



The Electric Kingdom

DAVID ARNOLD

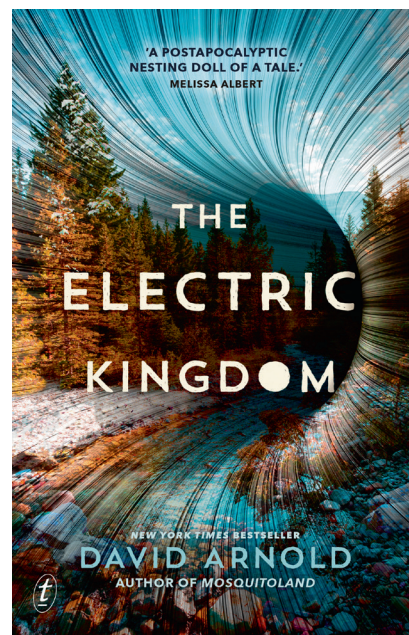
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 16+

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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 an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

In a post-apocalyptic world where humanity has been devoured by swarms of ravenous Flies, a group of children trek through the forest. They have come together from different places—Monty, Lakie and Kit travel away from Town, which holds only painful memories, towards the hope of a refuge; Lennon, Loretta and Pringles chase a similar dream in Boston; while Nico and her dog, Harry, follow a story so unlikely it could be a fairytale.

Nico has eight days to find the lost Kingdom of Manchester, a place she isn't sure really exists, and Kit, a child with the extraordinary capacity to see things that others do not, knows that his destiny is intertwined with hers. In the background is the Deliverer, watching their every move. The story and the world it takes place in are fragmented, broken. Shards of the past, present and future come together as each of the characters tries to understand their place in a world that doesn't make sense, a world with very little hope. This complex, ambitious novel tackles themes of destiny, love and sacrifice, asking if humanity can ever mend a broken world, or if we are destined to keep repeating our mistakes over and over again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Arnold lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with his (lovely) wife and (inquisitive) son. He is the New York Times bestselling author of *Mosquitoland*, *Kids of Appetite* and *The Strange Fascinations of Noah Hypnotik*, which has been optioned for film by Paramount. His books have been translated into over a dozen languages.

BEFORE READING

1. In the acknowledgements of the book, David Arnold says 'in many ways, *The Electric Kingdom* was born in the fray, a child of pandemics and wildfires and systemic collapses—of the economy, of politics, of decency in leadership'. These current concerns are amplified to the extreme in the imagined landscape of the book. How do you imagine the future? How do you think the worries you have about the world now might play out in fifty or one hundred years?
2. The novel explores many fears—isolation, violence, a loss of control, genetic modifications, and becoming the hunted. Where do you think these come from? Can you imagine a creature that brings these fears to life?
3. On the publisher's website, the book is described as 'genre-smashing'. What do you think this means? Read the blurb as a class. Which genre do you think the author utilises in the story and what does this lead you to expect?

WHILE READING

1. At what point do you start to believe that the stories of Manchester and the Waters of Kairos are real? What makes you think this?
2. Kit feels embarrassed for missing a bedtime story and then ashamed for being embarrassed (p. 196). Why do you think he feels embarrassed and ashamed here? All of the characters in *The*



Electric Kingdom are telling themselves stories of some kind. What stories do each of the characters in the novel tell themselves, and how do these stories make them feel? What is the importance of storytelling, in their lives and in ours?

- When Lennon and Nico are telling Kit jokes, Nico describes Kit's laughter as 'ultimate, life-giving' (p. 228). Why is laughter so significant in this moment—what does it signal? Outside of the obvious losses, why else might the characters find it difficult to laugh in this world?
- What is the meaning of the refrain 'we've been here before', which appears a number of times throughout the book? Who do you think is speaking? What or who are they referring to? Why do you think this suggestion is significant?
- Why do you think Echo leaves so abruptly in the middle of the night? How do you think he feels when he first comes home to find the others inside his house?
- In the story that Nico's dad tells her, Voyager thinks that her role is the most important (p. 80). Who do you think has the most important job? Can any of them exist without the others?
- Why does Nico doubt her father's story? Do you believe him?
- What does the 'language of loss' (p. 282) sound like to Kit? What other languages does he describe? How would you describe the sound of each of these emotions?
- Why is Lennon so surprised by the idea of a calendar (p. 251)? What other items or traditions from the past don't make sense in the time of the book and why?
- 'There was no protocol for hope of this magnitude.' (p. 260). What do you think Lennon, Nico and Kit each hope for in this moment?
- How do you feel about the ending of the story? What do you think it means?
- What would you say the book is about?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

- 'Nico remembered what Kit had said about swarms, how they operated like giant octopuses, and all around her she felt the weight of the wild woods.' (p. 229) What are the Flies and where did they come from? What do you think they represent?

How are the Flies described in the novel? Are they frightening? What draws them? Why do Bruno and Gabe worship them?

- 'For Nico, there was no How Things Used to Be; there was only How Things Are.' (p. 188) How do the characters who have only known the Age of the Fly describe the world before? Why do you think it

is so hard for them to imagine? How do you think it feels for the people who can remember what the world used to be like? What would you miss most from your life right now if the world changed this drastically?

- Focussing only on survival has aged the characters in the book. Kit seems older than his years, and Nico reminds Lenin that they're 'all kids', although she then goes on to reflect that 'in a world consumed by Flies, kids were adults and adults were nowhere. 'How long you'd been alive only meant something when life itself wasn't a luxury.' (p. 229) What childhood experiences have Kit and his friends missed out on? Which memories do they hold close?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- 'We've done all of this before. We've been here before.' (p. 141). Is the story told in a linear or circular narrative? How does this change the way you read and understand what's happening? Can you identify a beginning and an end? Where does the story begin and end for each of the characters? It might help to visually map the points in the story where each timeline overlaps.
- The book contains multiple narratives that converge on one moment—how and where do they overlap? Why do you think the writer has chosen to follow Nico, Kit, and the Deliverer in these threads?
- Who is the Deliverer—what sets this narrative thread apart from the others? When do you think it's set? What is the point of the Deliverer if she's unable to change the outcome of the story?
- What is the first sign that something bad will happen in Waterford? Why is the Diviner unable to intervene? What other elements of the text add to the sinister undertone of this scene.

THEMES

Survival

- How do the Metal Masks represent the worst of what people will do to survive? Why is their violence different to Nico attacking Bruno?
- What does survival mean—is it about life or death or something else? Is survival individual or collective?
- Consider the way each of the characters survive mentally when they have every reason to give up hope. What keeps them going?
- What would you do to survive in this situation?

Love

- Loretta and Monty get to experience romantic love. How is their love evident to the other characters in the book? What obstacles might they face in this landscape? How do they show their love to each other?
- Kit saves Nico's life because he loves her. He sacrifices himself to save her. What other examples



can you think of where a character sacrifices something in a way that demonstrates love? Is it a love for each other as individuals or a love of something bigger? What does Nico sacrifice for love? Who does she sacrifice it for?

- As she prepares to leave, Nico looks at Kit and reflects on 'how she might enact certain qualities of love.' (p. 236) What do you think these qualities are, and how do you see each of the characters enact them in the novel?

Trust

- When Kit is talking to Nico at the Cormorant (p. 225) he tells her a story about Dakota and Lakie (and their love of mushrooms). How does this story indicate that Kit is beginning to trust Nico? How do you think he knows that he can trust her?
- How hard must it be to trust someone in a world where life and death are so precarious? What are the dangers of trusting the wrong person in this world? How do the characters in the book make decisions about who they are able to trust?
- Nico is reluctant to tell Lennon and Kit the purpose of her journey, even after she agrees to let them travel with her (p. 244). Is this because she doesn't trust them? If it isn't this, why do you think it is?

RESPONDING

- There are pockets of survivors tucked in towns and houses throughout the book. The main protagonists meet some, but there are undoubtedly more. Imagine someone who has survived the first and second wave of the Flies—how have they survived? Where are they? What have they lost, or sacrificed? Write a short scene from the perspective of a different survivor.
- Given the final meaning of the image Kit sees in his dreams (and the one he paints), what is the significance of the new story he paints as he and Lennon and Nico camp out in the toy/book shop?
- Many of the characters have a saying that guides them. For Kit, it's an echo of something his mother used to say—'When the majority of the world has been wiped out, you don't kill what's left.' (p. 29) Come up with a similar phrase that might guide or comfort you through a world like the one described in the novel.
- 'You're only paranoid until you're right.' (p. 340) Research survivalism in preparation for a classroom debate on the pros and cons of the above statement.
- 'How to be human, it seemed, was an infinite ocean in which Kit had only yet dipped the corner of a toenail.' (p. 31) In many ways, *The Electric Kingdom* is a book about being human in the face of great loss and despair. Choose a scene from the book where a character demonstrates their humanity, and write a paragraph describing its significance.

- 'When the known is death itself, you enter the unknown.' (p. 78) All of the characters are longing for something unknown. Imagine that you are one of them—what does the unknown look like for you? How does it feel? What is the thing you want most in the world?