



A Winter's Promise: The Mirror Visitor, Book 1

CHRISTELLE DABOS

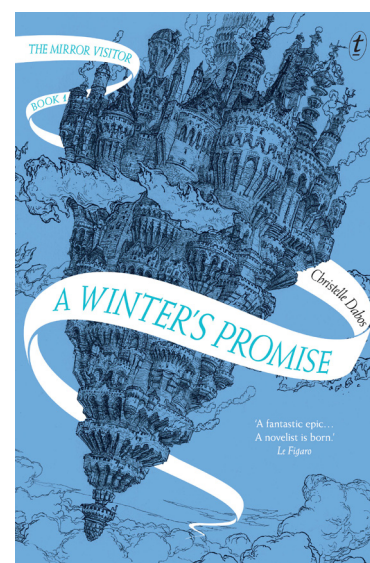
ISBN 9781925603828

RRP AU\$22.99

Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 13+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Ophelia's life already has meaning. As a Reader, and the caretaker of the museum on Anima, she is able to read deep into the history of objects and their owners, just by touching them. She has her great-uncle, her little brother, her home. She isn't looking for a husband to complete her.

But when Ophelia is promised in marriage to a man from a faraway ark, a man who seems to hold nothing but the deepest disgust for Ophelia and her family, she must leave behind the security of Anima and follow him to his home on Citaceleste, the capital city of a faraway ark. Citaceleste is nothing like Anima, where every object has a soul. In Citaceleste it seems as if nothing does. The land and its people are cold and cruel, and none more so than Ophelia's betrothed. She has nothing to offer Thorn, and he knows it, so why is he so desperate to marry her?

Adrift in a sea of danger and corruption, Ophelia doesn't know who she can trust. What game has she become a pawn in? And who is really controlling it?

Ophelia must be prepared to face her true self in order to survive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christelle Dabos was born on the Cote d'Azur in 1980 and grew up in a home filled with classical music and games. Her love of fantasy began with the Harry Potter series and she is part of a new generation of young fantasy writers.

A Winter's Promise, Book One in her debut series, *The Mirror Visitor*, won the Gallimard Jeunesse-RTL-Telerama First Novel Competition, as well as the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire and is an international success. She now lives in Belgium.

BEFORE READING

1. Read the blurb of the book and take note of significant words such as 'The Rupture' and the 'arks'. What meaning do these words carry for you? What do they make you think the book might be about? An ark is traditionally seen as a refuge, but after a while might turn into a place that is claustrophobic or isolating. Discuss the purpose of an ark and how it might be used in the book.
2. This is the first book in a new fantasy quartet, similar to the epic sagas of Cornelia Funke and Ursula Le Guin. What do you expect from the first book in a series? How might the author break up the story? How does knowing the genre of the book tell you what to expect from parts of the story? Discuss some of the world-building techniques authors use to create fantasy worlds and make some predictions about which ones you might see in this particular story.
3. Ophelia is pressured into a diplomatic marriage to Thorn, who takes her away from her family on Anima to live with him. She is powerless in this situation. What does this tell you about the power structure on Anima and in the book overall? Think of a time



where you felt powerless. Who was in control of that situation? How did not having control make you feel about yourself? What kind of character do you think Ophelia might be?

WHILE READING

1. Ophelia sneaks into the Archives through a mirror. How is she able to do this? What does her great-uncle say it shows of her character?
2. Why isn't Ophelia able to evade her engagement to Thorn as she was the first two? Who do you think is controlling these events?
3. How do you know that Anima is a different world? Which aspects are the same as ours and which are different? Keep a list as you read descriptions that distinguish Anima and Citaceleste as fantasy worlds.
4. Ophelia 'couldn't understand what all that sun was doing there. It felt wrong in the middle of that particular conversation.' (page 25). The weather is used throughout the book to set the emotional tone of a scene. What other examples can you find of this? Can you think of any examples from your own life?
5. We are told that Ophelia wears gloves to protect the objects she touches. Are the gloves only to protect the objects? Who else might need to be protected from Ophelia's power and why?
6. Thorn clearly doesn't like Ophelia, so why does he want to marry her? Why is Thorn so determined to keep Ophelia a secret once they arrive in Citaceleste?
7. How does Ophelia decide who she is able to trust? Is she able to trust them as much as she trusted her great-uncle? Why/why not? Give an example of a scene where Ophelia's trust is broken. How does she react? Does this fit with what you know of her character?
8. Who is most important to Berenilde? What does she want the most? Why does Thorn tell Ophelia that Berenilde is the only person she can trust? Do you think of Berenilde as trustworthy? What makes you feel that you are able to trust a character or not?
9. How do you feel about the ending of the book? Which questions have been answered? Which questions have been left unanswered? Discuss your predictions about the series overall – which characters might be important? What secrets will be revealed? Who or what are Artemis and Farouk?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. Thorn is introduced as a hunter, with a name that 'rang hard on the tongue. Rough. Almost aggressive' (page 45). Before Ophelia meets him, she reads the diaries of her ancestors, and notes that Thorn's people look 'brutal, arrogant' (page 32).

What assumptions does Ophelia make about her fiancé prior to meeting him? Are these assumptions shown to be true or false when they meet? Find other examples of Thorn's physical description. Do these descriptions make him seem more or less threatening? Would you call him a trustworthy or an untrustworthy character? What makes you say this? Keep a list of Thorn's behaviour throughout the book and make a prediction about what might be revealed about his character in the next book in the series. Who is he loyal to? Why does he make the choices he does?

2. Narrative tension comes from raising the stakes of what each character has to lose – how hard will they fight to get what they want? What do they have to lose? What risks do they face? Keep these questions in mind as you read the book and see if you can use them to understand the choices that Ophelia makes. What is most important to her once she is taken away from her home and family? Does Thorn want the same things as her? How does this affect their interactions with each other?
3. Ophelia describes the Knight as 'real poison' (page 442), and he seems to lack any empathy for anyone else. But in the flesh, he looks far less dangerous than Thorn - he is a child, with angelic features. How does the author use the contradiction between physical appearance and behaviour to create a character that is genuinely terrifying? What makes a character frightening? Make a list of all the characters that seem afraid of the Knight. Why do you think he has so much power over people? Discuss the way that the contrast between a character's actions and their physical appearance can be used to create tension or to surprise a reader.

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. The narrative tensions in the book are structured around power – who has it, who wants it, what they need to do to get it, and who they're willing to betray to get there. Consider the different power dynamics of the book. There is the power of various clans – demonstrated in the tension between Thorn and his half-sister, Freya. There is class – seen in the contrast between living quarters for Ophelia and Berenilde on Clairdelune. There is gender – Anima is described as a matriarchy, which means that women are the ruling power. There is physical power – Thorn towers over Ophelia, often in a way that would seem intended to intimidate her. And there is individual power – both magic and otherwise, which Ophelia discovers in herself in a number of ways over the course of the story. Who is the most powerful character? Can you identify particular scenes where the balance of power shifts? How does this change the direction of the story? Is Ophelia powerful?
2. *A Winter's Promise* is a fantasy novel. What conventions do you expect to find in a fantasy novel? How does Christelle Dabos accept or



reject these conventions? What parts of the story surprise you? Is there anything that you didn't enjoy? Consider this book against another fantasy novel you've read recently. How are the two stories similar? How are they different? Is it possible to create a new story when we already know what to expect from a genre?

3. The story takes place partly on Anima and partly on Citaceleste. The two arks are drastically different, as are the people on them. The climate of each ark – the descriptions of the buildings, of the landscape and of the objects – tells us a lot about the characters we will find there. Discuss the way that place is used to reveal information about the characters. How is each character connected to the place they come from? How does it define them? How does this sense of location inform a character's identity, and tell the reader how they fit in with those around them?

THEMES

Identity

1. Ophelia's mother describes the (married) women in their family as 'radiant wives, fulfilled mothers, accomplished women'. She is frustrated at Ophelia's resistance to getting married. But is there more to identity than marriage? Do you believe that Ophelia's mother is fulfilled? What makes you say this? How do you think Ophelia sees herself outside of these roles? Think about someone you know who is a wife or mother. How else would you describe them? How do these terms limit the way we sometimes see people? We use the phrase 'gender roles' in this context. Which female characters in the novel don't fit these roles? How are they treated? Who do you think Ophelia is most like? What makes Ophelia feel uncomfortable about Artemis? Find quotes in the text to support your opinions.
2. "Traveling through mirrors," her great-uncle had said before their separation, "that requires facing up to oneself." (pages 489–490). In the last pages of the book, Ophelia makes a powerful choice – she decides for herself what her identity is. How does Ophelia identify herself? How does this give her power? Are there any other characters in the book who would be able to face up to themselves the way that Ophelia has? Think about the things that make you who you are – who decides these things are important? Whose opinions shape our identities? Why is identity so important?
3. The author, Christelle Dabos, plays with identity and stereotypes to write characters who are complex, and able to act in unexpected ways. Think of the way Thorn is described – he is rude, arrogant, careless and cold. He has been cast out as a bastard by his family, and met with resentment and hostility by everyone he encounters. Do these traits make him seem 'good' or 'bad'? Do you expect him to be trustworthy, or not? How does his character act in surprising or unexpected ways? What other

characters defy our expectations? Is there any such thing as a truly good or bad character?

Family and duty

1. Ophelia has already turned down two marriage proposals, and so is clearly unruffled by her mother's displeasure that she will not marry. Why then, must she marry when the Doyennes tell her to? Is Ophelia's duty to her family or to Artemis? Why? What will happen to her family if she doesn't fulfil her duty?
2. There is the family you are born into and the family you choose. When Ophelia is taken away from her family, who does she choose to surround herself with? Discuss the closeness that develops between Ophelia and Rosaline because of their shared exclusion on Citaceleste – what do they learn about each other? How do they save each other? What do you think will happen to Citaceleste when Rosaline leaves?
3. Discuss the importance of ancestry and family in relation to the powers inherited in the novel. How does Thorn intend to take Ophelia's power for his own? How are characters made a target or a threat based on the nature of their powers? Why does Gail hide her power? Who is she loyal to when her family have all been killed?

Secrets and truth

1. Archibald's power allows him to keep up the illusion of Clairdelune, but when Gail uses her power to show Ophelia what the estate really looks like, she sees that it is 'varnish over filth' (page 452). Why is it so important to Archibald to maintain the illusion of beauty? How might the behaviour of the characters change if they were able to see what the city really looks like?
2. Secrets are power (keeping Ophelia a secret gives Berenilde power over her), but truth is also power, as Ophelia discovers at the end of the book. Think about the way that a secret can be used to control someone. How does that feel? Write about a time when someone has used a secret against you. Rewrite the same scene where you are in control – what changes?
3. When Berenilde tells Ophelia the truth, Ophelia forgives her. Truth is used to liberate characters from their lies and shame. To what extent are the characters in the book divided by the secrets they keep? Should they be afraid of telling the truth? Telling the truth and facing up to oneself are key themes in the book—and are central to anyone's growing up. How does Ophelia seem more mature at the end of the book? Does maturity come from age or from something else? Do you think that Farouk would be able to face himself in the mirror? Would Thorn? Berenilde? Would you?



RESPONDING

1. A character arc shows the transformation of a character over the course of a story – the significant moments in their development. Choose a character and map their arc throughout the book. Note the differences in their character at the beginning of the story and at the end. What have they lost? What have they gained? Chart the five key scenes where you notice their character develop. What is the catalyst for each change? Is it a positive change or a negative one? See if you can rewrite one of the scenes to have a different outcome – what impact would this have on the other key scenes you've identified?
2. Ophelia discovers towards the end of the book that the Knight has been stealing the letters from her family. Imagine that you are a member of Ophelia's family – her great-uncle, her mother, her sister, her brother or her father. Write a series of letters to Ophelia, trying to fill in what scenes might have taken place on Anima during her absence. Use evidence from the book as the foundation for your ideas. Compare your work to the rest of the class.
3. 'It's often said of old buildings that they have a soul. On Anima, the ark where objects come to live, old buildings tend mostly to become appallingly bad-tempered.' (page 15) Place is important in the novel – it defines characters, directs the movement of the narrative, and sets the emotional tone of the piece. Think of a building that evokes an emotional response in you and write a description of it, trying to use language that captures your emotion – think of descriptions of light and dark, of noise, of colour and movement. What kind of story might take place in your chosen location?
4. Artemis is described as having a 'cold beauty, indifferent, almost inhuman' (page 72), while Farouk is 'too devoid of human warmth' (page 403) to have any effect on Ophelia. Their inhumanity gives them both incredible power, but may also be their downfall. Discuss.
5. Berenilde accuses Ophelia of being either 'too modest, or you are false' (page 149). But really, Ophelia is neither of these things. Who is she really? Use examples from the text to support your argument.