



The Peacock Detectives

CARLY NUGENT

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 9+

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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

11-year old Cassie Anderson loves to tell stories. When the two peacocks that live opposite her house go missing, Cassie decides to become a detective and write the story of how she came to solve the case of the missing peacocks.

With the help of her English Literature teacher dad, Cassie introduces the reader to the different puzzle pieces that comprise the jigsaw of storytelling; an inciting incident, a Red Herring, a climax and resolution.

What soon becomes apparent in Cassie's story, is that she too has unintentionally included a Red Herring in her story. The real mystery is not the missing peacocks but where her Dad really goes when he says he is leaving for work in the morning.

With the help of her best friend Jonas, Cassie must piece together the clues behind her father's silence and why he is hoarding ornamental decorations in the laundry cupboard.

The Peacock Detectives is a familiar but important story. It's a novel about family, friendship and the secret battles we all face on a day-to-day basis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carly Nugent lives in Brighton in Victoria. Her short fiction has featured in numerous publications, including the *Bellevue Literary Review* and *Award Winning Australian Writing*. *The Peacock Detectives* is her first novel.

BEFORE READING

1. Share with students the front cover of *The Peacock Detectives*. From the front cover and book title, invite discussion by prompting students to make predictions about the plot, characters and setting of the novel.
2. Collect items connected with the text for a treasure or scavenger hunt to take place in the classroom. Items could include; a peacock feather, a copy of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, a magnifying glass, a pebble, a wooden cooking spoon, a train ticket, gum leaves, a bible or cross, miniature bridge, toy snake, a Buddhism statue or a cookbook. Hide these objects around the classroom and ask students to uncover the hidden objects. After students have located these items, ask them to consider what these objects might represent in the story they are about to read.
3. What is your favourite mystery story? When have you solved a mystery? Ask students to reflect on their favourite mystery story or when they have solved a mystery in their own life. Ask students to write about this experience or this story. As a group, get students to share their mystery stories with each other. After students have shared their stories, invite discussion of the similarities between the mystery stories. Conclude the discussion by asking students why we enjoy listening to mystery stories and why we also enjoy solving a good mystery.



WHILE READING

1. 'Dad also says that a story has to have an Inciting Incident at the beginning. An Inciting Incident is something that happens to get the story started, like a problem that has to be fixed, or a mystery that has to be solved.' (p. 4) What effect does an inciting incident have on a reader? What initially do we believe is the Inciting Incident in *The Peacock Detectives*? Is there more than one inciting incident in the story?
2. 'Writing a story is sometimes like being a detective. When you are being a detective you have to collect a lot of information. Some of the pieces of information will turn out to be clues, and some of them will turn out to be Red Herrings. A Red Herring is something that seems important but actually isn't.' (p. 70) What is the Red Herring in *The Peacock Detectives*?
3. Cassie has a Notebook for Noticing. Create your own Notebook for Noticing to record key quotations from the novel. Key quotations are quotes that explain the characters, themes and ideas of the story.
4. 'But when you have to do things on one of Those Days, even things you normally love, it really, really hurts. But it doesn't hurt in a place you can show your mum or a doctor, like Diana's arm did when she broke it two years ago falling off the monkey bars. It just hurts everywhere inside you and makes you want to cry, but you don't because you can't point to the pain and no one can help you.' (p. 87) Like her dad, Cassie has 'Those Days'. What kind of illness do you think Cassie is suffering from when she is having one of 'Those Days'? What does Cassie do to help her get through these tough days? What other things might Cassie do to make 'Those Days' better?
5. Why does Diana move out of the house and into the backyard to live in a tent? How does this decision connect with the belief system within Buddhism?
6. 'Jonas is thinking that us not-being-friends anymore is an example of Cause and Effect. An effect is the thing that happens, and a Cause is why it happens. "Because" is a Cause and Effect transition word.' (p. 115) Make a list of the different causes and effects that you notice in the book.
7. 'I opened ten boxes altogether. Inside all of them were ornaments, the kind you put on window ledges and mantelpieces to brighten-up-your-home.' (p. 121) Why is Cassie's dad filling the laundry with miniature ornaments?
8. 'I tried to imagine good reasons for my mum moving out. Like her being a lion tamer with a travelling circus, or a secret superhero, or the prime minister. But none of these reasons were true enough, and I didn't believe any of them.' (p. 129) Why do you think Cassie's mum moves out? Is there evidence in the text that provides an answer to this question?
9. 'Jonas nodded, "It's a euphemism," he yelled (softly).
"What's that?" I yelled (softly) back.
"It's a word that makes something horrible seem not-so-bad. Like saying casualties instead of people killed in a war, or laid-off instead of sacked."' (p. 146) Can you think of other examples of euphemisms?
10. 'And I was thinking how weird it was for one person to be two people—one who is nice and who smiles and wants to hold hands in train stations. And one who is mean and ashamed, and wants to make the people who care about them feel like dog poop.' (p. 218) Why do you think Rhea acts in two very different ways in Chapter 32 and 33? What reasons are there to explain these differences?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. How would the characters of the text look in a real detective story? With the intention of understanding the characters in more depth, create a Case File for one the following characters: Cassie, Diana, Mum, Dad, Jonas, Grandad or Rhea. Your Case File should include the characters name, any nicknames or other names they go by, their age, gender, their address, their family and friends, education and job, hobbies and interests and a description of their personality and motivations. Be sure to make your Case File look authentic!
2. 'I'm going to write down my interview in dialogue, which means writing what someone actually said instead of just explaining what they said.' (p. 7) As a detective assigned to solving the disappearance of William Shakespeare and Virginia, Cassie conducts interviews with witnesses to help her solve the mystery. Cassie writes about the interviews she conducts using dialogue. Cassie says that her Dad 'says it's important to have dialogue in a story because it helps the reader imagine how people speak and it also stops them from getting bored reading lots and lots of long sentences that feel like they go on and on and never end.' (p. 7) Imagine that Cassie interviewed another character in the book about the missing peacocks. What questions would she ask? How would the other person respond? Write this extra scene using appropriate dialogue structure.
3. "'You shouldn't lie like that, Cassie," Diana said, in a quiet voice. "It's not funny."' (p. 22) Cassie and Diana remember their family holiday very differently. Why does Cassie remember the holiday fondly, while Diana accuses her of lying about what really happened on the holiday? Is Cassie lying? Is Diana remembering the holiday incorrectly? Does Cassie believe she is telling the truth? Why do the two girls remember the holiday differently? How is their understanding of this memory shaped by their personal identity?



4. 'One of the most important characters in this story is my dad. He is important because he is part of this story, but also because I wouldn't be able to write this story without him. My dad knows more about books and writing than anyone else I know.' (p. 53) What makes a character important in a story? Who are the important characters in the novel? Why are they important in this particular story?
5. Each of the characters within the novel change in their own way. Record how each of the main characters change in the narrative. How and why do they change?

STRUCTURE

1. Research the elements of a mystery story. Document these elements and their definitions before identifying how they are presented in *The Peacock Detectives*.
2. The author Carly Nugent separates the novel into three sections; Autumn, Winter and Spring & Summer. Why does she choose to call Part One Autumn, Part Two Winter and Part Three Spring & Summer? Does this simply illustrate the different seasons or is Nugent communicating something about the atmosphere and tone of the three parts of the story?
3. *The Peacock Detectives* is told through first person narration. Cassie narrates the story from beginning to end—the reader sees the other characters and the events unfold through her eyes. Does Cassie accurately tell the story? How does her personality and identity shape the way she tells the story? Is Cassie a reliable narrator? Why or why not?

THEMES

Friendship

1. 'Jonas and I are the good kind of opposite, and that's the first reason we are friends.' (p. 45) Using the example of Cassie and Jonas, what do you believe is important for a good friendship? Should friends have opposite interests and personalities? Or should they have similar personalities? What does Cassie mean when she says that she and Jonas are a good kind of opposite?
2. 'And suddenly I realised Rhea wasn't A Minor Character after all—in my story, she was A Main Character.' (p. 210) Why do Cassie and Jonas eventually become friends with Rhea Grimm? How and why are they able to overcome their initial differences with her? Why and how does Rhea become a main character in the book?
3. There are many examples of unconventional and complicated families in the novel. There are also many examples of unconventional and complicated friendships. What kinds of complicated friendships do we see in the novel?

Family

1. "'I understand a lot of things now.' I stood up. 'Like what's in an M movie, and how to swear in Greek, and what sausages are made of. And I want to understand why you don't want to live with us anymore. I want to understand why Diana doesn't have to go to church and why she gets to live in the stupid garden. I want to understand about Grandpa. And'—I turned my voice in Dad's direction—"I want to understand why you're not doing anything.'" (p. 131) Why does Cassie's family not tell her about her grandpa's terminal illness and her mum and dad's separation? Why doesn't Diana tell her the truth? What reasons do her parents have for leaving her in the dark?
2. 'I turned to Jonas. "Maybe they're not your parents in a fact-way," I said. "But they are your parents in another way. In the way of buying you a laptop, and all those encyclopedias. And in the way of loving you.'" (p. 208) What personal struggles does Jonas have with his family? Why is he reluctant to call them 'Mum' and 'Dad'? What is your definition of a 'mum' and a 'dad'? Do our parents need to be genetically connected to us to be our parents?
3. 'I wondered if their parents had cried and hugged them until their eyeballs hurt. I knew Jonas's would have. I wasn't so sure about Rhea's.' (p. 214) How is Rhea's family different to Jonas and Cassie's?

Storytelling

1. 'Sometimes it's hard, though, being the writer of the story and trying to decide what you (the person reading the story) need to know and not know, because we are different people.' (p. 11) Does everyone read a book the same way? Why do you think people might read a book differently and understand it in different ways? What determines how we read and understand a book?
2. 'Once I came up with that story I didn't feel so sad about not sitting with them anymore.' (p. 42) How does storytelling support Cassie in dealing with the everyday problems and issues in her life?
3. 'When I want to stop thinking, my favourite kinds of books to read are mysteries, like Sherlock Holmes and Nancy Drew. Dad doesn't like mysteries. He says they are lollies for your brain and that I should read harder books with Themes in them, like *Lord of the Flies*. But I think that sometimes it is good to read mysteries because it gives your brain a rest from thinking about things like freedom and society and meaning. Which is important, because if you spend too much time thinking about meaning you start to get quiet and sad and you don't want to play tennis-on-a-string with your kids anymore.' (p. 57) In this section of the novel, Cassie voices her and her dad's opinions on how reading particular genres of books can affect people. Can you think of any other book genres that might affect people in particular ways?



RESPONDING

1. Throughout the novel, Cassie introduces the reader to a host of different narrative techniques that she has learnt from her dad. Go back over the novel and record each of these techniques. When you have documented each of these techniques, create flashcards that outline the narrative techniques and the definition of the techniques that Cassie provides.
2. Using *The Peacock Detectives* as inspiration, write your own detective story! Be sure to use similar elements that Cassie uses in her own story to craft your mystery!
3. Create a map for Bloomsbury. Your map will need to include the following:

My Side of Town:

- 'My House
- Jonas' house
- Grandpa's house
- School
- Church
- The post office
- The fish-and-chip shop

And some things on The Other Side of Town:

- The bank
- The Very Nice Restaurant
- The hospital
- The bus station
- Lee Street (a dead end street that Diana and I aren't allowed to go down because, Mum says, "It's just not the kind of place you need to be hanging around." Whenever adults talk about Lee Street they get this look on their faces like someone has just died and they are very, very sorry.' (p. 38)

4. In groups of 3 or 4 children can investigate the following motifs and symbols: snake, pebble, bridge, ornaments, peacock. Provide students with a definition of a symbol and a motif and ask that in their groups, students brainstorm what their allocated symbol might represent in the story.
5. How would *The Peacock Detectives* be a different story if Diana were the narrator and not Cassie? Although the plot and characters would be the same, what would change with Diana narrating the story? Re-write a chapter from the novel from the perspective of Diana.
6. Do all of the mysteries in the novel get solved? Make a list of all the mysteries or secrets in the novel. Circle which ones are solved and annotate how they are solved. Think about the mysteries the author chooses not to solve and write about why you think these mysteries continues to be mysteries.
7. 'We walked for so long that we go to the bridge, which is where the track meets the road and crosses the river. Mum says I'm not allowed to go over the bridge by myself, because over the bridge is The Other Side of Town.' (p. 36) What does the bridge symbolise in the story? How does the symbolism of the bridge change over the course of the novel? Re-read the scenes from the novel where Cassie visits the bridge and consider the symbolism of the bridge in each.
8. 'Dad says Themes are what books are really about. I don't know how Dad finds Themes, because when I read books I just find characters and things that happen to characters. Dad says I have to look-beneath-the-surface, but when I look-beneath-the-surface of my books I just see my hands.' (p. 53) Research the definition of a theme. What do you think are the 'themes' in *The Peacock Detectives*? What events in the novel explore these themes? Make a list of the novel's themes and find some quotes that connect with each one.
9. 'But he gets some wrinkles in his forehead when he says this, and I think that somewhere deep down in him he really does still want to write stories. And I think it makes that place deep down a little bit happier when he helps me write mine.' (p. 55–56) How do stories help and comfort people when they're experiencing a difficult time in their life? In an extended piece of writing, explain how a story has comforted you.
10. 'When you write a story it's important to use lots of details, but it's also important not to use superfluous details. Superfluous means something you don't need. In a story, superfluous details are details that the reader doesn't need to know to understand the characters.' (p. 10) Can you find any superfluous details in the text? What details could Cassie have removed from her story? Can you think of any details Cassie might have included that would have been superfluous?