Cybele's Secret

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Teachers' Notes

This book is rich in themes and information. The possibilities for questions, tasks and activities are numerous. These teachers' notes have not dealt with all of them, because of the endless possibilities. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to provide a variety of themes, questions, tasks and activities. The aim is for teachers to use these, build on them and adapt them to suit the interest and abilities of their students. Teachers are encouraged to use them as stepping stones for their own ideas. In so doing, it is hoped students will get enjoyment and benefit from the enriching experience that reading and working on this text can bring. The questions, tasks and activities generally follow a thematic approach.

Please note: *Cybele's Secret* follows *Wildwood Dancing*. It is not important to have read *Wildwood Dancing* as Juliet explains any relevant connections throughout the story, although if the reader has read *Wildwood Dancing*, then it makes this one more enjoyable.

Teachers' Notes for *Wildwood Dancing* are available on the Pan Macmillan website.

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SYNOPSIS

Cybele is an ancient goddess who was the deification of Earth Mother. Her cult is long gone but an artefact bearing her final words surfaces in Istanbul, together with rumours that her cult has been revived. This is cause for concern to the religious Islamic leaders of the city.

Paula is an unusually liberated and extremely well-educated young girl from Transylvania, who travels on a mission with her merchant father, Teodor of Braşov, to the Istanbul of the early Ottoman Empire. They were commissioned by a wealthy collector to return with Cybele's Gift, an unknown artefact that is supposed to bring good fortune to its owner and his or her descendants. This mission could be financially very rewarding for both Teodor and Paula.

In their youth, Paula and her sisters paid visits, by way of usually invisible portals, to the Other Kingdom – a parallel world where they spent time dancing and learning valuable lessons in life from magical beings. This world became closed to them when Paula's eldest sister Tati followed her lover, Sorrow, permanently into the Other Kingdom.

On arrival in Istanbul Paula catches a fleeting glimpse of Tati, dressed in black, and hears her instructions that now is the time for Paula to begin her quest. Tati reappears at regular intervals with further cryptic messages and guides Paula on her quest, which is tied in with her father's mission to acquire Cybele's Gift. Paula's quest requires her to solve numerous puzzles and takes her through parts of vibrant Istanbul, a private library, a voyage on a supposed pirate ship, a subterranean magical labyrinth and a hidden mountain village. Paula's journey is fraught with many dangers but also leads to love, found and lost, and found again. Elements of the magical Other Kingdom have their own manifestations in Istanbul and throughout Paula's quest. The quest reaches its rightful conclusion and the story has an appropriate fairytale ending.

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TASKS AND ACTIVITIES

CHARACTERS

- Choose two (or more) of the following characters and describe them in detail – their physical features, their characters, the importance of their roles in the novel, and anything else you feel is appropriate. ***Cybele; Paula; Stoyan; Duarte da Costa Aguiar; Irene of Volos; Murat, Irene's eunuch; Teodor of Braşov.***
- What were Paula's first impressions of Stoyan? Why did she pick him as her bodyguard? What qualities did Paula find admirable and endearing in Stoyan?
- What were Paula's first impressions of Duarte da Costa Aguiar? What and who influenced her judgements? What made her change her mind? What qualities did she admire in him, and why? Why did she decline his proposal?
- What were Duarte da Costa Aguiar's early impressions of Paula? Why? What made him change his mind? Why?
- How far did Stoyan go to fulfil his duties as Paula's bodyguard? Why was he so dedicated to ensuring her welfare, above and beyond the call of duty? What were his feelings towards her?
- How would you characterise Teodor of Braşov, as a father? Illustrate his paternal qualities. Is he authoritarian? Is he benevolent? Is he wise? Is he aware of or oblivious to Paula's needs?
- Initially, Irene of Volos is portrayed as a benevolent champion of women and a patron of women's scholarship. How does the author illustrate these characteristics? How usual are these in the times and society in which Irene lived? How and why was she able to provide these outlets for women?
- Later, Irene of Volos is depicted as a power-hungry, thrill-seeking and dangerous schemer, who has let down those who looked to her for guidance and friendship. How, and in what circumstances, does the author illustrate these characteristics? Apart from providing a place for women's scholarship and fostering the independence of women, is there anything that reveals at least one redeeming trait in her character? What is it?
- ***Hasty character judgements***: Would you say that Paula is prone to making these? If so, about whom does she make these? Describe/illustrate some examples. Who else, if anyone, is also prone to this trait? Describe/illustrate examples for these also.

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GENERAL

Throughout the book various items of interest are mentioned that do not warrant a category of their own. Questions relating to a selection of these appear below, in no particular order.

- ***Black market***: What does this mean? Does it also exist in today's society? What is the colour of the currency used in a black market? What is ***black money***?
- ***Venetian glass***: What is this? Find out all you can about it. Include illustrations and/or pictures.
- On p.31 this quote appears: ***. . . all part of doing well in the competitive world of trading***. What is meant here? Does this apply today?
- ***Business acumen***: (p.32) What does this mean?
- ***The Sultan's officials***: How are these depicted in the text? Describe their appearance, their demeanour, their dress and how they conduct themselves and their business.
- ***False rumours***: On p.69 mention is made about Cybele's cult and false rumours that may have been circulated about it for political reasons. What does this mean? Can you equate this to any modern examples, such as political leaks in today's political climate? Why do you think politicians make use of this practice?
- ***Shopping etiquette***: (p.90/92) When Paula goes to the market to buy material to make new clothes, she is adamant about her father letting her do her own bargaining and purchasing. She learns that there is a certain protocol that is usually followed. What is this? What lessons does Paula learn from Duarte's assistance/intervention? Does a shopping etiquette exist today? If so, describe it.
- Paula frequently refers to herself as a scholar. She is fluent in Greek and familiar with Classical Greek literature and mythology. She refers to the following: ***Persephone and Atalanta*** – Who were they? ***The Dramas of Sophocles*** – Who was Sophocles? List some of his dramas.
- On p.101 Paula discusses Duarte's trading methods: ***. . . a most admirable end should not be served by dishonest means***. Who was ***Machiavelli*** and what is the ***Machiavellian*** theory that relates to this comment?
- On p.114 Irene discusses Duarte with Paula and says: ***A man with a reputation is more glamourous than an upright fellow with a spotless record. And, of course, girls love the notion that a bad man can be turned to good, as long as he has the right woman to help him***. Explain what she means.
- Much is made by Stoyan about his lack of education and his illiteracy. In his environment and times, as a man of the land, neither he, nor even his village elders, were privy to such skills. Only the priests were granted this privilege. Indeed, for a very long time in medieval history, education was solely for the clergy. Why do you think this was so?
- What is a ***eunuch***? What purpose did they fulfil in the Sultan's court? Does this practice still exist today? If so where?

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HISTORY/GEOGRAPHY

The novel is set in the times of the Ottoman Empire, of which modern-day Turkey and Istanbul were a part. It spanned eight centuries and during these times covered a vast geographical area.

- Compile a timeline of major events that occurred during the times of the Ottoman Empire. Make sure you include the date that Constantinople became Istanbul, as well as the names of major rulers.
- Draw a map of the Mediterranean area that includes southern Europe, northern Africa and eastern Asia and mark the areas and extent of the Ottoman Empire when it was at its largest, geographically. Also include all the place names mentioned in the text.
- Extract all of Paula's descriptions of Istanbul. These are vivid and numerous, and include what she sees, hears, feels and smells. Use these impressions to write a detailed travelogue for a time traveller travelling back into Paula's times.
- On a piece of paper draw a large ***X***. This is similar to a ***Y*** chart but with an extra category. In each of the four sections list the following of Paula's feelings and sensations about Istanbul: how it looks; how it sounds; how it feels; how it smells.
- Find the meaning of the word ***entrepot***. From the information gleaned in the novel, how does this apply to Istanbul and why?
- On p.11 the author mentions the word ***caravan***. In the context of the area and times of the novel, what is meant by this word? To your definition, research and add information about the ancient ***Silk Route*** and the ancient ***spice trade***.
- ***The Topkapi Palace***: Find out all you can about this building – its architecture, history, modern movies in which it has played a prominent role, etc., and include pictures.

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CULTURE/CULTURE CLASH

- On p.10 Istanbul is referred to as a ***melting pot of cultures***. What do you think is meant by this? Illustrate your explanation with examples drawn from the text.
- How do the modern terms ***multicultural*** and ***multi-ethnic*** compare with the description of a ***melting pot of cultures***?
- What do you perceive to be the benefits of living in a multicultural society? Why? What are the disadvantages and problems associated with such a society? How would you suggest they might be overcome?
- What do you understand by the term ***culture clash***? Does this happen in the story? If so, give examples and discuss them.
- ***Slavery***: Early in the novel, when Paula first arrives in Istanbul, she is shocked to witness the poor treatment of slaves. What do you know about the history of slavery? Where and when was this practised? From where did many slaves originate? Does slavery exist today? If so, what form does it take and where can it be found? What about Irene's explanation for her use of slaves? Does she make a valid argument? Why?
- Life for the ruling class in Ottoman times was dangerous, as is mentioned in the text. Describe how and why the security and isolation surrounding the Sultan and his court/household is not as safe as one would imagine.
- The text is rich in descriptions about the fashions of the times, both for women and men. Describe as many examples as you can of the types of clothes worn by the various characters and people in the book and, where applicable, any specific uses some of these garments may have had.
- The ***haman***, a Turkish bath, is frequently used not only by the women who visit Irene, but also men who attend public baths. Describe exactly what type of bath this is, the treatment Paula and others receive there, and what other functions such a place fulfils. Do people visit Turkish baths today? Do they go by any other name in these modern times?
- There are frequent references to the architecture of buildings that Paula sees, or in which she finds herself, while in Istanbul. Find pictures of ancient/old Turkish buildings and label and describe their features.

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CYBELE

- Find out everything you can about Cybele from references in the mythology from ancient Anatolian, Greek and Roman times. How does this compare to the information given about Cybele in the book? Does the author fudge any facts in order to lend more drama or interest to the story? If she does, where do these occur?
- Why and where, in the text, are there suggestions that Cybele's Gift should be approached with caution? As the novel nears its conclusion, are these cautions justifiable? Why do the mountain villagers want to secrete Cybele's Gift from the rest of the world? Do you agree with their reasons? Why?
- Why do you think many of the characters in the book were willing to stop at nothing to acquire Cybele's Gift? Who are they? To what lengths do they go?
- What are the rumours circulating about Cybele's cult? Why does the possibility of its revival concern the Islamic religious leaders?
- Who is responsible for reviving Cybele's cult? What reasons does the person have for reviving it? What are the motives – both the altruistic and personal ones?
- What are the purported benefits of owning Cybele's Gift? What can it provide for its owner?
- Pursuit and/or acquisition of Cybele's Gift can prove to be dangerous. What happens to Salem? Who, do we eventually find out, is responsible for his fate? What about Paula's father? What happens to him? Who is responsible?
- Why is Salem willing to help Paula's father acquire Cybele's Gift, but not willing to profit from this venture?
- What are Duarte's motives for acquiring Cybele's Gift? Is that why he is successful? How much of a part does destiny play in this outcome?
- When Paula, Stoyan and Duarte reach the labyrinth, in their quest to unite both halves of the artefact, they are required to fulfil a variety of tasks for a variety of reasons with a variety of rewards. Describe, in detail, the adventures these three characters have in the labyrinth.
- How does the author develop the metaphor of a tree for Cybele? Include Paula's discovery of the fragments of documents she finds in Irene's library, Stoyan's solution to the puzzle, and how this information is applied to Paula's, Stoyan's and Duarte's journey through the labyrinth.
- What is Cybele's message to humanity? How valid is it in today's society? Explain your answer.

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ISLAM/MUSLIMS

The tale is set during the times of the Ottoman Empire, in what today is part of Turkey. Then, and now, this was a predominantly Muslim society. Note that Islam, Moslem, Muslim and Mohammedan are interchangeable terms.

- Various Muslim rules, customs and traditions are mentioned in the text. List and explain as many of these as you can find.
- There are rules and customs, described in the text, that refer specifically to women. What are they? Given that Paula was an educated, freethinking, independent spirit, how does she cope with these customs? Does she or does she not adhere to them strictly? What role does respect for the cultures and customs of the host country play in Paula's adherence to their customs?
- How strictly Muslim is modern Turkey? Has it become more secular in modern times? What is the difference between a secular and non-secular government? Give examples of countries for each.
- Give a brief outline on the origins of the Islamic religion. Which countries of the world are predominantly Muslim?
- List the basic tenets of Islam – prayer rituals, rules of dress, status and role of women, role of men, dietary laws, etc.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION

The 1960s saw the Women's Liberation Movement attempt to bring equal status to men and women. In the past women were seen to have been relegated to a more inferior position in society, with clearly defined roles. Education, travel, broadening one's horizons, etc., were not usually the domain of a woman until modern times, especially not in Muslim societies. Women's liberation is a recurrent theme in this novel.

- What do we learn about Paula in the opening pages of the book? What privileges have been bestowed upon her and by whom? Given the times and setting of the story, are there any foreseeable obstacles for Paula?
- What do you know about the Women's Lib movement? Do you believe that the women of today have achieved equal status with men? Do you believe that there should be some differences? If so, what would these be and why should they be? Do you believe there are certain roles that should always be gender specific? Why?
- There are times when Paula feels it is unworthy of her to think of herself as an independent woman. When do these occur and why does she think that way?
- Is Irene's house a male-free zone because of her desire to provide women with the freedom to pursue interests and activities usually the preserve of males? Why does she make an exception in Paula's case? Does Irene reveal another motive for disallowing men into her home? If so, what is it?
- What role have women played, and what role do they play today, in religion? Look at the role of women perpetuating religious beliefs in the home; taking up ministerial positions in the church today; famous women in religious history, etc.
- On p.145, reference is made to ***career vs domesticity***. Do they have to be in opposition or can they be juxtaposed? Discuss.
- List all the occasions on which Paula asserts her independence. What are the outcomes?
- How is Paula and Duarte's intellectual equality manifested throughout the latter part of the book?

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MYTHS/LEGENDS/MAGICAL REALMS/ MYSTERIES

- Paula comes from ***Transylvania***. Where is Transylvania? For which legend is Transylvania famous? Who is the author of the book about this legend? What are ***vampires***? Do they really exist? Are there any medical conditions known to mimic vampire symptoms? If so, what are they? What are vampire bats? How and why do they figure in the Transylvanian legend?
- Describe the ***Other Kingdom***, its rules, customs and inhabitants. Do you believe in the possibility of a ***parallel world***? Why? What is a ***portal***? What is a ***time warp***?
- Paula refers to the dangers of charms and points out the good and/or evil that can befall involvement with magical, mystical, paranormal phenomena. Imagine you had your fortune told. Once you thought you knew what was going to happen to you, how much influence do you think this knowledge would have on your beaviour and the fulfilment, or otherwise, of the prophecies?
- On p.58 Paula remembers instruction from the Other Kingdom that she should ***look beyond the obvious***. What do you think this means?
- What is the legend of ***Ariadne*** and ***Theseus***?
- List all the magical signs, cryptic messages, riddles and tasks that Paula encounters throughout the novel.
- As the story unfolds we are informed, by Paula, that no matter how cruel and unreasonable some of the tasks set by the Other Kingdom might be, they all have specific and general purposes. What are they? Explain them. What can happen when they are ignored? Are there any examples? If so, describe them.
- Apart from the symbolism and messages present in Paula's nightmares and dreams, what role do they play in the relationship between Paula and Stoyan?
- Why do you think Stoyan is so accepting of Paula's stories about the Other Kingdom? Why is Duarte not so accepting?
- What is the significance of the crow/black bird/raven in mythology, legend and superstition? What role does the crow play in the novel?
- How relevant is the role of ***fate*** or ***destiny*** in the progression and final outcome of all the events and relationships in the novel?
- Explain the meaning of ***predestination***. Is this message conveyed in the book?

THE WOMAN IN BLACK/TATI

- A mysterious ***woman in black*** appears at the start of the novel. We soon learn that it is Paula's sister Tati, visiting from the Other Kingdom. List every appearance she makes in the story, the circumstances under which she makes this appearance, the purpose of the appearance, and the instructions or information she imparts.
- In many of the countries of the Mediterranean region women often dress in black. Find out why.

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RELATIONSHIPS

- How would you describe the relationships between the following people: Paula and her father; ***Paula and Stoyan; Paula and Duarte; Paula and Irene; Teodor and Stoyan; Irene and Duarte; Irene and Murat; Stoyan and Duarte; Stoyan and his mother; Paula and the Other Kingdom; Duarte and his crew***.
- How and why do Paula and Stoyan develop a romantic relationship? Why do both Paula and Stoyan find it difficult to express their true feelings? How is this manifested? What happens to the relationship at the end of the story? How and why does it happen?
- Explain how Paula's youth, naivety and inexperience with men influences the way she copes in her relationships with Stoyan and Duarte.
- What leadership qualities does Duarte exhibit? How are these manifested in his relationship with his crew? How are these manifested in his relationships with Paula and Stoyan?
- Do you believe that the fact Paula's mother has died explains her father's close relationship with her? Is that why he indulges her in her attempt to be independent?
- On p.72 Paula refers to the profound differences the marriage of her sisters, and having children, could create in her relationship with them. What might these be? Explain them.
- Paula, as well as Irene, for example, stresses the differences in educational and social status between Paula and Stoyan. How relevant do you believe such differences are in a relationship, especially one that leads to marriage? How does Paula's final riddle, actually a gift/reward from the crone, help clarify things for Paula?

KNOWLEDGE/EDUCATION/WISDOM

- Is there a difference between ***knowledge*** and ***wisdom***? If so, what is it? How is this manifested in the text? Give examples and detailed descriptions.
- Why do you think Stoyan is able to solve the puzzles that Paula cannot?
- On p.56 Paula points out the importance of knowledge. What can it achieve? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Why is Paula so sensitive about her scholarly status? What did Stoyan mean when he called Paula ignorant (p.75)? Was he referring to her scholarly education or something else?
- What do you think Paula means when she thinks: ***I wondered if too much learning had blinded me to what is right and true*** (p.139)?

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