

## The Apothecary

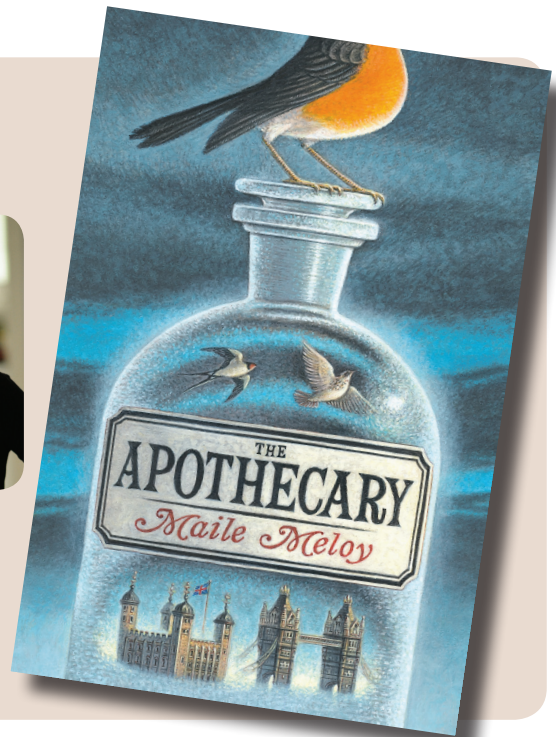
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Fiction, B paperback

Recommended for upper primary  
and early secondary students



A mysterious apothecary.

A magic book.

A missing scientist.

An impossible plan.

### Praise

'A wise and astonishing conjurer of convincing realities.'  
*New Yorker*

'A master of her craft.'  
*Weekend Australian*

'Inventive, smart and fun, an absolute delight.'  
Rebecca Stead, Newbery Medal-winning author of *When You Reach Me*

### Synopsis

Moving to a new local school can be difficult, but imagine how hard it is for Janie who is moving to a new school in another country. It's 1952, post World War II, and the Scotts have moved from their home in sunny Los Angeles to the grey bleakness of London. Mr and Mrs Scott work in a world of make-believe—writing scripts for television—so it's not such a leap from normal life when their daughter, Janie, finds herself caught up in a world of espionage and magic potions.

The western world is living under the shadow of the atomic bomb, the Cold War and Communism. London is still suffering from the effects of food rationing and bombed ruins. But amongst this harsh reality, in a tucked away store on Regents Park Road, exists a small apothecary that holds the key to saving the world.

Janie's new friend, Benjamin Burrows, is the apothecary's son. When Mr Burrows is kidnapped, the pair must guard his sacred book, the *Pharmacopoeia*, which is in danger of falling into the hands of Russian spies. In their quest to rescue the apothecary, the friends enlist the help of a gardener in the Physic Garden, a Chinese chemist, Jin Lo, and streetwise Pip. Through the use of magic potions and friendship, they

are able to save the apothecary and prevent nuclear disaster.

### About the Author

Maile Meloy is the award-winning author of the short story collections *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It* and *Half in Love* and the novels *Liars and Saints* and *A Family Daughter*. *The Apothecary* is her first novel for young readers.

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### Themes

- Belonging
- Dislocation
- Freedom of Speech
- Friendship
- Lies
- Magic
- Power
- Secrets
- War

### Is this book fiction or non-fiction?

The author has included a 'Note to the reader' at the beginning of the book from the main protagonist, Jane Scott.

- Is the author's name Jane Scott?
- Why has the author done this?

**Word definitions**

The *Apothecary* raises many challenging ideas and uses words you may not have come across before. Find a definition for each of the words below:

- alchemist
- apothecary
- archipelago
- avian
- black onyx
- censure
- Communist
- crucible
- diaphanous
- mortar & pestle
- prosthetic
- samovar
- temporal

**Nice to meet you**

The author refers to many famous people in the story. Do you know who they are?

- Link the name of the person with their description in the table attached
- Create a timeline placing people in order using their date of birth eg:
  - Dante, born 1265, an Italian poet of the Middle Ages.
  - Henry the Eighth, born 1491, King of England from 1509 to 1547.
  - Jane Austen, born 1775, an English novelist.
  - Henry James, born 1843, an American author of the 19th Century.
  - Madam Curie, born 1867, a Polish–French physicist–chemist famous for her pioneering research on radioactivity.
  - Winston Churchill, born 1874, a British politician.
  - Julius Robert Oppenheimer, born 1904, a theoretical physicist and professor of physics known as the father of the atom bomb.
  - Katherine Hepburn, born 1907, an American actress of the 20th Century.
  - Queen Elizabeth, born 1926, Queen of the British Commonwealth since 1952.

**On the map**

A number of countries are mentioned throughout the novel. Do you know exactly where they are?

- Find a world map and locate the following countries:
  - Australia, China, Germany, England, New Mexico, Russia, United States, France, Italy, Greece, Africa, Scotland, Norway and the Arctic.

- What is the distance between Janie's home LA and her new home London?

**School Uniform vs Free Dress**

*'No one stared at me in the halls, in my uniform. It was the perfect disguise, and I thought that if I could look like an ordinary schoolgirl, maybe I could be one.'* (111)

Janie comes from Hollywood High, a school that has a free clothes policy, to St Beden's School, which has a school uniform policy.

- List the pros and cons of both policies.
- Discuss how the pros and cons could affect Janie's ability to fit into her new environment.
- Where are uniforms used outside of the school environment? Name three other instances where you might find someone dressed in a uniform.
- What purposes do these uniforms serve?

**Rhyming Slang**

*We found Pip sitting at the bottom of the staircase that led up to the newsreel theatre, with Detective Montclair and Officer O'Nan.*

*'I'm just having a drink with these two ducks an' geese,' Pip said.* (346)

When Janie arrives in London, she is faced with an English that is a little different from the English spoken at home. Cockney rhyming slang is believed to have originated in the mid-19th Century in the East End of London. For example, ducks and geese is rhyming slang for police.

- Find the meanings of the following words:

Cockney slang	Definition (for teacher)
frog and toad	road
weasel and stoat	coat
donkey's ears	beers
Pat Malone	alone
plates of meat	feet
china plate	mate
skin blister	sister
dog and bone	phone

- Make your own rhyming slang for the following words:
  - brother, street, house, spy, chess, truth, bird

**Keeping it safe**

Near the beginning of the story, Janie is in the lunchroom and experiences her first 'duck and cover' drill in case of being caught in an atomic blast (25). In the 1950s, many people were concerned about an atomic bomb attack after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima during World War II.

- Do you think people are concerned about different threats to safety today?

- What are they?
- What can you do to prevent or deal with them?
- Do you have a fire plan at home? Does your family know what to do in case of a fire emergency?

*'Whenever we tamper with natural laws, there are consequences,' the count said. 'The larger the disruption, the larger the consequences. The name of your Pharmacopoeia, for example, comes from the ancient Greek Pharmakon, which meant both drug and poison: the power to heal and harm.'* (286)

- How are drugs and potions used throughout the book to create positive benefits?
- How are they used to harm?
- What are the dangers of taking a prescription medicine that has been created for someone else's use?

From the 1930s, and especially following World War II, a Hollywood blacklist was created which named entertainment professionals who held Communist political beliefs or had associations with Communism. As screenwriters, Janie's parents are affected by the blacklist and choose to leave Hollywood to work in England on a new TV series of Robin Hood.

- Can you see any connection between Communism and the story of Robin Hood?
- Do you believe Robin Hood is a hero or a villain? Explain your answer.

### Judging a book by its cover

*We are deceived by the appearance of right.* (23)

We often make assumptions about strangers. We look at their physical attractiveness, their clothes, how they talk, the possessions they have, or where they live and decide what sort of person they are without really getting to know them. Throughout the book, assumptions are made about people many of which turn out to be incorrect. Mr Danby appears to be a friend to Janie and Benjamin in his first guise as Latin teacher and then as an officer from the Foreign Affairs Department, but they soon discover that he is a Russian spy and a threat to their safety.

- What assumptions are made about the following people?
  - Pip (think about his ability to play chess versus his appearance and the way he speaks)
  - The apothecary (think about his first appearance at the beginning of the book, to how his character is portrayed at the end of the book, and the importance of his work)
  - Sarah Pennington (is she the snobby rich girl Janie first considers her to be, or is she something more?)
  - Jin Lo (before we meet her in person)

*'Pip?' she (Sarah) asked, tilting her head fetchingly. 'As in Great Expectations?'*

*'Why not?' Pip said.*

*She smiled. 'Do you have great expectations?'* (154)

- Who wrote the novel *Great Expectations*?
- What expectations does the Pip in *The Apothecary* have?
- What obstacles might he face by attending a school such as St Bedens?
- How do you think he might fit in with the other students?

### Truth and Lies

*'What's the name of the friend?'*

*Benjamin hesitated. 'Stephen Smith.'*

*'You're lying, Figment,' my father said. 'I've worked in show business a long time and I know what lying sounds like.'*

Janie and Benjamin are warned not to trust the police by two sources — the gardener and the apothecary. This makes it difficult for Janie to tell her parents the truth about her late arrival home. She also doesn't want to worry her parents by telling them about the death of the gardener, but her parents are already worried and do not trust Janie's new friend, Benjamin. Consider the following:

- When is it okay for you to tell a secret you've promised to keep?
- Is it okay to tell lies in order to keep a secret?
- How could Janie and Benjamin have handled this situation better?
- Secrets that are passed from one person to another to another have a way of becoming distorted. Choose a line from the book then whisper it into the ear of the person next to you (make sure the line is not too long). That person in turn whispers the line to the person next to them, and so on. The first person should stand up and recite the original line. The last person to hear the secret should stand up and recite the line they heard. You may find that the more people who take part in this experiment, the more distorted the original message becomes.

*Veritas* first appears in Roman mythology as the goddess of truth. When Janie uses the *veritas* plant to make a truth serum, she drinks some of the potion, which leads to an embarrassing situation. (77)

- Consider a situation when telling the truth is not necessarily the best option. Write a short play showcasing such a situation.

### Writing a letter

Imagine you have moved to London in the winter of 1952. You have just left the blistering summer of Australia. Plane flights are very expensive, so you have probably arrived by ship on a journey that has taken about five

weeks—one way. There is no Internet or Skype or mobile phones to keep help keep you in close contact with friends. International phone calls are only used for special occasions or for emergencies, as they are expensive. Consider moving to a new country and the difficulties you might encounter: different currency, language or dialect/slang, change of climate, no friends, and a different school system.

- Write a letter to your best friend at home and describe your new life. Try to include some of the Cockney slang you hear around you.
- Describe being caught in a 'duck and cover' situation, or the appearance of the 'bomb ruins' in the city of London.

**Crack the Code**

The gardener leaves the children a transformative elixir and a note explaining what he has done. Imagine if there was another way of leaving a message not using the alphabet as we know it. (Remember again, this is 1952, so forget about texting a message.) Codes are often used during war time as a way of maintaining secrecy. A simple code is to assign numbers to the letters of the alphabet. For example, A=1, B=2 etc. Ancient alchemists also used codes to pass on the secrets of their trade to other alchemists but they used symbols instead of numbers.

- Using the table below to help you assign numbers or symbols or even letters, create your own code and write the following message:

*I would prefer to pass the bottle directly into your hands. I wish you all luck.*

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Q</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>		

- The ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphics, which was a form of picture writing. Create your own symbols to write your name.

**Imagine you are invisible**

During the story, Janie, Benjamin and Pip all become invisible.

- Being invisible could be fun, but what if you were never visible again?
- What would you miss?
- What if you were the only invisible person in the world? Would you get lonely?

- Would you ever dress again? What role do clothes play?
- Could you have a pet if you were invisible?
- Describe yourself to a new friend who has never seen you.

When Janie starts her new school, she feels lonely and unsure. Many newcomers feel 'invisible' when they first arrive at school, because they have no friends to sit next to at lunchtime or in class, no one to discuss homework or home life with.

- Write a short play where the main character is the new kid at school using the theme of invisibility. (Hint, will they be visible by the end of the play?)

*When I think about how much eavesdropping we did, I realise that being fourteen had prepared us for it. To be a kid is to be invisible and to listen, and to interpret things that aren't necessarily meant for you to hear — because how else do you find out about the world? (175)*

- Do you agree with Janie's thoughts?
- Do you think this has changed from the world of 1952? Consider the changes in social attitude between then and today.
- If you don't think Janie's statement relates to kids today, has the world of media, TV and the Internet contributed to the change?
- Imagine you are a student in 1952. How would you research information for a school assignment?

**It's a bird...**

Janie, Benjamin and Pip use a potion to become birds and they use their new forms to help them escape from harm. But they don't all turn into the same type of bird: Benjamin becomes a skylark, Pip a swallow, and Janie a robin.

- Think about other characters found in the book and choose a bird that best describes each one:
  - Sarah Pennington
  - Sergei Shiskin
  - Jin Lo
  - Mr Danby
  - Scar
  - the apothecary, Mr Burrows
  - the gardener
- What type of bird would you transform into if you took the elixir?
- Why do you think the author chose bird forms for the transformative elixir?
- What would the ramifications be of turning into a cat or dog instead of a bird?

*Then we heard a cry that sounded not entirely human, and my heart froze...I looked up over the sea, and saw a boy falling from the sky.*

*'Benjamin!' I screamed. I watched horrified, as he plummeted into the waves.*

*'How fitting,' Danby said. 'The boy who flew too high.'* (318)

Danby's reference to 'the boy who flew too high' alludes to a story from ancient Greece. The tale is about a boy called Icarus who wishes to escape his captors in Crete to return over the seas home to Athens. His father, Daedalus, makes a pair of wings from feathers, wax and thread to aid in their escape and he warns Icarus not to fly too high in the sky for the sun would melt the wax. But Icarus is so caught up in the magic of flying that he forgets the warning, he flies too high, his wings are melted and he plunges to his death into the sea.

- How is Benjamin's situation similar to and different from that of Icarus?

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### Dear Diary

Janie keeps a diary, which becomes a crucial part of her 'remembering' the true events of her adventure. (352)

- Write a diary entry that describes Janie's first day at St Bedens using either Sergei Shiskin or Sarah Pennington as the narrator.
- How does the change in narrator affect the way the reader views Janie?
- How does the change of narrator affect the way the reader views the narrator?

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### Yesterday

*'In my day, a girl with any looks on her never bothered with Latin,' Mrs Parrish said. 'Boys didn't like a girl who was too smart.'* (204)

- How were the 1950s different from today? Can you find examples in *The Apothecary* that show:

*Attitudes of society towards*

- girls vs boys
- adults vs children
- the environment

*Technology of the time*

- black and white TV vs huge flat screen colour TV
- telephones vs mobile phones, texting, Internet, instant messaging, Skyping, Facebook

*'I remember smell of father's shirt,' she (Jin) said. 'Combing mother's hair. Sometimes faces not so clear. I am eight. I remember baby brother's feet. Very small toes and very funny.'* (290)

- Interview an adult and write a paragraph/page on what they remember about being a child of eight. Are these memories very different from your life experience?
- Write a paragraph/page about your earliest memory using the five senses — taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing.
- Draw a picture of this memory.

## Nice to meet you — famous people in *The Apothecary*

Link the name of the person with their description in the table below.

Name	Occupation
Dante	Queen of the British Commonwealth since 1952
Henry James	An English novelist
Henry the Eighth	An American actress of the 20th Century
Jane Austen	A British politician
Julius Robert Oppenheimer	An Italian poet of the Middle Ages
Katherine Hepburn	An American author of the 19th Century
Madam Curie	The King of England from 1509 until 1547
Queen Elizabeth	A theoretical physicist and professor of physics known as the father of the atom bomb
Winston Churchill	A Polish–French physicist–chemist famous for her pioneering research on radioactivity