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THE BALLAD OF MELODIE ROSE

Kate Gordon



Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS

Melodie Rose is a ghost, invisible and alone. Abandoned at Direleaf Hall, she has lost her memory, along with her ability to sing. Although the stars have stopped shining, Melodie at least has a home now. And a grandmother she has never known.

Before long, Melodie becomes friends with a tetchy crow called Hollowbeak, and Lucy, Florence and Nell, three ghosts who also call Direleaf Hall home. But with the school run down and her grandmother reluctantly selling to the mysterious Lady in White, Melodie must summon up the courage to make herself seen and heard.

The Ballad of Melodie Rose is the beautifully lyrical companion of *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*. It is a story about friendship, hope and coming together.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Belonging
- Love
- Grief
- Courage
- Hope
- Ballads

WRITING STYLE

The Ballad of Melodie Rose is a gentle and enduring tale told in third person, past tense. With themes of love, belonging and hope, Kate Gordon carefully shares with readers notions of heartache and grief and the healing that comes with time. In this way, it offers middle readers a tender foray into gothic literature while alluding to the perennial presence of loved ones lost. Sharing important messages about how to treat one another with humanity, the narrative reprises the complex character of Hollowbeak, the dark and brooding crow in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*. With an emphasis on the importance of song and recurring motifs of stars and sunrises, the text exudes a literary quality that is lyrical, compelling and timeless.

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STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, use the cover and blurb of *The Ballad of Melodie Rose* to make predictions about the text. For those who have read *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*, speculate on the characters that may reappear in this story?
- Throughout the text, memory is described as a ‘funny thing ... It was like a film reel, unspooling, some frames in focus and others not, and some of the images so fingerprint-smudged that it was hard to make them out at all’ (p. 3). As you read the text, take note of other references to memory. Why has the author talked about memory in this way? How and why does Melodie’s memory become clearer as the narrative progresses?
- What is the significance of Melodie’s ability to recall facts? How does this help her to ‘[squeeze] out everything else’ (p. 4)?
- On A3 paper, create a trifold. Use the thirds to note Melodie’s character traits 1) before her father’s death 2) during her time as a ghost, and 3) after she discovers she is still alive. Discuss Melodie’s character development from the beginning to the end of the novel.
- Why, when she tries to sing, do no words come out?
- Melodie feels invisible. Who else in the text might feel invisible? Have you ever felt like this? What point is the author making about the importance of being seen and heard? Why, early in the story, does Melodie feel that being seen is ‘dangerous’ (p. 12)?
- Create character portraits of Lucy, Florence and Nell. How do these ghosts remind you of other characters in the story? Give evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- What is the significance of the stars in *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*? Why are there no stars at the start of the story? Why do they slowly emerge as the narrative progresses?
- Why is Direleafe Hall described as ‘flawed and vulnerable, just like the rest of us’ (p. 23)? In what ways does the school become almost like another character?
- It is noted by Florence that the Lady in White ‘never once looked at the rabbits ... or the ... buttercups’ (p. 27). What does this observation reveal about the woman’s character? Why might she wish to ‘crush Direleafe ... like a flower field flattened by a storm’ (p. 28)?

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- What clues do we get throughout the text that Melodie may not be a ghost?
- Hollowbeak plays a unique role in *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*. Create a character profile of Hollowbeak that demonstrates your understanding of his character traits. Why is he found 'sitting on the closest thing to [the stars]' (p. 32)? Why might he have been 'turned away' when trying to go to the stars (p. 33)? How do the facts that Melodie knows about crows describe Hollowbeak's character so accurately? (See p. 41.)
- Why does Hollowbeak think there is 'too much of [Melodie] entirely' (p. 38)?
- Why is Hollowbeak reluctant to befriend Melodie? Why does he later describe her as a 'sunshine girl' (p. 42)?
- Why, after only a few days at Direleaf Hall, does Melodie feel 'her heart mending' (p. 44)? Why is it important to Melodie that she saves the school?
- Re-read the passage on p. 46 describing the Lady in White. How has the author used language features to create such a vivid depiction of her?
- What does Ms Gallow mean when she says 'a woodpecker can break down even the most ancient tree if it has enough time' (p. 51)?
- Why does Ines throw a conker at Melodie?
- In a reflection, explain what it means to appeal to one's humanity? (See pp. 64, 99–100, 181.)
- Although she can only hum, Melodie has recollections of her mother telling her to 'never stop singing' (p. 70). How is this explored throughout the text?
- Melodie is often referred to by her parents as their 'sunrise'. Explain, in your own words, what they mean.
- Discuss the passage on pp. 72–73 in which Melodie's father talks about sunrises and life lasting for 'an instant'. Why is '[enjoying] the instant' and valuing memories so important?
- Who, on p. 80, might the 'family of stars' be? How do they help Melodie throughout *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*?
- What does Melodie's mother mean when she says that 'grief is a thing that can't be fixed' (p. 83)?
- Why is it that all of Melodie's letters to the Lady in White come out sounding 'like a song' (p. 88)? How does this relate to the title of the book?

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- In the role of Melodie, write your own letter to the Lady in White (see p. 90).
- Discuss the author's use of repetition on p. 93 when both Hollowbeak and Melodie's father 'did not come'. Why is this such a powerful passage?
- How are Georgiana and Ines similar and different to one another? Why have characters like these been included in the text?
- Describe the friendship that develops between Melodie and Ines. How do they help one another? What does this reveal about the nature of true friendship?
- Discuss the sentiments in Melodie's ballad (p. 106). Why does Ines awake humming after receiving her night visit from Melodie?
- Why does Ines behave the way she does? What advice would you give her about belonging and friendship?
- How did you feel when you learnt that Ines had 'never been hugged before' (p. 109)?
- Ines discovers that she is 'visible to Melodie' only once Melodie reveals that she saw Ines throwing the conker but promises not to tell anyone (p. 110). How does this make Ines feel?
- What does Melodie's father mean when he says that books 'will help grow your mind ... but little moments of joy will grow your heart' (p. 114)?
- Re-read the description of the sunrise on pp. 126–127. Discuss the use of imagery to depict this scene. Why has the author included a reference to larks in this same part of the book?
- Why does Hollowbeak say of Ms Gallows, 'perhaps it's hard to believe in yourself, entirely, when a piece of you is missing' (pp. 147–148)? Which other characters may feel this same way?
- In a reflection, discuss what the author is saying about love: 'being seen and being heard is what love is, really. It's only when you're seen and heard that you can make a difference and a change...' (p. 148)
- How does the author create a sense of empathy with readers about Hollowbeak's loneliness and sadness? Find passages from the text to support your thinking.
- How does Melodie's friendship change Ines?
- Why does Melodie think that she is 'unlovable' (p. 153)? Is this true? Discuss.

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- Why doesn't Melodie wish to be seen? Why does she believe that 'being seen is hard. Being seen is what love is, and love will break your heart' (p. 153)?
- How do songs help give Melodie strength when she confronts the Lady in White?
- In what ways does the Lady in White help Melodie?
- Ines sees Melodie as 'this vivid, noisy, shining girl who [doesn't] seem to need anyone but herself' (p. 157). Is her perception of Melodie entirely true? Discuss.
- What is the significance of Ines and Melodie holding hands? How does this relate to the recurring memories of Melodie holding her father's hand as he falls?
- Melodie's mother pleads with her to 'never stop singing, please. Your songs make the stars shine. Without them, everything is darkness' (p. 171). How does this help readers better understand Melodie's mother?
- Describe the relationship between Melodie and Hollowbeak. How does this relationship develop throughout the course of the novel?
- Kate Gordon uses figurative language to enhance meaning. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Examples include:
 - With curls as red as fox fur, freckles like sparks and eyes like a midsummer sky, this new girl was tall and sturdy and seemed to have *too many bones* (p. 38)
 - She smiled, and it was as if the sun had emerged from a cloak of clouds (p. 40)
 - This conker *connected* and blood made a scarlet rivulet on Rowan's flurry-white skin (p. 58)
 - The sound, in the dark, quiet hallway, was a thunderclap, a siren (p. 80)
 - Melodie waited, still as a fox in a hunter's crosshair (p. 80)
 - The ribbon wrapped itself around a spindly branch, until it became a tangled thing that looked more like animal innards (p. 117)
 - She wasn't obvious in her evil; she was like a kitten who hides its claws beneath white velvet fur (p. 159)
 - On the day her father died, the sky was as blue as a fairy-wren's belly (p. 168)
 - Storm clouds make a murky lake of the sky (p. 169)
 - A girl with hair like the sun and a heart even bigger (p. 185)

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- Her hair was like a helmet, her eyes like steel and midwinter frost (p. 186)
- Why does Melodie feel ‘only empathy’ for ‘*poor Georgiana. Poor her*’ (p. 186)? How does this help readers to empathise with her as well?
- What message is the author giving us about the importance of treating one another with care, dignity and respect?
- How does Melodie’s father help her throughout *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*?
- Ines says to Melodie, ‘You are Melodie ... You are a song’? Hollowbeak adds, ‘You are a song, and you are seen and you are heard’ (pp. 188–189). Why, then, do the three ghost girls say, ‘You are a song, and you are seen and you are heard and you belong’ (p. 189)? How does this passage reflect the themes of *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*?
- What is the significance of Melodie’s name?
- How would you describe the message of Melodie Rose’s ballad?
- What is a ballad? Share examples of other ballads. How are they like Melodie’s?
- How does Melodie help set Lucy, Florence and Nell free? Why is it that Hollowbeak does not go to the stars with them?
- How does Kate Gordon use *The Ballad of Melodie Rose* to explore themes of friendship, courage and love?
- Write a chapter of *The Ballad of Melodie Rose* from Ines’s or Hollowbeak’s perspective.
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, map the main plot points of *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*.
- After finishing *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*, re-read p. 1. How have language features been used to make the setting of Direleafe Hall so vivid? Discuss the author’s use of contrast in the first and last sentences on this page. What causes Melodie to think of herself as dead? How is arriving at the school akin to her birth?
- Discuss Ines’s statement that ‘fear never fixes anything’ (p. 201).
- What do you think is Hollowbeak’s backstory? What clues do we get that he has not always been a crow? How and why has he finally found happiness?

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- With reference to the following quote, what does *The Ballad of Melodie Rose* convey about true friendship?
‘A friend.
Now. That was a thing.’ (p. 205)
- At the end of the text, Direleafe Hall is described as ‘full of hope ... And wonder’ (p. 209). For those who have read *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*, make text-to-text connections between these two tales. What other connections can you make between these stories?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I always envisaged the Direleafe Hall books as a trilogy. One book is set ‘now’, one in the past, and one in the future, so we see how the hall changes and grows and crumbles through time, as if the hall itself were a character. I think of the story of Direleafe Hall as being a song, with a beginning, middle and end (or maybe there isn’t an end? Maybe it’s eternal?), but I wanted to invert the typical linear narrative of a song. I decided to begin with now, move to the future, and end (with book three) at the beginning.

In the second book, I wanted to write a story that was a counterpoint to *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*. While in *Wonder Quinn*, the hall is thriving, in *The Ballad of Melodie Rose*, the hall is slowly dying. While *Wonder* is about a dead girl among the living, the opposite is true in *Melodie Rose*. *Wonder* is about moonlight; *Melodie* is about sunlight and stars. *Wonder* is about letting go; *Melodie Rose* is about coming together.

I wanted to explore what it means to be alive, what it means to find purpose, what it means to heal from grief. And I wanted, more importantly than all of this, to explore friendships – particularly female friendships – and how girls, when working together, can achieve the impossible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Gordon grew up in a small town by the sea in Tasmania. She is the author of six novels for teenagers, as well as the picture book *Bird on a Wire*, and the junior fiction series Juno Jones. She now writes middle-grade fiction. The *Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* was published by UQP, in 2020.

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Kate was longlisted in the 2019 and 2020 CBCA Book of the Year Awards and received the 2016 IBBY Australia Ena Noël Award. In 2018, she was shortlisted in the Dorothy Hewett Awards for an Unpublished Manuscript, and was commended in the 2018 Vogel's Literary Awards. Her books have been published internationally.

When not writing, Kate reads, listens to Josh Ritter, has grand adventures with her daughter, and tries to ride a bike.