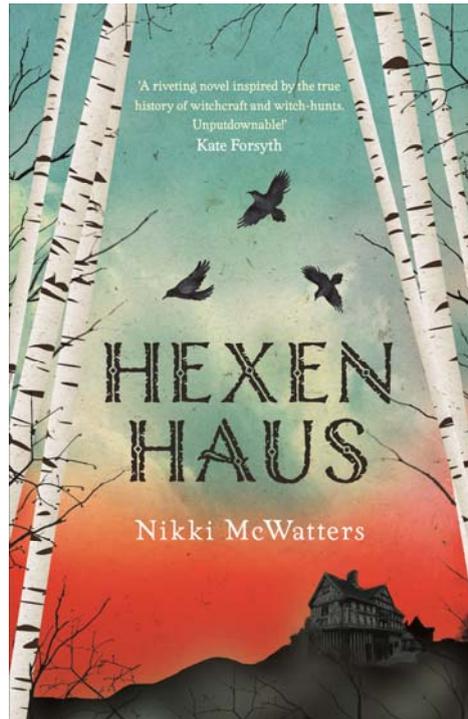


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

# HEXENHAUS

## Nikki McWatters



### Teachers' Notes

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

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**SYNOPSIS**

*Hexenhaus* chronicles the persecution experienced by three young women from different countries and time periods, each of whom are the victims of hysteria, gossip and allegations; they are accused of witchcraft.

In 1628, Veronica Junius and her brother Hans become orphans after the Hexenbischof of Bamberg in Germany condemns their parents to be burned at the stake, charged with witchcraft. Fleeing for their lives, Veronica and Hans are helped by a healer who lives in the woods and offers them refuge.

On the eve of the eighteenth century, Scottish maid Katherine Campbell is falsely accused of possessing the young daughter of the manor with the devil; she is caught in the Protestant-led prosecution that is using witch-trials to flush out the dissident Jacobites.

In modern-day rural Australia, Paisley Muller-McLeod is the subject of gossip and fear-mongering as the prejudice of a small town struggles with her mother's Wiccan methodologies.

Although almost 400 years separates their stories, these three women are linked by a common bond through their persecution from false accusation and mob mentality.

**THEMES**

- Persecution
- Witchcraft/Witch hunts
- Belonging/Family
- Resilience
- Acceptance/Inclusion
- Women

**WRITING STYLE**

*Hexenhaus* is a beautifully crafted literary text narrated by three young women who span different time periods and countries. Veronica's and Katherine's stories are narrated in first person, past tense, giving a detailed and descriptive account of the witch hunts of the 17th century. Paisley's story is told in first person, present tense, alluding to the modern-day prevalence of fear-mongering and gossip that leads to victimisation. All three stories are rich with figurative language and detailed description, particularly the recounts of Veronica and Katherine that provide vivid depictions of life during the deadly witch hunts of their times. This text is suitable for secondary students of all ages, particularly Years 10–12, and can be compared with texts such as *The Crucible*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Chocolat* and Armin Greder's picture book, *The Island*.

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**STUDY NOTES****Veronica Junius: Bamberg, Franconia, 1628**

- The first line of Veronica's story immediately draws the reader into her narrative – 'It was a warm day in August when they burned my father at the stake' (p1). Discuss the simplicity, yet effectiveness, in the author's language choices.
- Veronica has an arresting voice, using beautiful description and vocabulary, without becoming too cumbersome in her words. Discuss the author's ability to depict emotions and events so vividly.
- Select a passage from Veronica's story to annotate, showing your understanding of figurative devices and the author's ability to 'show not tell'.
- In the role of Veronica, write a diary entry of the evening the Jesuit priest has handed you the letter from your father. Share the insights you have of Veronica's character.
- How does the author use the senses to help write effective description? For example, the passage on p5 that describes a person being burned at the stake?
- As you read, keep a 'Word Wall' of vocabulary that you would like to use in your own writing.
- Why do you think Veronica waits before reading her father's letter? How does this strategy draw readers further into the text?
- Make predictions as to what you think is in the letter from Veronica's father. Write this letter in the role of Johannes Junius.
- Why does the author deliberately orphan Veronica and Hans and force them to leave Bamberg? How does this help drive the tension and plot? How can this structure help you in the planning of your own writing?
- What role do Veronica's parents play in her narrative, even though they have been killed?
- Describe the relationship between Veronica and Hans. How does Veronica's love for Hans inspire her when all else seems hopeless?
- What role does Frau Berchta play in *Hexenhaus*? How does she help Veronica to process and accept her situation? Why does she decide to give Veronica the book showing the bloodline of the goddess?
- Discuss Christoff's observation that wood is more important than gold (p154).
- What is the relevance of Hans citing his father's traditional blessing before Veronica journeys to Ebrach?
- When Veronica is being tortured, she says that her 'stubbornness was the only thing I clung to'. Stubbornness is often criticised. How is Veronica's stubbornness a positive trait?

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- What role does nature play in Veronica's story? How does Nikki McWatters use the motif of nature to represent hope and connectedness?
- What can be inferred about Christoff's love and respect for Veronica in promising to build her a Heilenhaus?
- Select some of the descriptive passages from Veronica's story to analyse. What devices are at work? How are they used so effectively? Some examples early in the text can be found on pages 2, 3, 5, and 6.
- When Veronica washes herself in the stream before returning to Hans and Frau Berchta in the woods, what is she really washing away?
- Discuss Veronica's observation that in the Hexenhaus, 'these supposed witches were systematically taken out and destroyed before a new batch arrived ... to begin the waterwheel again. It was an eternal cycle of pain and death, lies and devilment' (p197). What effect would it have on Veronica witnessing this cycle?

**Katherine Campbell: Renfrewshire, Scotland, 1696**

- Discuss the author's ability to use setting to engage the reader, for example, in using the superstitions and traditions of the Scottish highlands to establish Katherine's story.
- What relationship does Katherine share with her granaidh? How does this help her throughout her short life?
- How is Katherine like her granaidh and mammie? Which of their character traits help her to persevere through times of hardship?
- Why does Katherine say that John Campbell would become 'a catalyst for her own personal revolution'? What revolution has she experienced?
- Why is it that Reverend Brisbane wants to vilify Katherine? Why has he not been the subject of public scrutiny?
- Why does Katherine say, 'I had more of a mind to be a man than to love one' (p102)? What does this reveal about Katherine's character and the depiction of strong women in *Hexenhaus*?
- Why is Katherine's heart a 'big gaping lonely field' (p104)?
- Discuss the comment that the Jacobites should be able to 'worship without the fear of persecution' (p35). Discuss other instances of religious persecution, both throughout history and in the present day. How does this make *Hexenhaus* relevant in a modern-day context?
- Research the history of the Jacobites and the Whigs in 17th century Scotland to help contextualise the conflict that led to the witch hunts. See p185 – 'The word *witch* was the smoke while the word *Jacobite* was the flame beneath. I shut my eyes and prayed for the strength to resist giving them kindling they needed to light the bonfire'.
- John proves to be weak when it comes to defending Katherine and assisting her in the Tollbooth. Why doesn't he help her?

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- What does Agnes mean when she says ‘in good there is evil and in evil, good’ (p287)? What comment is the author making about the hypocrisy within some people’s actions?
- What do you think is the most powerful passage in Katherine’s narrative? Explain why this extract is so effective, justifying your choice with reference to language features and the use of motifs and themes.
- How do you feel when Isabel virtually disowns her own sister? What does this reveal about Isabel’s character and the relationship between these sisters?
- What would Katherine’s life had been like had she never met John Campbell? Discuss.
- Write a reflection to share how you felt at the end of Katherine’s story. Was this what you were expecting?

**Paisley Muller-McLeod: Bundanoon, Australia, Present Day**

- What are the first clues that accusations of witchcraft are going to affect Paisley and her mother?
- Paisley often refers to herself as the ‘parent’ and her mother as the ‘child’. Why is this the case? Is this a fair assessment? Discuss.
- How is Annabel Hooper similar to characters in the stories of Veronica and Katherine, or like characters in other texts in which characters find themselves the victims of small-mindedness and gossip (for example, *Chocolat* or *Edward Scissorhands*)?
- Discuss a time in your life when you felt like Paisley when she says ‘sometimes facing a problem head-on was preferable to hiding away to let the thing fester’ (p63).
- Paisley’s father says that ‘one accusation can trigger an epidemic fuelled by fear’ (p141). How does the town gossip about Kirsten mirror the fear-mongering experienced in Bamberg and Renfrewshire?
- Why are people afraid of what they don’t understand?
- How does Isaiah’s disappearance contribute to the hysteria in Bundanoon? Why do you think he vanished?
- Paisley and her mum are accused of being gypsies. Compare this with the way in which Anouk and her mother are victimised in *Chocolat*.
- How do Paisley and Kirsten balance one another?
- When Paisley is given the *Systir Saga*, she considers the ‘hundreds of adventures and ... tragedies’ (p164) contained within its pages. Plan and write one such tale.
- Discuss the importance of the theme for the Winter Solstice Festival – ‘Community and inclusion ... Accepting differences’ (p217).
- Discuss the trolling that Paisley and her mother are subjected to on Facebook. Why does Paisley comment that this is cowardly?

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- What can you learn from Kirsten's approach to life, 'accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative' (p243)?
- Why does Paisley say that ignoring Isaiah was 'somehow sadder and more tragic' than teasing him (p277)?
- How important is Paisley's reconciliation with her father to the story? How is the relationship between each of the three women with their parents represented?

**General Notes**

- Discuss the role of women in *Hexenhaus*. How are the female characters role models for modern-day women?
- How are Veronica, Katherine and Paisley similar to and different from one another? Compare their characters using a graphic organiser.
- In what ways have disputes over religion led to the persecution depicted in *Hexenhaus*? What are other examples of religious persecution throughout the ages?
- How is the acronym for WITCH (wise, intuitive, trusting, compassionate, honourable) reflected in *Hexenhaus*?
- Discuss the threads and clues that bring these three women's narratives together through the *Systir Saga*?
- What role does mob mentality and gossip play in *Hexenhaus*? Compare how this concept is explored in *Hexenhaus* with other texts such as *The Crucible*, *Chocolat*, *Edward Scissorhands* or Armin Greder's picture book, *The Island*.
- Discuss the practice of using unbearable torture methods to extract confessions of witchcraft.
- Analyse the way in which Nikki McWatters has successfully created three unique voices throughout *Hexenhaus*.
- In the role of one of the characters, write and perform a monologue showing your understanding of the themes of the novel.
- How is nature used as a motif throughout *Hexenhaus*?
- Reflect on a time you felt isolated or excluded. How did you handle this situation?
- In light of the closing pages of *Hexenhaus*, what do you think is the main message in the text?
- Read the Historical Notes at the end of the text that contextualise Veronica's and Katherine's stories and highlight a range of websites and sources relevant to the study of *Hexenhaus*.

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**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

After the feminist movement began in earnest in the 1960s, women began standing up and owning their history of persecution and changing the narrative of the witch, embracing it as something to be remembered with caution but at the same time celebrated. Since then we have had Samantha Stevens from *Bewitched*, the girls from *Practical Magic*, *Charmed*, *The Craft*, *Witches of Eastwick* and of course Hermione Granger and more recently Angelina Jolie's *Maleficent*.

When I stumbled a year or so ago on a tale that went back to the town of my ancestors – Paisley in Scotland, I felt a deep sense of knowing and familiarity with the story that was difficult to explain. Seven people were put to death in the late 17th century and before going to the gallows one woman had laid a curse on the town and all its descendents – that of course would include me! So I engaged in some extensive research, going through parish records, court transcripts and tax slips from the time and pieced together a new and unexplored theory of what happened. It seems it was actually a political plot to put down a pocket of resistance from rebels. My family has some faint link to one of the women who was killed, a grandmother, Agnes Naismith. This was the seed of what was to become *Hexenhaus*.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nikki McWatters has had an adventurous life from television acting to working for a billionaire to being homeless and living in a tent with her young family. The one constant in her life has been her passion for the written word. After completing a law degree in 2009, she changed her mind about her career direction and dared herself to follow her dream of becoming a published author. After a shortlisting at the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards exactly one year later in 2010, followed by a memoir published in 2012, a young adult novel *Sandy Feet* (under Nikki Buick) in 2014 and a new one ready to go in 2016 ... she finally feels like she's on the right path. She is a writer and loving it.

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