



Liar's Test

AMBELIN KWAYMULLINA

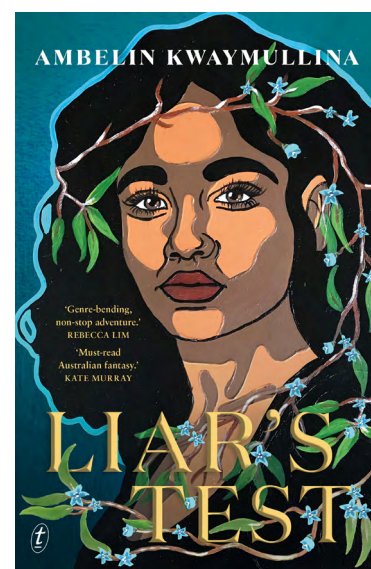
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Fiction

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.

TEACHING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CONTENT

It is important for any teachers engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content to create respectful and inclusive classroom spaces. A selection of resources is provided on page 4 of these notes to assist teachers in their ongoing journey towards culturally safe teaching and learning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambelin Kwaymullina is a First Nations writer and illustrator who comes from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Ambelin tells stories across a range of forms, including poetry, short stories, essays, young adult novels, and picture books. She is a previous winner of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and the Aurealis Award.

SYNOPSIS

I didn't want to rule the Risen. Wreak a little havoc upon them, though? That was something else entirely.

Bell Silverleaf is a liar.

It's how she's survived. It's how all Treesingers have survived since they were invaded by the Risen and their fickle gods. But now Bell is in the Queen's Test—she's one of seven girls competing in deadly challenges to determine who will rule for the next twenty-five years. If Bell wins, she'll have the power to help her people and take revenge on the Risen. But first she has to make it through the challenges alive.

She doesn't know how much she's been lied to, or where she fits in a bigger story, a mystery stretching back generations. And she's facing much bigger dangers than the Queen's Test. She's up against the gods themselves.

Liar's Test is a fast-paced, intricately woven fantasy novel with an unforgettable heroine inspired by the strength and power of Aboriginal women.

Ambelin Kwaymullina is an Aboriginal writer and artist who comes from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. She tells stories across a range of forms, including picture books, novels, essays and poetry. Her books have won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and the Aurealis Award.

BEFORE READING

Using the essay following these notes and the additional author resource listed below, explore the concept of Indigenous Futurisms. Consider:

- What difficulties have Indigenous peoples encountered with the genre of speculative fiction?
- What are some of the characteristics of Indigenous Futurisms? Does knowing *Liar's Test* is a work of Indigenous Futurisms mean you expect



different things from the story it than you might of another speculative fiction book?

Additional author resource:

Ambelin Kwaymullina, *Reflecting on Indigenous Worlds, Indigenous Futurisms and Artificial Intelligence*

<http://motherofinvention.twelfthplanetpress.com/2017/09/16/reflecting-on-indigenous-worlds-indigenous-futurisms-and-artificial-intelligence/>

WHILE READING

1. On pages 28/29, Bell invents names for most of the other candidates in the Queen's Test. What do those names tell you about Bell's assessment of their personalities? Why do you think the author used nicknames instead of the characters' real names?
2. On page 33, Bell says: 'When my people first came here, they'd been shocked to find the Risen didn't have any trees (although they'd also thought it explained a lot).' How does the architecture of Radiance reflect what is valued by Risen society?
3. The Queen's Test is separated into three different challenges: one belonging to the sun-priests, one to the moon-sisters, and one to the guilds. What are each of these three groups looking for in a Queen? How do their challenges help them find it?
4. Power in Risen society is shared between the sun-priests, the moon-sisters, the Queen and the guilds. Who do you think holds the most power? Why?
5. In chapter six, Bell experiences one of her mother's memories. How does this change how Bell sees herself and what she considers her purpose to be?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. 'We all draw something from the trees we were named after.' (p. 101). Discuss how Bell, Tamsin and Uncle Dar are influenced by Silverleaf trees, Blackbark trees, and Holdfast trees. (See pages 101–2 for an explanation of the characteristics of these trees.)
2. '...I wasn't made out of the people who'd tried to bring me down. I was made out of the ones who'd lifted me up. Tricks and the Nexus. Ronan, Tamsin and Sasha. Journeys Far. The Ancients. Even Elodie.' (p. 258). Why is it important that Bell defines herself through the people who lifted her up? How might she see herself differently if she allowed herself to be defined by the people who'd tried to bring her down?

3. 'A new picture. Five seeds thrown into a pool of water. The seeds were little. But the ripples they made were big, reaching all the way to the edge of the pool. I sighed. "You think we can change them. Me, Tricks, Ronan, Tamsin, and Sasha."' (p. 184). Why do you think the Nexus brought together these five people? What qualities do these characters possess that will help them transform Risen society?

STRUCTURE

1. While Bell Silverleaf is the primary narrator of the story, *Liar's Test* also includes a number of other voices. In the order that these voices appear in the text, they are: Leana Silverleaf (p. 48), Journeys Far (p. 135), Alethea Silverleaf (p. 140) and Granny Silverleaf (p. 147).
 - a. Choose two of these voices and discuss how they are different from each other and from Bell's voice. How does the author make each voice distinct?
 - b. Why do you think the author used different voices to tell the story?
2. 'Seven will come/two will die/two will sleep/two will serve/one will rule.' Much of the book is loosely structured around the Queen's Test. Map the relationship between the Test and the plot of the book.
3. 'I was trying to put together a puzzle without all the pieces.' (p. 54). Bell uncovers the the knowledge she needs as the story progresses, including information that she doesn't recognise the significance of until later (eg, she doesn't understand the importance of the medallion worn by Eldan until page 196). Identify the information in the book that is critical for Bell to heal her grove and defeat the gods, and map out when she receives it. Why do you think the author communicated knowledge in this way? What would happen if Bell knew more earlier in the story?

THEMES

Inequality

1. Bell lives within a society that discriminates against Treesingers. Consider the different forms of discrimination that exist in Radiance.
 - a. Which characters hold explicitly discriminatory views against Treesingers (ie, they knowingly believe that Treesingers are 'less than')?
 - b. Which characters hold unconscious bias (ie, they don't consciously characterise Treesingers as 'less than' but their attitudes and behaviours



are shaped by adverse stereotypes which cause them to treat Treesingers unequally)?

c. What systems and organisations have prevented Treesingers from determining their own futures? How have these systems and organisations changed over time? Why have these changes happened?

2. Bell is the first Treesinger allowed into the Queen's Test. But at the end of the book, she thinks 'One Treesinger making to the top in spite of determined efforts to destroy me did not make this an equal society.' (p. 253). Why does she think this? What more might she believe needs to be done to make Risen society equal for Treesingers?
3. "You want to talk about imbalance?" I growled. "Their whole society is built on it! Traders matter less than knights, and crafters less than traders, and workers less than crafters, and Treesingers less than anybody." (p. 184). Throughout the book, how does position in the hierarchy affect how people are treated? How does it change how they interact with authority figures? (See, for example, the conversation between Bell, Tamsin and Sasha about Alasdar on p. 130.)

Strength and resistance

1. 'Bell hunched her shoulders. My child didn't value the hidden ways as much as she should. I sighed. "There are many ways to be strong, Bell. You must remember that when I am not here to remind you." (p. 49). What different kinds of strength are held by Treesinger women in the book? How do these different strengths shape different resistance strategies?
2. 'It'll be a hidden kind of fighting Treesingers do, in Radiance.' (p. 143).
 - a. How have Treesingers and their trees and plants used deception to protect themselves and others? How has Bell?
 - b. 'True liars never lie to themselves. But I had. I hadn't let myself feel how bad things had really been, in the temple. I'd had to pretend so I could go on.' (p 216). What is the cost of continually having to hide who you are? How does it affect Bell?

Connectedness / Relationships

1. '...everyone in the grove—humans, trees, animals, everything—just does their best to keep the grove in balance, so all the life can grow and be happy.' (p. 65). How do Tricks, the Nexus and Bell help each other to 'grow and be happy' throughout the story?
2. The perspectives of trees and plants are an integral part of the story. Consider:

a. How do trees and plants view things differently to humans? (see, eg, p. 36, 145, 149; 183–5).

b. How do these perspectives influence Bell?

3. 'In a narrative drawn from Indigenous understandings, there is no lone hero, nor is there a singular, linear march to the future. There is only what is grown out of relationships.' (see page 5 of these notes). Identify the connections Bell makes with her relatives, friends and allies throughout the story. How do these connections contribute to healing her grove and defeating Tomas and Allora?

RESPONDING

1. Refer to the website below, where Ambelin has explored some aspects of Indigenous futurist thinking through a series of five paintings as part of a creative residency at the ANU School of Cybernetics:

<https://cybernetics.anu.edu.au/projects/IndigenousFuturisms/>

a. The third painting contains a poem about non-linear time. In groups, discuss how the ideas in this poem are contained in *Liar's Test*.

b. The final painting in the series is expressed entirely through symbols. Choose a character, idea or event in *Liar's Test*, and create a symbol or series of symbols to represent the character, idea or event.

c. Come up with an idea which you think will contribute to creating a positive future. Express this idea as a work of art (this can be done through incorporating text into artwork or through using images instead of words).

2. 'This focuses attention on process, rather than outcome, for there is no fixed destination to be reached. It is the balancing and nurturing of relationships that moves life closer together, and imbalance that breaks us all apart.' (page 5 of these notes). Drawing on the selection of short resources below (or through researching your own resources), create a presentation on First Nations knowledges and sustainable futures. What have been the problems with the processes used to engage with First Nations knowledges in the past? How are those processes being changed now?

Resources:

CSIRO, Our Knowledge Our Way in caring for Country: Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening and sharing our knowledge for land and sea management.

<https://www.csiro.au/en/research/indigenous-science>



Bronwyn Carlson, Peita Richards, Indigenous knowledges informing machine learning could prevent stolen art and other culturally unsafe practices

<https://theconversation.com/indigenous-knowledges-informing-machine-learning-could-prevent-stolen-art-and-other-culturally-unsafe-ai-practices-210625>

How cultural burning protects land and heals people

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cro_iBShSfM

Tara de Landgraft, Indigenous medicine used to soothe crocodile bite could gel in time to help Brisbane Olympic athletes

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-02/traditional-medicine-after-crocodile-bite-use-olympic-athletes/103057744>

NB: a more comprehensive examination of First Nations knowledges and inventions, along with associated educational resources, can be found in SBS *The First Inventors* television series and teacher resource:

<https://www.sbs.com.au/learn/resources/the-first-inventors-teacher-guide/teacher-resource/>

3. Ambelin has written that 'When colonisers came to Indigenous shores, they did not value the life-ways of Indigenous peoples, especially those of Indigenous women. Characterisations of Indigenous peoples in general and Indigenous women in particular as 'less than' shaped laws and policies for much of the last two centuries and while this idea is now recognised as false, it continues to manifest in bias against Indigenous peoples...' (Essay, p.5).

First Nations women and girls continue to experience high levels of inequality and intersectional discrimination. The landmark Wiyi Yani U Thangani initiative has set out a change agenda for First Nations gender justice which includes a visual representation of gender justice and equality in the form of a Sacred Grandmother Tree. The change agenda is downloadable here:

<https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/WYUT%20Change%20Agenda%202024%20%28FINAL%20DIGITAL%29.pdf>

In groups, explore the image and discussion of the Sacred Grandmother Tree at p. 12–17 of the change agenda. Consider the following:

a. Why use an image of a tree? What do the different parts of the tree represent? Do you think art is a more compelling way of conveying knowledge than words alone? Why/why not?

b. The Grandmother Tree combines three elements (outcomes, practice, evaluation – see p. 12 of the Change Agenda). Why are all three required for change to occur? (Australian Human Rights Commission, Wiyi Yani U Thangani

Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice (2024), page 37; 75 ff)



Indigenous Futurisms, Aboriginal Women, and *Liar's Test* by Ambelin Kwaymullina

I am a writer of Indigenous Futurisms¹, which I have characterised as stories grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and in our deep knowledge of injustice². Our futurisms are diverse, reflecting the many cultures and viewpoints of Indigenous peoples across the globe. But they are also connected by the commonalities which shape our worldviews, such as our understanding of reality as a living, interrelated whole.

First Peoples hold ancient understandings of an existence that sustains and is sustained by a dynamic network of relationships. In this regard, much of what the West has viewed as 'speculative fiction'—such as inter-species communication—has always been part of Indigenous realities. Nor do we need to imagine an apocalypse or dystopia; we have experienced both since the arrival of the colonisers, and we have survived.

Liar's Test is the story of Bell Silverleaf, a Treesinger girl who inhabits a world and a situation different from mine. But no tale is created in a vacuum, and much of Bell's journey is drawn from my knowledge and experience.

Aboriginal women's resistance

The dedication to *Liar's Test* reads: For the Grandmothers/Spiky and strong/Fierce and proud/Warriors all/Survivors all/We who came after/remember.

When colonisers came to Indigenous shores, they did not value the lifeways of Indigenous peoples, especially those of Indigenous women. Characterisations of Indigenous peoples in general and Indigenous women in particular as 'less than' shaped laws and policies for much of the last two centuries and while this idea is now recognised as false, it continues to manifest in bias against Indigenous peoples at structural, explicit and unconscious levels. In Australia, research has shown that one in five Australians hold explicit bias against Indigenous peoples³, while three in four hold unconscious bias⁴. And one of the major findings of the recent Wiyi Yani U Thangani Women's Voices report was that structural forces overwhelmingly determined the life outcomes of First Nations women and girls⁵. That report also highlighted the potential for transformative change, if only the strength of First Nations women's voices was recognised and heard⁶.

The path I walk as a storyteller only exists because of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who went before me, including those who lived through the apocalypse of the frontier and the dystopia which followed. These women are the holders of many different kinds of strength. They flowed like water, finding pathways around and through the laws and policies that blighted their lives.

They rose up from the earth like rock, born from and deeply connected to their Countries. It was of them that I thought as I wrote the Treesinger women in *Liar's Test*, from the unyielding self-reliance of Granny Silverleaf—

If you wanted something done right, you'd best be prepared to do it yourself. This world was full of dreamers and fools. (*Liar's Test*, p. 147)

—to the gentle wisdom of Leana Silverleaf—

I wanted to tell her the words spoken at the passing of every Treesinger: Everything returns to the earth. But everything returns from the earth too. We will all be here again. To remind Bell that we came back, and in whatever form we lived next, we were always connected to those we loved and who loved us. (*Liar's Test*, p. 48)

—and the snarkiness of Bell herself:

Quiet reflection, my arse.
The only reason we'd been sent to 'reflect' was because the day was supposed to have been taken up with the Bubble challenge that we'd already done. I filled in the hours by rehearsing the speech I'd deliver in the Glass. Every candidate had to give a little talk to the guilds on why she should be Queen. Mine had something for everybody, encouraging them to vote for me because they thought they could push me around, or because they wanted to raise up a poor Treesinger girl (who'd be eternally grateful for the opportunity), or even because they believed in equality (unlikely, but you never knew your luck). (*Liar's Test*, p. 72)

I thought too of the many silences of First Nations women. Those silences have sometimes been misread as an invitation for others to speak for us, or as an absence of thought or feeling, as if we have no stories to tell. But we are rich in story, including the tales of the resistance-ways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Many of those tales speak of what lies beneath the silences—a bone-deep defiance; sharp sense of humour; and profound insight into the systems that denied the value of our voices. This inspired much of the resistance strategies pursued by Bell Silverleaf and her Ancestors as they fight to survive contexts in which it is not safe to show their power, walk in their strength, or speak the truth of their experiences. In the words of Alethea Silverleaf:



I won't be wandering anymore...Won't be looking up at those stars and thinking about what's out there. Won't be fighting either, leastaways, not directly. It'll be a hidden kind of fighting Treesingers do, in Radiance. (*Liar's Test*, p. 143)

And in the end, it is the strength of the Silverleaf women that helps carry Bell to the conclusion of a journey begun by her many-times grandmother:

A deep sense of satisfaction seemed to shudder through my bones. As if generations of Silverleaves were saying, Well done.

Or maybe it was just Alethea. (*Liar's Test*, p. 227)

Holism, relationships and time

In Aboriginal worldviews, everything lives and everything is related to each other. This includes plants and animals but also all the other threads of life that make up our Countries, such as sun and moon, wind and rain, river and rock. These threads together form a living pattern, which is itself contained within every thread. Or to put this another way: the whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts.

On this holistic view to be a fully realised individual is to be part of a collective and to ensure all other life has the same opportunity for self-realisation. Aboriginal kinship systems map connections, setting out a complex web of rights and responsibilities underlain by the recognition that it is by nurturing others that we ourselves are nurtured. As is often said by Aboriginal people: if you care for Country, Country will care for you.

This web of relationships shapes a non-linear reality where time moves in cycles, not lines. 'Near' and 'far' refer to relative positions in the web but not to the passage of linear years, which do not carry anyone away from, or towards, anyone or anything else. Time exists in space and is as susceptible to action and interaction as anything else in Country. This focuses attention on process, rather than outcome, for there is no fixed destination to be reached. It is the balancing and nurturing of relationships that moves life closer together, and imbalance that breaks us all apart.

These ideas have helped to shape the world of Treesingers and their groves in *Liar's Test*. The trees and plants in the book are Bell's relatives, Ancestors, friends, and allies. They are also sometimes wiser than she is, and often more far-seeing. This includes the mighty Nexus tree, who brings Bell back to herself when she needs reminding of what it is to be a Treesinger:

I couldn't get a word out, not with the Nexus storming through my body. They spoke in an angry whirlwind of images that I had no difficulty translating as: If you

deceive him now, you are no better than Tomas!

I shouted back inside my mind, If I don't he might not give me the pathway and everyone will die!

In response they threw my own words back at me: You want to talk about imbalance? Their whole society is built on it! Right after that came another image. Glowing worlds, and broken ones. Then my words again, and the picture, and the words ...

Stop! I shouted in my mind. I get it. The difference between broken worlds and whole ones was whether the people in them held themselves accountable to balance. And it wasn't enough to be a little bit accountable. It was all or nothing.

I was liar and I wanted to lie.

But I was a Treesinger and I had to tell the truth. (*Liar's Test*, p. 207)

Futures

The story of *Liar's Test* is the story of Bell Silverleaf. But it is also the story of her grove and all the life within it, her Ancestors, her family and her allies. In a narrative drawn from Indigenous understandings, there is no lone hero, nor is there a singular, linear march to the future. There is only what is grown out of relationships, the possibility of something better than anyone could create alone:

...I reached out to the Nexus, and together we scattered pathway across the connections that stretched and shone between life and worlds, sending a fragment to every bright-of-spirit. It wasn't enough to take them to the other side. It was just enough to be ... well, a hope, I guessed. To feel some of what I'd felt, those endless possibilities, that moment of being lifted up by the beat of wings and the joy of song. A world where something better was possible. (*Liar's Test*, p. 232).



¹ The term 'Indigenous Futurisms' was first coined by Anishinaabe academic Grace Dillon.

² Ambelin Kwaymullina, 'Indigenist Futurisms', Bronwyn Carlson, Madi Day, Sandy O'Sullivan and Tristan Kennedy, *The Routledge Handbook of Australian Indigenous Peoples and Futures*, Routledge, 2024, xxiii

³ Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews (D'harawal), 'Racism: the stats are clear' SBS 20 February 2017 <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/comment-racism-in-australia-the-stats-are-clear/filappowu>

⁴ For a summary of the findings of this research, see '[Three in four people hold negative view of Indigenous people](#)', Australian National University, 9 June 2020 : For a complete analysis, see: Siddharth Shirodkar, '[Bias against Indigenous Australians: Implicit Association Test results for Australia](#)' (2019), 22(3–4) *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* 3

⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission, [Wiyi Yani U Thangani Community Guide](#) (2020) ⁶ For a discussion of systemic racism and First Nations peoples, see ANTAR, [Systemic Racism](#)

⁶ *ibid*

TEACHING RESOURCES

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Guide to evaluating and selecting educational resources, September 2022:

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/education/guide-evaluating-and-selecting-education-resources>

SBS The First Inventors Teaching and Learning Resource, How to use this resource

<https://www.sbs.com.au/learn/resources/the-first-inventors-teacher-guide/teacher-resource/>

Shiralee Lawson (Wonnarua and Kunja) and Jarin Baigent (Wiradjuri), SBS Learn Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols Guide – For Teachers

<https://www.sbs.com.au/learn/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-protocols-guide-for-teachers/teacher-resource/>

Magabala Books, Teaching Indigenous Content

<https://magabala.com.au/pages/teaching-indigenous-content>

Cara Shipp (Wiradjuri) and Phil Page, Workshop: Teaching Culturally Sensitive Texts

<https://readingaustralia.com.au/2020/09/workshop-teaching-culturally-sensitive-texts/>

Australian Association for the Teaching of English, Resources to support the teaching of texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, compiled by Cara Shipp (Wiradjuri)

<https://www.aate.org.au/aate-digital/indigenous-literature-resources/indigenous-literature-resources>