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THE HEARTSONG OF WONDER QUINN

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Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

With only a gloomy crow for company, orphan Wonder Quinn feels invisible. She craves friendship and love, longing to shed the overwhelming heaviness that has stayed with her after her mother's death.

And then, finally, somebody notices her – a new girl at Direleaf Hall. The two become friends, filling Wonder with hope as she and Mabel embark on a mission to fulfil an unusual to-do list, including leaping into the sky, touching a star and breaking someone's heart.

The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn is a hauntingly beautiful tale of friendship, courage and letting go. It is an evocative and poetic story that will captivate readers long after the final pages have been read.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Belonging
- Grief
- Courage
- Hope

WRITING STYLE

The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn is a tender and lingering tale told in third person, past tense. Wonder, an orphan, lives in the dusty archives of Direleaf Hall, her only companion a sage crow called Hollowbeak. When new girl Mabel befriends Wonder, she empowers Wonder to believe in herself and finally deal with her sadness. The language choices are sophisticated, yet accessible to middle readers. Kate Gordon's use of figurative language and vivid description is exceptional, giving the text a literary quality that is both compelling and timeless.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, use the cover and blurb of *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* 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 Wonder and Hollowbeak after reading the first chapter? What evidence can you find to support your ideas?
- In pairs, role-play the scene in which Wonder and Hollowbeak sit on the roof on the first day of school. Include details about the different girls you see as they enter the gates of Direleaf Hall.

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- On p. 3, Georgiana Kinch is introduced. Identify the vocabulary that foreshadows her character traits.
- Speculate on why Wonder feels 'stuck here at Direleaf Hall' (p. 4) and longs to travel or make a friend from somewhere else.
- Discuss how the language features in the following extract, such as punctuation, line breaks, use of italics and sentence fragments, create meaning:
 'As long as she liked Wonder. As long as she saw her.
 A friend.
 Now, that would be a thing.' (p. 4)
- Kate Gordon uses repetition very effectively throughout *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*. As you read, take note of this device, discussing its contribution to the text's mood and meaning. Examples can be found on pp. 7, 9 and 138.
- Wonder longs for 'a friend to wind up the clockwork key and begin her again. Make her new' (p. 9). Why does Wonder feel this way?
- In the role of Wonder, write a reflection explaining how you feel when the new girl with red hair looks up to the roof and directly at you (p. 13).
- Throughout the text, Wonder feels grey but yearns for someone to see that she is golden inside. How does this *golden* motif play out throughout the text?
- How is the setting of Direleaf Hall so effectively depicted in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*? Sketch what Wonder's school and its grounds look like, including the silver birch tree. Place extracts from the novel on your sketch to help support your thinking.
- Hollowbeak plays a unique role in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*. Create a character profile of Hollowbeak that demonstrates your understanding of his character traits.
- Why does Hollowbeak say to Wonder, 'I don't need you. A crow needs only himself, entirely. But you need me' (p. 11). Discuss whether you agree with him as the novel unfolds.
- Re-read the description of Ms Gallow's classroom on pp. 14–15 and the sunrise on p. 51. Discuss the language features that make these descriptions so effective. Offer a range of visual stimulus that students can choose to describe using similar language features.
- How does the author create a sense of empathy with readers about Wonder's loneliness and sadness? Find passages from the text to support your thinking.
- Why does Wonder think that others are afraid to spend time with someone who is so grief-stricken? How does this reflect the way in which people may react when others are faced with bad news or loss?

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- What does Hollowbeak mean when he says that Wonder had ‘faded’ (p. 18)? Why is she described as ‘grey’ (p. 18)? How would you describe yourself in a metaphorical way? Share with a friend.
- How does Mabel’s friendship change Wonder?
- Why is Wonder so hesitant to accept Mabel’s hand? What is her reaction to finally holding hands with someone again? Why has it taken her so long to feel this way?
- How is the silver birch tree like Hollowbeak (pp. 20–21)?
- Why does Wonder think Mabel is ‘made of sunshine’ (p. 35)? How does Mabel make Wonder feel ‘so huge and glowing...[and] visible’ (p. 36)? What does this tell us about the importance of genuine friendship?
- Why does Mabel describe Georgiana as a ‘kitten, hiding its claws beneath white velvet fur...her swipes...are worse than any snake bite’ (p. 44)? Why has a character such as Georgiana been included in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*?
- What were your first impressions of Mabel’s poem (p. 47)? How did this change as the text progressed?
- Mabel says she wants to be bad but not nasty (p. 64). What’s the difference?
- Why does Mabel describe Wonder as ‘infinite’ (p. 73)? Brainstorm ways to describe the attributes of your classmates. Explain the thinking behind your chosen words.
- What does Wonder mean when she says, ‘One day, I will cry...And on that day, I will break apart and float off to the stars. I am too heavy, now, to float’ (p. 76)? Why does Mabel tell Wonder that she speaks ‘like a poem’ (p. 76)?
- Mabel asks Wonder to tell her five things about herself. What are five things that tell us more about you? Share in a manner of your choice.
- Why does Wonder feel she couldn’t put out the fire that killed her mother?
- What role do books and reading play in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*? What role do they play in your life? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss the message that Wonder’s mother shared with her about putting herself first and making sure that ‘no other human...[makes] her feel lesser or more’ (p. 96). Why is this good advice?
- Re-read Mabel’s poem on pp. 112–113, and Wonder’s on p. 114. In your own words, explain the essence of these poems. Write your own verse about friendship.
- Why does Hollowbeak help Mabel to fulfil her to-do list? What does this tell us about him and his love for Wonder? What other examples of this love can you find in the text?

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- Re-read the passage about friendship on p. 129. How can you use this to help shape the kind of friend you want to be?
- How is Mabel's ill health foreshadowed in the text? Why is 'showing not telling' in this way an effective writing tool?
- Why do crows and ravens, including Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*, feature in the text? What do they symbolise?
- What can you learn from *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* about 'seeing' others more clearly?
- Describe the relationship between Wonder and Hollowbeak. How does this relationship develop throughout the course of the novel?
- Discuss the recurring motifs of colour and shades of light in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*. How do they reflect how Wonder is feeling?
- Why is Wonder so reluctant to cry? Why is Mabel also determined not to cry?
- What does it mean to be 'infinite'? Why does Mabel describe herself and Wonder in this way?
- Kate Gordon uses figurative language to enhance meaning. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Examples include:
 - There was a flickering in her belly. A tickling. Like moths, beating their wings at her insides (p. 1)
 - Her mind was bubbling like ginger beer (p. 9)
 - And then they were swallowed up by the door, by the grey brick walls, by the stones. They were a school of blue-and-grey-scaled fish, made shining by the sea, swimming into the mouth of a whale (pp. 12–13)
 - The tree, like Hollowbeak, was a bent and twisted thing, its bark as silver as twilight and its branches as black as midnight (pp. 20–21)
 - Her voice was like a tickling feather (p. 22)
 - Wonder thought it would taste like sunbeams (p. 24)
 - My mum and dad are always hovering around me like gadflies (p. 33)
 - The words themselves were like flowers blooming (p. 38)
 - The stars and moon were bright and the dewdrops clinging to the blades of grass were like trembling fireflies (p. 49)
 - Tiredness began to rake its bony fingers through her mind (p. 51)
 - The clouds seemed heavy with the weight of all that was sorrowful in the world (p. 55)
 - Net curtains fluttered, like cobwebs full of moths (p. 56)
 - Her nose was red with the cold, like a berry-lipped elf had kissed her there (p. 56)
 - Mabel threw her head back and laughed a laugh made of silver smoke and wonderful wickedness (p. 59)
 - It floated away like a dandelion head (p. 63)
 - Georgiana's locker popped open, breathing out vanilla perfume (p. 63)
 - Wonder felt as if she was full of beetles (p. 83)

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- Her fingers on Wonder's skin were like tears of laughter (p. 83)
- The shadows made pictures on the wall that looked like hand puppets acting out memories (p. 92)
- Ms Gallow stared at Mabel for the longest time, for a stretched-elastic moment (p. 108)
- Mabel curled into a little ball of bones and softness (p. 126)
- Hollowbeak sat in the silver birch tree on a branch as slender as a bone (p. 138)
- Hollowbeak knows that Wonder 'had to fly', admitting that 'Sometimes a twig has to break to force a bird to find their wings' (p. 141). What does he mean? What do we learn about Hollowbeak when his heart breaks 'for his darling girl' (p. 142)?
- Wonder feels that 'Love was so, so frightening. Because love was loss' (p. 145). What does this reveal about her grief and ability to finally process it?
- How are birds used to symbolise release in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*?
- What role does Ms Gallow play in *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*? How does your impression of her change as the story progresses?
- How do the clouds described on p. 148 reflect the tears that Wonder has been holding back for so long?
- After reading the poem on pp. 150–151, write a reflection that shares your thoughts about the friendship between Wonder and Mabel.
- How does crying help set Wonder free? What does this reveal about the importance of processing feelings, especially ones of grief?
- How does Kate Gordon use *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* to explore themes of friendship, courage and love?
- Write a chapter of *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* from Mabel's or Hollowbeak's perspective.
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, map the main plot points of *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* on a story graph.
- Compare *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* with Peter Carnavas's picture book *A Quiet Girl*.
- As you read *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn*, collect interesting and unfamiliar vocabulary used by the author. Create a Word Wall for the classroom, using context and word recognition skills to understand their meaning. Use these words in your own writing. Examples may include:
 - flickering, pinafores, tamped, perchances, recommenced, newlings, shingles, thrumming, archives, solace, dowdy, hatchling, hex, furrows, daubs, dwindled, imbued, kindred, surveyed, irrits, vexing, pompously, yearned, decrepitude, luxurious, reminiscent, ominous, haphazard, maidens, duress, retrieved, tarnished, prised, coveted, flounced

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When I was a kid, I was fascinated by ghost stories. One of my first favourite movies was *Casper*, starring Christina Ricci. I adored *Ghostbusters*. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was my favourite animation. I read the Goosebumps series and Roald Dahl's short stories and my favourite Babysitters Club book was *The Ghost at Dawn's House*.

I always wanted to write my own ghost story. But I knew I didn't want to write a scary one. I wanted to write a ghost story the way I imagine ghosts – as friendly companions to the living. And I loved the idea of a ghost who is a young girl, who needs a friend. And so, Wonder was born.

Over the course of the writing process, I had many conversations with my father about his views on life and death and the afterlife. He believes that our ancestors become birds. It was through these conversations that Hollowbeak came to be Wonder's companion.

The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn is not your typical ghost story. It is more a story of friendship, family, memories and belonging. Some of my own childhood experiences have played into it, especially the constant need for acceptance and friendship and love. I think that's at the heart of *Wonder Quinn*. It's not about death. It's about life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Gordon grew up in a very booky 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 by Allen and Unwin in 2010. Her most recent publications are the young adult novel *Girl Running, Boy Falling* and the younger reader *Juno Jones: Word Ninja*.