

The First Book of Samuel

Ursula Dubosarsky

Teachers' Notes by Dr Wendy Michaels, Lecturer School of Humanities, The University of Newcastle - Ourimbah Campus and were produced in conjunction with the inaugural Ourimbah Campus Childrens' Literature Festival 2004 - Weaving stories - Spinning Yarns.

Ursula Dubosarsky is one of Australia's most imaginative writers for young people. Her works include fiction for younger readers and young adult novels. She has won many awards for her writing, including the 1994 Victorian Premier's Literary Award and the NSW State Literary Award for *The White Guinea Pig* and the NSW Premier's Ethnic Affairs Commission Award in 1996 for *The First Book of Samuel*. *The Game of the Goose* was short-listed for the Children's Book Council award in 2001.

Activities

Before reading this book with the class it would be useful to explore some of the contextual references or allusions that Dubosarsky uses to provide some of the layers of meaning in the story.

Research

Have students work in groups to research some of the following:

Historical context:

- Elias – Samuel's grandfather as a young boy grew up at the beginning of the Nazi period of Germany. Have students research the situation for Jewish people in the period leading up to World War II with a particular focus on the state of Palestine (prior to the establishment of the state of Israel).
- Encourage students to consider what life might have been like for Jewish families and to question how and why people might have adopted the position that the situation was simply "talk" and not really serious.
- They might also consider whether there have been other periods in history or in the contemporary world where similar "talk" has not been taken seriously.

Biblical allusions:



Dubosarsky gives her characters names that have particular resonances from the Bible – particularly the Old Testament, which is the part of the Bible that forms the basis of the Jewish religion.

- Have students research the names of the characters and the biblical stories associated with these characters – in particular Hannah, Elias, Elkanah and Samuel.

You may need to point out to students that the title of the novel is an appropriation of the book in the Old Testament – The First Book of Samuel, and it draws upon the main character of that book – a man named Elkanah who had two wives, one of whom was Hannah who had no children.

- Read parts of the first chapters of this book to the class so that they are familiar with the allusions Dubosarsky is drawing upon. In particular read the opening section of the third chapter where Samuel is lying down with Eli and is called by his name –“Samuel, Samuel.” Allow time for discussion of the issues that these allusions raise so that students will be able to make connections when they find them in Dubosarsky’s novel.

Medical allusions:

The resolution of the story depends upon an understanding of the tropical disease, malaria, and the way in which it is carried by mosquitoes and can live in the blood stream.

- Have students research this disease and the parts of the world in which the anopheles mosquitoes live.

Narrative allusions:

Dubosarsky uses a range of narrative allusions from various sources to enrich the context of her story. To assist your students’ responses to the story first explore some of these narratives so that they bring background knowledge to the reading.

Have students research the stories that Dubosarsky refers to in the text:

- The Mahabharata
- Pinocchio
- Kidnapped
- Treasure Island
- Count of Monte Cristo
- The Prince and the Pauper
- Opera

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life-enhancing book.'*

Sally McInerney, Sydney Morning Herald

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You may need to explain to the students that opera is a way of telling stories that relies on singing, drama, sets and costumes to create a total effect. Opera is not so much concerned with the events of the story, but with the range and depth of emotions of the characters involved in the events.

Elkanah, the father of Theodora and Samuel is an opera singer whose job meant that he travelled to different cities to sing in various operas – a kind of secular equivalence to the biblical Elkanah who also travelled to the temple for rituals and sacrifices to the Lord.

Have students research the stories of the various operas and the ballet that are mentioned in the novel:

- The Elixir of Love
- Hansel and Gretel
- Orpheus in the Underworld
- Tosca
- The Nutcracker Suite

You could show students excerpts from videos of some of these – particularly the Australian Opera production of Hansel and Gretel.

Discuss the issues and ideas that are raised in these stories and encourage students to look for connections between these ideas and the events and characters in the story.

Reading and responding to the novel

Have students read the novel and discuss their impressions of the events and characters. How do they respond to Elkanah – the adulterer? How do they respond to the two grandfathers? How do they see the relationship between Hannah and Pearl? How do they respond to the relationship between Theodora and Samuel?

The allusions and appropriations

Have students discuss the significance of the allusions and appropriations – particularly those relating to the Book of Samuel. How did their knowledge of these stories enrich their reading and response to the novel itself?

Sally McInerney, Sydney Morning Herald

The narrator:

- Ask students to consider how the story is told. How does the narrator position the reader in relation to the events and characters? Have students consider whether the reader is invited to “blame” any of the characters for the course of events?



- Have students examine the narrator's comments to the reader at various points throughout the story.
- Sometimes these comments are merely authorial summary that fill in information for the reader about such things as malaria and America. Have students consider why the author might have chosen to do that for the particular audience for which she is writing.
- Sometimes the comments are of a more philosophical nature – giving the reader a moral perspective on the events. Have students consider the comment:

But stories can only happen because of all the things that happened before, no matter how small and sudden those things may have seemed at the time. Or no matter how large and terrible, and no matter how much a person might prefer to lives as if such things had never happened. (p.5)

How does the narrator position the reader with this comment to accept the events of the story as it unfolds?

- Encourage students to think about other stories they know and the events of their own lives – do they see patterns of connection in the events?
- Have students skim through the novel to find other authorial comments on the events and characters. Have them examine the ways that these position the reader to accept, condemn, or condone the actions of particular characters.
- Hold a polarised debate on the topic: What happened to Samuel was no-one's fault.

Structure of the Story

This novel uses an interesting structure. It begins with a single statement that announces the central event of the plot: On his twelfth birthday, Samuel Cass disappeared.

The narrator tells the reader that the events cover only a short period of time just prior to and a few days after Samuel's birthday. Yet the story ranges over past years, even past generations as well as traversing other countries. By controlling the tight through line of the events surrounding Samuel's disappearance, Dubosarsky is able to fill in the back-story to highlight other issues.

- Have students create a plot point list or plot map that indicates the events of the story. Ensure that they identify the events of the few days of the story and distinguish these from the back-story. Encourage students to note how the back-story is introduced – eg through a character's memories or narrator.

- Discuss how the arrangement of the events in this way allows the author to explore particular issues relating to the interconnectedness of human beings and our own stories.

Theodora's Notebooks

Central to the plot and to the character of Theodora is her keeping of notebooks or journals. At the beginning of the story Samuel is sceptical of this practice but by the end he has learned the value of the personal notebook in tracing the patterns of events and this realisation helps to connect him with his beloved grandfather, Elias.

- Have students explore the references to Theodora's notebooks and their role in both complicating the plot and in almost solving it.
- When Theodora is observing Elias through the window, the narrator comments:

There is something mesmerising about watching someone who doesn't know you're looking, like picking up the phone and finding you have a crossed line.

Have students discuss the role of the observer or eavesdropper and the kinds of things they might hear and see. Can they know the whole context? Do they simply invent the things they cannot see and hear - as Rhody did? Are there dangers in this? Are there rewards?

- Have students keep their own journals recording their observations and overheard conversations for a few days. Then students should use one of the observations as the basis of creating their own story. Allow time for the development of the story and the sharing of the stories.

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