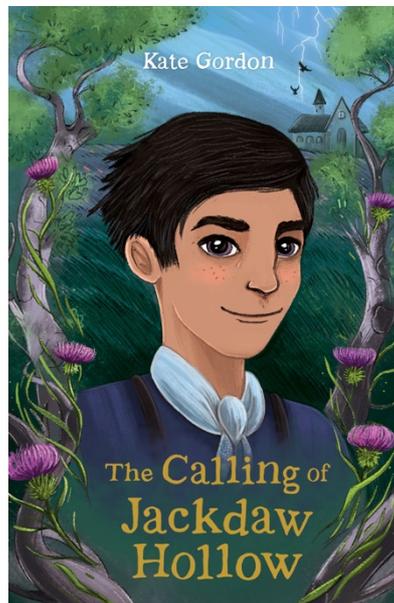


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THE CALLING OF JACKDAW HOLLOW

Kate Gordon



Teachers' Notes

Prepared by Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS

Believing himself to be unexceptional and a disappointment, Jackdaw Hollow struggles to understand why he survived the lightning strike that killed his parents. Unable to accept the joy he gives his adoptive mother, he convinces himself that he will never have a friend. While searching for his calling in life – for the one big thing that will make him shine – he is befriended by three young ghosts who reside at Direleafe Hall. But will they help Jackdaw to discover his destiny or lead him to further despair?

The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow is a gothic tale about the importance of love, hope, friendship and letting small things be big enough to bring happiness.

THEMES

- Love
- Friendship
- Belonging
- Hope
- Resilience
- Acceptance
- Self-worth

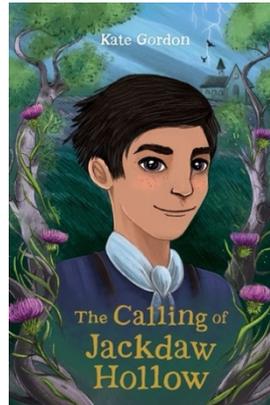
WRITING STYLE

The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow is an ethereal and evocative story told in third person, past tense. Jackdaw sees himself as unusual and unlikeable with a brain that thinks differently from everyone else's. A prequel to the Direleafe Hall series, Jackdaw's story is one of self-discovery and the realisation that one's place in the world can be found quietly. Repeated motifs of thistles, angels and birds represent courage, acceptance and destiny. In addition, Kate Gordon's exceptional language choices, text structure and use of original figurative language create a timeless, literary and lyrical tale that is accessible to middle readers.

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STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, use the cover and blurb of *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow* to make predictions about the text. How do the colours and illustrations offer insight into the book's protagonist and setting?



- What do we know about Jackdaw Hollow after reading the Prologue? Once finished reading the novel, re-read the prologue, making connections to details found later in the text. How would you describe the mood and voice of this chapter?
- Sketch Mr Hardbread after reading the description of him on p. 6.
- Why does Jackdaw make Mrs Beekman feel 'soft inside, and hopeful' (p. 10)? How does he help 'the stone inside her crack' (p. 11)?
- Mrs Beekman loves Jackdaw completely, saying 'he was saved, to be right here' (p. 11). Why does it take Jackdaw so long to believe this?
- Jackdaw feels 'he had no friends...whose hearts matched perfectly, entirely' (p. 14). Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss the language choices used on p. 16. How does the writing style elicit empathy in readers?
- Why does Jackdaw feel like a 'thistle amongst all the flowers' (p. 17)? How does this symbol return later in the text? Does he still feel the same about thistles then?
- Why does Jackdaw find 'people in books much easier to understand than people who lived outside of them' (p. 18)? What would you say to Jackdaw to help him understand people better?
- Jack feels that he 'doesn't burn brightly at all' (p. 21). Is this true? Discuss, giving reasons to support your thinking.
- Why is Jackdaw so desperate to find his calling?
- When Jackdaw says that 'nobody sees me...aside from my mother' (p. 43), why is Lucy's quiet response so perfect?

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- Create character profiles of the three ghosts, Florence, Lucy, and Nell. Use the descriptions of them on p. 26 to launch this task, adding to their profiles as you learn more about them.
- Why does Jackdaw describe the tree in the orchard as ‘where one of his lives had ended and another had begun’ (p. 31)?
- Why does Lucy say to Jackdaw that ‘ghosts are only the perfect meeting point of science and imagination...like you’ (p. 37)?
- How does the author create a sense of empathy with readers about Jackdaw’s loneliness and sadness? Find passages from the text to use as examples.
- Kate Gordon uses figurative language to enhance meaning. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Examples include:
 - Jackdaw Hollow was called into this world, quick and sharp as bird claw. He burst into life faster than blinking (p. 1)
 - Winters in the Midlands were only ever blue and crystal-sparking or thunder-cloud furious (p. 3)
 - The news the old man delivered felt like a knife in her belly (p. 7)
 - Mr Hardbread [proffered] the child to Mrs Beekman like a gifted loaf of bread (p. 7)
 - She stared at the weather-lines in his brown-apple face and the aching in his eyes (p. 9)
 - Mrs Beekman had...hardened into the stone of a peach (p. 11)
 - He felt their absence like a duffel coat removed (p. 29)
 - One by one, silver raindrops began to fall, as if the heart of the sky were breaking (p. 29)
 - Hills like stout pistachio cakes blocked his view (p. 31)
 - The girl seemed to *flip*, like windmill sails turning (p. 33)
 - He...sat up straight as a pin feather in his cosy, warm nest of a bed (p. 34)
 - The other was a will-o’-the wisp, a puff of smoke and sweetness (p. 35)
 - Nell shot her a look that could melt bones (p. 44)
 - The girl in the tulip field turned, heels over head, like foam-tipped waves rolling to shore (p. 48)
 - Her face...was...a tulip with its petals unfurled (p. 50)
 - Her eyebrows were dark millipedes, arching on her dirt-stained face (p. 51)
 - When she exhaled, it shone silvery against the darkness like the puff of an angry dragon (p. 55)
 - Her teeth were crooked fence posts (p. 59)
 - The burned-toast sky was buttering itself, now, turning into daylight (p. 61)
 - His heart was beating like hummingbird wings (p. 63)

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- In his mind, worries jostled against each other like fighters in a ring (p. 66)
- All his misgivings fell away like snow shaken from feathers (p. 79)
- Her eye whites were mercury-silver, the tears catching the moonlight like so many tiny, awful memories (p. 104)
- Her curdle-milk curls struggled to break free from beneath her cotton bonnet. Her eyelashes above her ivy-green eyes were as pale as mealybugs (p. 117)
- His plan was a pie and, like all his pies, it came out just a bit *oddways* (p. 124)
- She peered at Jack, her eyes black diamonds (p. 150)
- With cheeks as pink as galah feathers (p. 175)
- Why do the girls keep telling Jackdaw that Angeline does not need saving? Why doesn't he quite understand this? How does he eventually learn this for himself?
- Why does Nell say, 'I see you, Jackdaw Hollow. I see you *not living*. I am telling you: live more wildly, more fully. Now' (p. 45)?
- Jackdaw wonders what you say to someone 'to make them be your friend' (p. 49). What advice would you give Jackdaw about making friends? Why can't friendships be forced?
- Why does Angeline often make Jackdaw's 'heart shrivel breakfast-fig small' (p. 51)? Track the description of his heart being like a fig throughout the text.
- Discuss the use of imagery on p. 56 to describe how Jackdaw is feeling. How have language features been used to elicit such a strong sense of regret and hopelessness?
- What role does hope play in *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow*? Why does hope make Jackdaw's heart '*moon-big*' (p. 58) at times, but unsure at others?
- Why does Jack see Angeline as special, as a 'dream thing' (p. 60)? How does this affect the way he interacts with her?
- Angharad says to Jackdaw, 'while we are alive...the world is positively brimming with next times' (p. 69). Write a reflection about her comment, and how this may guide you in your life.
- Discuss the recurring motif of birds and crows throughout the text. Why and how has the author used this device?
- In what ways does Angharad help Jackdaw? Why is there a character like her in *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow*?
- To what extent do anxiety and fear impede Jackdaw's happiness?
- Discuss the language choices of the last paragraph on p. 70. How do these make this passage so effective?
- How does Jackdaw's brain work differently from others? What is the importance of Florence saying, 'I love your strange, unruly brain' (p. 72)?

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What other words of encouragement does she give Jackdaw? What can we learn from her advice?

- Jackdaw says of Angeline that 'in her white dress, she might have been a bird, or she might have been an angel' (p. 75). What makes him feel this way about her?
- Jackdaw says, 'this girl – this Angeline – looked like the centre of a feather, as if she might break in a rowdy wind' (p. 76). Is this a fair description of Angeline? How does this perception lead Jackdaw to make mistakes later in the story? Discuss.
- What can Jackdaw learn about failure from Angeline: 'It was as if failure did not trouble her at all. She simply kept on trying and she seemed delighted by it all. Even the falling. Even the bruises' (p. 81)? Why is he frustrated that '*all you're teaching me is how to fall*'? What is it that Jackdaw wants Angeline to teach him instead (see p. 83)?
- Create a glossary of the words Jackdaw teaches Angeline. What is the significance of these words to the themes of *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow*?
- Why, when Angeline refuses to learn Latin, does he feel 'something like disappointment [sticking] its claws into his soul' (p. 85)?
- Jackdaw begins to think that all friendships are 'like rocks in your pockets and wings on your back all at once' (p. 87). What does he mean by this? Write a reflection that shares your understanding of friendship.
- Why is Jackdaw worried that he is only destined to 'sit here in the refracted glow of Angeline' (p. 88)? What is the author sharing about the need for us to shine on our own?
- How would you describe Angeline's character? What are her strengths? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Why is Jackdaw sceptical about Angeline's dream of running away to the circus? Why is she so determined to do so?
- What does Angharad mean when she says, 'We're all messes, aren't we? What matters is we're happy messes' (p. 99)?
- What makes Jackdaw fill with *rage* (see p. 103)? How does this influence decisions he makes in the future? What advice would you give him about acting upon such rage?
- Why is Angeline so angry with Jackdaw when he tries to save her?
- What does Florence mean when she says, 'I think this "saving" business is going to be Jackdaw Hollow's cherry tree' (p. 109)?
- To what extent are Jackdaw's misfortunes Nell's fault? How does she reconcile the damage done? How does she help Jackdaw to learn important life lessons? What do you think she learns about herself in the process?
- Why does Florence wager that Angeline means the thistle to symbolise herself, not Jackdaw?

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- Why is Jackdaw so reluctant to confide in Mrs Beekman? How would the story have been different had he done so from the beginning? Why has Kate Gordon deliberately made this the case?
- In the role of Nell, write a journal entry about your 'heart [breaking] properly then. It was worse than falling from a cherry tree' (see p. 136). How does she regroup and help Jackdaw to think differently?
- What does it mean that Jackdaw 'must choose to atone' (p. 138)? How does he do this?
- After reading *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow*, how would you describe hope (see p. 139)? Why is Jackdaw sceptical of hope earlier in the text?
- What does Lucy mean when she says, 'Life teaches you...Death teaches you more' (p. 140)? What have the ghost girls learnt after their deaths?
- Why does Jackdaw suddenly stop seeing Angeline as an angel (see p. 148)? How does this help him to move forward? Why is Angeline pleased that he refused to throw the stone at Direleaf Hall? What is it that she has taught him after all?
- How does Jackdaw use his wits to deal with Mrs Bristleroad?
- When he needs to, Jackdaw lets 'every sad feeling be as big as it needed' (p. 176). Why is this important to do?
- Why does Jackdaw say that Nell's apology does her 'good too' (p. 177)? Why is giving an apology so important for the wrongdoer?
- Before reading the letter from Angeline, predict what it may say. Write this letter.
- Discuss what the following excerpt shows about the friendship between the ghosts and Jackdaw: 'This was not a time for talking, they knew. This was a time for breaking and healing and breathing in and letting go' (pp. 182–183).
- What is it that truly makes Jackdaw 'shine'? What is his 'calling'? What does he learn about callings through his friendships with Angeline, Angharad and the ghosts?
- What does *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow* share with readers about life and happiness?
- How does Kate Gordon use *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow* to explore themes of hope, friendship and love?
- Write a chapter of *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow* from Angeline's perspective.
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, map the main plot points of *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow* on a story graph.
- Read the other books in the Direleaf Hall series as companion texts to *The Calling of Jackdaw Hollow* – *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* and *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*. How is Jackdaw Hollow like Hollowbeak? How is he different?

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Once, I was asked in an interview if I had a central ‘theme’ that carried through all of my books – a way a reader could immediately identify a book by Kate Gordon. I struggled to think of an answer – after all, I’ve written picture books, junior fiction, middle grade and young adult. I’ve written fantasy books and horror stories and contemporary romances. Surely there couldn’t be a thread, linking them all.

I gave some sort of haphazard answer and left feeling like I really didn’t know what I was doing as an author. I told a writer friend, later, about my problem. They looked at me as if I was completely clueless and said, ‘Of course you have a theme to your books – you write about kids who don’t fit in. You write about lonely kids, yearning for a friend.’ Of course, they were exactly right.

I’ve always written about kids ‘on the outside, looking in’. Kids who are desperate for love and belonging and a little bit bewildered by the world. Jackdaw Hollow is perhaps the strongest example of this. Jackdaw has spent his life searching for a place to belong, a place to feel love and a way to feel worthy. This book is about his search and about how we need to find our worth and strength within ourselves, rather than trying to find it in others. It’s also about how sometimes we have all the love we need, right under our noses. Most importantly, it’s about how life gives us a purpose, and sometimes that purpose is to be just who we are. Living is the thing. The meaning of life is to live it.

I hope Jackdaw Hollow finds a special place in the hearts of other young people who are looking for somewhere to belong. I hope that the journey of this lost, lonely little boy will give hope to anyone who feels tied to the ground when all they want to do is fly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Gordon grew up in a very bookish house, in a small town by the sea in Tasmania. After studying performing arts and realising she was a terrible actor, Kate decided to become a librarian. She never stopped writing and, in 2009, she applied for and won a Varuna fellowship, which led to all sorts of lovely writer things happening. Kate’s first book, *Three Things About Daisy Blue*, was published in 2010. Her most recent publications are the middle-grade novels *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*, *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*, and *Aster’s Good, Right Things*, which won the 2021 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers.