

The Billionaire's Curse

Richard Newsome

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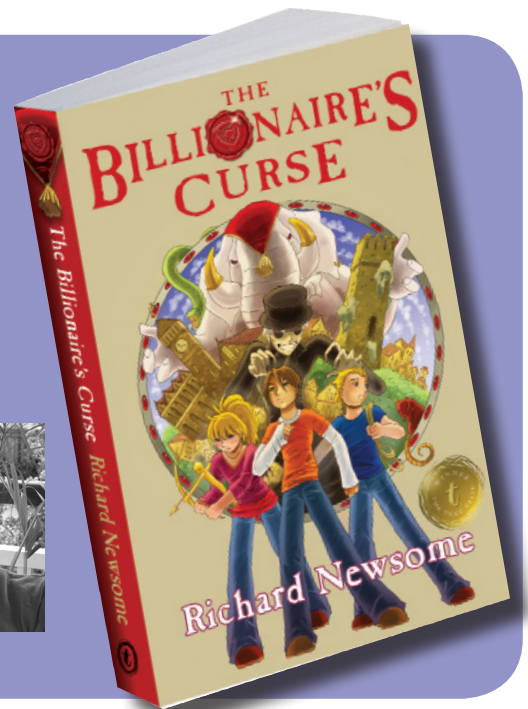
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Fiction, B paperback

Recommended for Upper Primary/Lower Secondary

Resource Kit Contains

- Synopsis
- Author information
- Reading activities
- Research and discussion questions
- Debate topics
- Writing activities
- Drama exercises



Praise

'A mile a minute adventure with characters you want to be and odd-bods you have to work out carefully. Newsome is going to keep a lot of kids up late at night, torch under the covers and fingernails chewed to the first knuckle.' James Moloney

Synopsis

The world's most valuable diamond has been stolen from the reading room in the British Museum. Constable Lethbridge, the last man who saw it, lies unconscious. Two sedative darts protrude from his backside.

Gerald Wilkins is in Year 8. Far away in Australia, he knows nothing about the theft. He's busy drawing knights and imagining himself on a quest. He's busy looking forward to a snowboarding holiday with his best friend, Ox.

But then Gerald's aunt Geraldine dies and Gerald finds himself on a private luxury jet heading for London to attend her funeral. He inherits her estate, worth twenty billion pounds. His aunt also leaves him a bundle of envelopes informing Gerald that she was murdered.

With the help of the Valentine twins, Sam and Ruby, Gerald goes on a real quest to find answers. Who stole the diamond? What is the mysterious casket that everyone is looking for? Was his aunt really murdered and if she was, who is the culprit?

The mystery takes the friends into secret passageways, a musty jumbled bookshop, an ancient crypt, the tower of a ruined church and a colossal cavern where the secret of a priceless treasure lies protected by deadly booby traps. It's a perilous adventure.

Richard Newsome writes with humour, originality and flair. *The Billionaire's Curse* is full of opportunities to

engage students in discussion and exercises around language, character, theme, structure, plot and history. Students will love imagining themselves as part of this world.

They will have the opportunity to study the narrative conventions of mystery, suspense and adventure writing. The text provides an excellent base upon which to write stories.

The characters of Gerald, Sam and Ruby are real: they are brave and loyal but also a forced to confront their fears and uncertainties. They present an opportunity for class discussions on gender stereotypes. Students could also engage in a range of other discussions on themes such as greed, death, friendship, loyalty, honour, and the rights and responsibilities of parents.

The historical references in the text allow for a wide scope of study: the legend of Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table and the Holy Grail. Students could also research Indian history and religion, the impact of the diamond trade in different regions and the impact of the first world on the third world.

The Billionaire's Curse is one of those rare books for class study: it's a well-crafted, hilarious page-turner that will appeal to girls and boys (and teachers).

About the Author

Richard Newsome was born in Wanganui, New Zealand, and lives in Brisbane with his wife and three children. He won the inaugural Text Prize for Young Adult and Children's Writing for *The Billionaire's Curse*, which grew out of stories he made up for his children at bedtime —tales of kids out and about getting up to mischief, tackling puzzles and solving crimes. Newsome is now busy writing the exciting sequel.

ACTIVITIES

Pre-Reading Activities

Detective Notebook

In *The Billionaire's Curse* every clue counts for Gerald. Keep a notebook while you are reading. Record your answers to the questions asked in these notes. Record every clue that you find in the novel. Try to be the first person in the class to solve the mystery of the missing diamond and the murder of Geraldine.

Make a list of qualities that a good detective needs. Record these in your notebook.

Make a 'Detective Kit' full of practical things that you will need to solve the mystery. For example, will you need money? A magnifying glass? A fake passport? A fingerprinting kit? Some disguises?

In *The Billionaire's Curse*, Gerald discovers that money has some drawbacks. He also discovers that sometimes, it makes life much easier.

1. Make a list of the first ten things that you would buy if you had a billion dollars.
2. Would you share your money? Make a list of people with whom you would share.
3. Make a list of five things that money can't buy.
4. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages that come from having money?
5. List three things that you would never give up, regardless of how much money you were offered.
6. What responsibilities do you think come with having lots of money?
7. Make some predictions based on the cover of the book. What do you think is the billionaire's curse?

In the novel, Gerald discovers some things about his destiny.

1. Find out the meaning of this word and record it in your notebook.
2. Do you believe in fate or destiny? Why or why not?
3. What do you hope that destiny holds for you? Let your imagination run wild.

Reading Activities

Make a character/suspect chart in your book and add to it as you read. Record on your chart the key characteristics of every person that you read about. You could record your information under the headings listed below. Remember to use evidence from the novel to support your views.

1. Name.
2. Physical appearance.
3. Characteristics.

4. Connection to the diamond.
5. Motives to steal the diamond.
6. Opportunities to steal the diamond.
7. Alibi.

Chapter 1

In this chapter you are at the scene of the crime. To solve the mystery you will need to be very observant. Make notes under the headings: who, what, when, where and how. You won't have all the answers, but you will have some ideas.

How is the diamond described? What makes Newsome's description so vivid?

Write some questions that you might ask Constable Lethbridge when he wakes.

Chapter 2

Draw a picture of the beast. How does the beast's dialogue foreshadow what is to come for Gerald? What similarities are there between the beast and Mr Atkinson?

Find out what the word 'quest' means and record this in your notebook. Discuss some quests that people go on today. (You might look at people you know or at people in the news.)

What's your opinion of Mr Atkinson? In a group, decide on the five most important qualities of a good teacher. Decide on the five most important qualities of a good student. Share your list with the class and defend your answers.

Chapter 3

Gerald has a lot of questions at the end of Chapter 3. In your notebook, make some predictions about the answers to his questions.

'Relatives and money—what a toxic mix.' (p.34) What does Gerald mean by this? Do you think this statement is always true? Discuss what you believe to be the qualities of good relatives.

In what ways are Mr and Mrs Wilkins surprising parents? What is your opinion of them? As a class, discuss the rights and responsibilities of parents. Discuss the rights and responsibilities of children.

Chapters 4 and 5

Re-read the descriptions of the people at the funeral. What techniques has Richard Newsome used to make his characters vivid? What do we learn about the man with the round head? Consider his dialogue and mannerisms. Be sure to add to your character/suspect chart.

Why do you think that Geraldine left her money to Gerald?

How does Newsome create suspense and excitement at the end of Chapter 4?

Chapters 4 and 5 continued

Write a journal entry as Mr Fry at the end of Chapter 5. How does he feel about Gerald, Geraldine and his new duties?

'You are now probably the richest thirteen-year-old on the planet,' Mr Prisk tells Gerald. Imagine that you are the richest person on the planet. Write a journal entry about what you plan to do with the money. What are you excited about? What fears do you have?

Gerald's new home is one of great luxury but he feels it is a prison. What is your definition of a prison? What is your definition of freedom? Are there things more important than freedom? If so, what are they?

Chapter 6

Gerald receives some more clues about the mystery in this chapter. Make a note of these in your book. Update your character/suspect chart.

Add three things to Gerald's 'Young Billionaire's Survival Kit'. You might invent some things that will help him on his quest!

What positive qualities does Gerald possess? What qualities does he need to develop?

Chapters 7 and 8

Read to the end of Chapter 8. Add to your suspect chart and clue list.

Discuss the qualities and characteristics of Sam and Ruby. How are they different from the other people in the novel? Which characters do you trust? Which characters don't you trust? Give reasons for your answers.

Chapter 9

In Chapter 9, Gerald, Ruby and Sam learn about a rectangular box. Draw a picture of this into your notebook. Do some research about the Library of Alexandria. Find three things about the library and make a note of these in your book.

Find out what the Hindu god Ganesh looks like and draw a picture in your notes. Find out five things about this god and record them in your notebook.

Chapter 10

Gerald seems to be gaining confidence. Discuss why this might be the case. Why might Gerald have lacked confidence before this point? In your opinion, what things are essential to give children if they are to grow up happy and confident?

Make a note of any new clues in your notebook.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13

Who do you think set the fire? Write a journal entry explaining your opinion. Make your case to the class, providing evidence to support your view.

Chapter 14

What things do you like about Mrs Rutherford? Why might it be important for Gerald to have someone like Mrs Rutherford in his life? In what ways is she different to Vi?

Chapters 15 and 16

Sam is very afraid of rats. Write a journal entry about something that scares you.

Chapter 17

In this chapter we read about the Holy Grail, a cup that enables people to live forever. Would you like to live forever? Why or why not? What problems do you foresee for the world if everyone lived forever?

Chapter 18

What do you think causes Gerald's visions? Why does he keep them from Sam and Ruby?

Chapter 19

What do you think about Sam's actions in Chapter 19? In what ways is he justified in what he does to the thin man? In what ways is he not justified? What would you have done in his place? Why does Ruby not want to talk about what happened? Do you think she should?

Adopt the role of Gerald and write a journal entry. What things make you angry? How do you feel about your parents? How do you feel about money?

Chapter 20

Before you read Chapter 20, look over your clues. Write a journal entry outlining who you think killed Geraldine, why you think they killed her and what you think they want. In groups, share your theories.

Chapter 21

Octavia and Zebedee are very angry. Write a journal entry from one of their perspectives. What is it like losing your home to someone like Gerald? What might it be like to have a father like Sid?

Chapter 22

Look over your notes. Discuss your theories. Who in the class was the closest to solving the mystery? What questions do you have after Green holds the rod across Gerald's bow?

Character

Richard Newsome has created wonderful characters in this book. In pairs, choose one character from *The Billionaire's Curse*. Draw a picture of them on a poster and include everything that you know about them. Include even the small details. Make a list of ways that the author has conveyed information about this character. Consider things such as physical appearance, dialogue, mannerisms, loves, hates, fears etc...

Themes

There are many important themes in the novel. As a class, discuss the meaning of the word 'theme'. In groups, create a collage from magazines to illustrate the main themes of the novel. Explain your collage to the class.

Adopt the role of Sam, Ruby or Gerald and write a journal entry that reflects on one of the themes. For example, Gerald might write that he has decided that money can't buy happiness. Sam might comment on how it feels to take a human life. Ruby might reflect on the importance of family.

Structure/Plot

Construct a timeline to show the order of important events in *The Billionaire's Curse*. You might like to represent the events using pictures or symbols.

As a class, discuss the narrative structure of the novel. (Exposition, problem, conflict, rising conflict, resolution.)

As a class, discuss the similarities and differences between the narrative structure of a novel and the narrative structure of a short story. Create some symbols to show the most important things to include in a short story.

Mystery and Suspense

As a class, brainstorm the key features of a mystery novel. Think about characters, plot, language and theme.

How is suspense created in this novel? Can you see any similarities in the way the chapters end? Are some sentences shorter than others?

How are clues revealed? What do you think is the most important thing about the pacing of the clues?

Similes

There are many original similes in *The Billionaire's Curse*. Look up the definition of a simile and make a record of this in your notebook. Discuss what you like about Richard Newsome's similes.

Choose your favourite simile and draw an illustration to go with it. If drawing isn't your favourite thing to do, cut up some old magazines to make a picture to go with your favourite simile.

In pairs, make up some of your own similes. Make them as original as you can. If you're stuck, use the beginnings of some of Richard Newsome's similes as sentence starters. Share these with the class. See who can come up with the most original and funny similes.

Symbols and Imagery

There are many references in the book to the negative ways that money can affect people. Discuss ways in which Newsome has used symbols to highlight the idea that there are unexpected traps associated with having money.

Why might Newsome have included references to Ganesh and King Arthur in the novel? What might this god and legendary figure symbolise?

Research Questions

The United Kingdom

Draw a current-day map of the United Kingdom. Mark in capital cities and any surrounding oceans and seas. Mark onto your map the places mentioned in *The Billionaire's Curse*. Remember to include a border, title, compass directions, key and scale on your map.

Research the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Who were they? Where and when did they live? Why was the Glastonbury Tor significant to Arthur? What qualities did Arthur think were important? Create a job description for a prospective knight. What qualities will they need to have?

Gerald, Ruby and Sam find themselves in a Roman burial chamber. Research how the Ancient Romans impacted on Britain.

1. When did the Romans arrive in Britain?
2. When did they leave?
3. What things did the Romans introduce to Britain?
4. Were there really Roman burial chambers in Britain? What were they like?
5. What is a sarcophagus? What is a crypt?

On page 194, Ruby inspects a picture of a bloody battle scene between some African warriors and British soldiers. Be a history detective. What battle might this picture depict? Find one positive and one negative impact of British colonial rule on Africa and the Caribbean.

India

Draw and label a map of current-day India. Mark in capital cities and any surrounding bodies of water. Mark in one river and three landforms. Remember to include a border, title, compass directions, key and scale on your map.

Ganesh is described in the book as one of the most revered of Hindu gods. Research this Hindu god. What are his characteristics?

Create a tourist pamphlet about India. Include some important information for travellers. For example, key religious sites, currency, population, transport etc...

Diamonds

India was one of the first countries to mine diamonds. In pairs, write five research questions about the history of diamonds and the mining of them in India. Answer these questions and present your findings to the class in a PowerPoint presentation.

Blood Diamonds

1. What is a 'blood diamond'?
2. Where do these diamonds come from?
3. Why is it important for people to think carefully about where diamonds come from before they buy them?
4. Should people stop buying diamonds altogether? What would be the impact on some people if this happened?

Global impact of greed

Throughout *The Billionaire's Curse* there are many references to the problems associated with greed. At times, Newsome refers to problems within families. At other times, he makes reference to global problems.

As a class, brainstorm how one country's actions and policies can impact on people in other countries. You might consider climate change and environmental policy or the impact of the shopping choices you make.

As a class, draw a world map. Use arrows and symbols to represent how the choices we make in Australia can impact on the lives of people in other countries.

Discussion Questions

1. Hold your own United Nations class conference to discuss the impact of greed on people and families across the world. Each class member could represent a country or an interest group. Have speakers explain the impact of greed on their country. At the end of the conference, create a document explaining how the world could change for the better.
2. *'Greed can be a dangerous master...If it takes hold it can make people do shocking things—things they would never otherwise contemplate.'* Is greed an inescapable part of human nature? What does Mason Green mean when he says greed does not discriminate between classes?
3. Do you think we have social classes in Australia? What are they? Discuss ways that class systems can be eliminated.
4. People have killed for diamonds. Why are people willing to do this? After all, diamonds are just pretty rocks.
5. Would you want to live forever? Why or why not?

6. Discuss how the media represent the roles of males and females. In what ways do Sam, Gerald and Ruby break these stereotypes?
7. In *The Billionaire's Curse*, it is the young people who are the true heroes. However, children are not always given the respect that they deserve. Do you agree?
8. The novel proves that people are capable of both great and terrible things. Discuss.
9. *The Billionaire's Curse* suggests the most important things in life are friends and family. Discuss.
10. Gerald is a true hero at the end of the novel. Discuss.
11. Sam was not right to kill the thin man. Killing is never justified. Discuss.
12. The novel shows that we all have control over our destinies. Do you agree?

Debate Topics

1. Money can't buy happiness. All it buys is trouble.
2. Money is the root of all evil.
3. Everyone is greedy. Everyone can be bought.
4. Life is worth living because we die. There would be no point in living if we were all immortal.
5. If children ran the world, it would be a much better place.

Writing Activities

1. Write your own mystery. Use the short story structure discussed earlier in the section on structure. Use some of the techniques discussed to create suspense. Share your story with a friend. See if they can solve the mystery!
2. Adopt the role of an investigative reporter. Write a newspaper article explaining what really happened to the diamond and to Geraldine.
3. Gerald is a very brave character. Write your own story about a character who must confront a fear in order to save a friend.
4. Sam, Ruby and Gerald form a strong friendship. Write about a friend who is important to you.
5. Write the first chapter of the sequel to *The Billionaire's Curse*. Make sure that you write in the style of the author. Look back to your notes on simile and character. Make sure your characters are vivid!

Drama/Creative Arts

1. *'The Archer fortune was built on teabags. Or rather, on the little staple that attaches the string to the bag.'* Design an invention that you think could make loads of money. Explain your invention to the class, arguing the case of why this invention is essential to the world.
2. Choose one of the characters from the novel and write a monologue explaining your role in the mystery. Perform your monologue for the class. Make sure that you speak, dress and act like your character. Use the character chart to help you plan (see page 4 of the *Teachers' Resource Kit*).
3. Create a new cover for the book, highlighting some of the key themes of the text.
4. Create a model of your own crypt, complete with deadly booby traps for intruders.
5. In groups, choose your favourite scene from the book. Perform it as a play. Use costumes and sound effects to make it even more exciting for your audience.