes, to avoid a fight with another scuffer, it helps to pretend you're more confident than you feel.' (p. 20) This is also a good description of how countries pretend confidence to each other in the lead-up to wars. Discuss.
2. 'What worries me more is another type of threat. Words, lies, manipulation. And I'm worried that the boy in front of me, with his cheerful grin and slippery fingers, might wield these weapons a lot more effectively than claws.' (pp. 65–6) Can wars be fought with words?
3. Danika thinks of her parents' death as 'Collateral damage in the palace's fight to remind us who has control.' (p. 217) Compare this comment to the way in which contemporary armies routinely refer to the death of civilians as 'collateral damage' and sometimes to the death of their own soldiers as being the result of 'friendly fire'. Should death ever be referred to so casually?

Questions

1. 'But there's a silent resolve beneath those stares. Solidarity. Unity. And it strikes me, suddenly, that we're in this together. To go back to my old ways . . . it would still mean losing something. Not through death, or treachery. But a loss, nonetheless.' (p. 257) What does Danika mean by this statement?
2. When they decide to blow up the secret fortress in the Wastelands to prevent the destruction of the Magnetic Valley, the crew faces the conundrum of possibly causing loss of life for a greater good. Danika feels sick at the thought of killing innocent people. Is violence ever justified, if it is aimed at saving lives? Conduct a debate on this subject.

Hope

When the world seems hopeless we all need a place to escape to. For the people of Taladia, 'the Magnetic Valley is where refugee crews run to, where our dreams carry us on the darkest nights, in the coldest alleyways. It's a boundary of green

meadows, a doorway into another nation that lies beyond Taladia. In the Valley, the king's magically powered planes and war machines are as useless as toys. Its hillsides are lined with magnetic rocks, which interfere with magic.' (p. 32)

Activities

1. When people are destitute or in crisis they often focus on a particular dream or idea which makes their situation bearable. Discuss the role of hope in our lives.

Questions

1. Is this a novel about hope?
2. How important is hope in our lives?

KEY QUOTES

1. 'I don't want to join the army. I don't have a problem with fighting – it's part of life here – but I do it on my own behalf. Not on behalf of kings and councils who take our lives to conquer distant lands. And according to our legends, the nation beyond is a paradise.' (p. 12)
2. 'I refuse to do this any more. I refuse to spend my life in this grimy city, scavenging for food and sleeping in doorways. I refuse to reach my eighteenth birthday here, to be conscripted into King Morrigan's army and shunted off to fight on behalf of the monarch who killed my family. I'm going to escape from Taladia. I'm going to find the Valley.' (p. 34)
3. 'There are no bins out here to scavenge food from, no richies to beg for a cleaning job or barmen to offer me under-the-table shifts in their alehouses. There are only trees and hunters and death.' (p. 83)
4. 'If we can't trust each other, we're not going to survive.' (p. 97)
5. 'And if a crew does not keep fed,' I recite quietly, 'you know that crew will soon be dead.' (p. 100)
6. 'I thought I'd never get to see it,' says Maisy. 'It was nice to explore outside for a bit, even if it was only with words.' (p. 146)
7. 'That's the price of relationships, though. I learned that when I was just a kid, the night I watched my family burn. You get the benefit of companionship, of love and trust, maybe. But I'm not sure it's worth the pain that you get when they're gone.' (p. 197)

8. 'On city streets, I'm confident and savvy. Out here, I'm prey.' (p. 207)
9. 'I reckon it's the normal people, in places like Rourton, that are dangerous to the king.' 'Why?' 'Because they're the ones desperate enough to do something stupid.' 'Like what, run away with a refugee crew?' says Clementine. 'Yeah, exactly,' Teddy says. 'Or start a revolution.' (p. 217)
10. 'Nowhere will be safe,' says Maisy quietly. 'There will be nowhere left to give people hope. Nowhere for refugee crews to run to.' (pp 316–317)

FURTHER RESOURCES

On *Chasing the Valley*

View the official Book Trailer here:

<http://youtu.be/SvqzfnnYg2k>

An interview with author Skye Melki-Wegner about her inspirations and the characters and themes of the book:

<http://youtu.be/qSrZ1OvAbIY>

Books

See the titles mentioned under 'Dystopian future fantasy' activity 6.

Websites

Alchemy <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alchemy>

Fantasy <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy>

Plato's five regimes

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato's_five_regimes

Rebellion <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebellion>

WORKSHEET ANSWERS

Worksheet: Comprehension

1. Teddy Nort. 2. Foxaries. 3. In a sewer. 4. She lets off a flare. 5. Rourton. 6. A kite. 7. Radnor.
8. Gunning. 9. They board a train called the Bird of the North. 10. Sharr Morrigan. 11. It is winched into the air on pylons like a chairlift. 12. Maisy.
13. Curiefer. 14. Midnight Crest. 15. Night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE RESOURCES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright has operated justified text writing and publishing consultancy services since 1997, and has published widely on children's and YA literature. She has judged a number of literary awards and was Inaugural Chair of the Prime Minister's Literary Awards Children's and YA panel (2010-1). She is a Member, IBBY Australia Inc Committee; Member, ACLA Board; Deputy-Chair, ASA Board, and President, Curtis Coast Literary Carnivale Committee. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 the CBCA (National) Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature in Australia.

FURTHER READING FROM RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

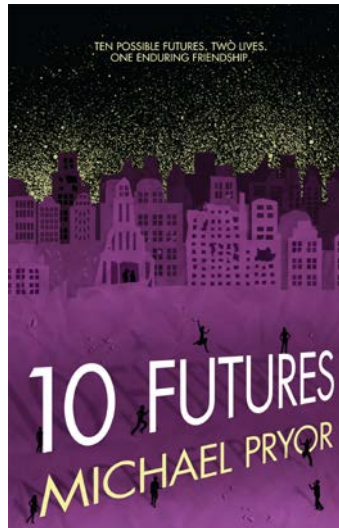


Juno of Taris
Fleur Beale

Why this story? For a comparison study on dystopias in teen fiction, or for a thrilling read about a reluctant rebel asking the difficult questions about society.

Juno is young; she has no authority, no power. The Taris Project was the brainchild of a desperate twenty-first-century world, a community designed to survive even if the rest of humanity perished. An isolated, storm-buffed island in the Southern Ocean was given a protective dome and its own balmy climate. And now Juno is one of 500 people who live there – but what has happened to the outside world in the years since Taris was established? Juno yearns to know about life Outside, just as she yearns to be allowed to grow her hair. It is a rule on Taris that all must have their heads shaved bare. But is it a rule that could be broken?

Teachers' resources available



10 Futures
Michael Pryor

Why this story? Ten fascinating stories explore what our future could have in store for us.

Sam and Tara. Best friends in a future when artificial intelligence organises our lives, and micropets are the latest craze. Best friends when rationing means cold showers and no internet. Best friends when genetic matching makes asking a girl on a date a minefield of epic proportions.

But will they still be best friends in a future when plague wipes out most of humanity? Or a future when the Inquisitor asks Sam to choose one betrayal over another?

Michael Pryor, one of Australia's best authors of speculative fiction, imagines what our next 100 years might be like. Utopia or dystopia? Miracle or catastrophe? Whatever might happen, it's just around the corner. Which future will be yours?

Teachers' resources available



Grimsdon
Deborah Abela

Why this story? An exciting adventure in an alternate world.

Grimsdon is in ruins. Three years ago a massive wave broke its barriers and the sea flooded the city. Most were saved, others were lost and some were left behind.

Isabella Charm and her best friend Griffin live with three other children in the top of an opulent mansion. They've survived with the help of Griffin's brilliant inventions, Isabella's survival skills and their vow to look after each other.

But what will happen when a thrill-seeking newcomer arrives in his flying machine? When bounty hunters attempt to capture them? When Byron P. Sneddon, the self-appointed protector of the flooded harbour, demands obedience? What if the danger is even greater? Something they can't see coming – something below the floodwaters?

Teachers' resources available

WORKSHEET: Curriculum Topic – Comprehension

| | Questions | Answer |
|-----|---|--------|
| 1. | Which character is a pickpocket? | |
| 2. | What animal do the crew ride on when they first escape? | |
| 3. | Where does Danika meet her future travelling companions? | |
| 4. | How does she distract the guards at the gate in order to allow her friends to escape? | |
| 5. | What is the name of the town where Danika lived? | |
| 6. | What device does Lukas use when he is following Danika and her friends? | |
| 7. | Which character in the group is killed? | |
| 8. | Where do they plan to meet Hackel? | |
| 9. | How do they escape the fire in the market? | |
| 10. | What is the name of the king's niece? | |
| 11. | How does the train cross the nearly impassable mountains? | |
| 12. | Which character does Danika nickname 'mouse'? | |
| 13. | What is the secret substance that the king is planning to use? | |
| 14. | What was the mountain they head towards when they escape the train? | |
| 15. | What was Danika's proclivity? | |

WORKSHEET: Curriculum Topic – Vocabulary

This book contains some words which students may be unfamiliar with. Invite them to write a meaning and then a synonym in the columns below.

| Word | Example | Dictionary Meaning | Synonym |
|---------------|---------|--------------------|---------|
| woozy | p. 2 | | |
| shrapnel | p. 4 | | |
| proclivity | p. 5 | | |
| perilous | p. 27 | | |
| disorientated | p. 58 | | |
| meandering | p. 72 | | |
| privilege | p. 123 | | |
| disturbance | p. 172 | | |
| conscription | p. 222 | | |
| sentimental | p. 256 | | |
| arsonist | p. 267 | | |
| spontaneously | p.274 | | |
| predecessors | p. 280 | | |
| triumph | p. 284 | | |
| consort | p. 288 | | |
| valid | p. 291 | | |
| proximity | p. 304 | | |
| compromised | p. 314 | | |
| undulations | p. 332 | | |
| soppy | p. 389 | | |