



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary and lower secondary
(ages 12 and older; years 6 to 10)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Personal and social capability; Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Great dual narrative – perfect example of structuring a story around two different voices.
- Encourages discussion around topical themes such as women's rights, women's education and position in society.
- This is a fun, historical mystery story.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Belonging and identity
- The role of women in society

PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia and A. L. Tait

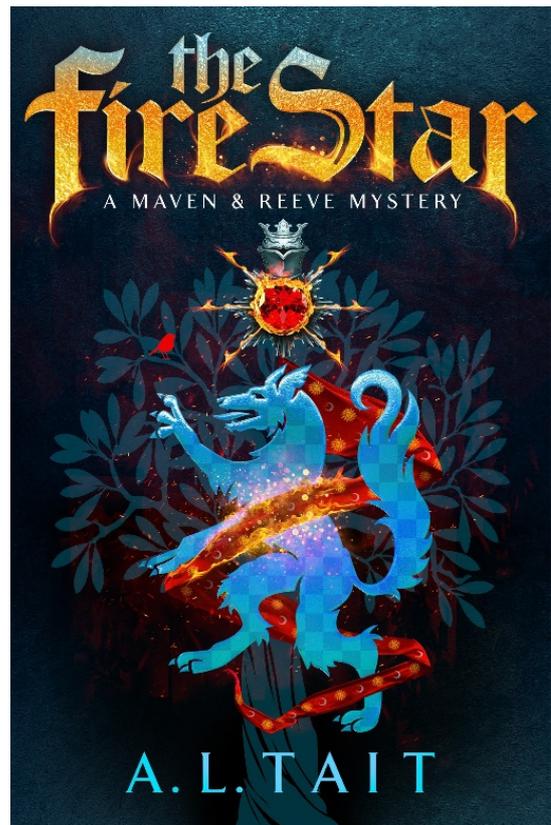
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The Fire Star

A.L. Tait

PLOT SUMMARY

A maid with a plan.

A squire with a secret.

A missing jewel.

A kingdom in turmoil.

Maven and Reeve have three days to solve the mystery of the Fire Star. If they don't, they'll lose everything.

This could be a complete disaster . . . or the beginning of a great friendship.

Bestselling author A. L. Tait is back with the intriguing story of two unlikely allies and a mystery to solve that could change their lives.

'I was up past midnight finishing this book! The mystery kept me turning the pages, and I felt like I'd known Maven and Reeve forever.' – Amie Kaufman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Ice Wolves*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Tait (A. L. Tait) is the internationally published bestselling author of middle-grade adventure series *The Mapmaker Chronicles* and *The Ateban Cipher*. A multi-genre writer, teacher and speaker with many years' experience in magazines, newspapers and online publishing, Allison is the co-host of the top-rating *So You Want To Be A Writer* podcast. *The Fire Star: A Maven & Reeve Mystery* taps into her passion for historical fiction and adventure. Allison lives on the south coast of New South Wales with her family. Find out more about Allison at allisontait.com

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

A. L. Tait says:

The Fire Star began with my long-held dream to write a mystery story. When I was a kid, my favourite stories were always mysteries.

I first fell in love with *The Famous Five* series, in particular the clever and resourceful George, but my real, true love from about the age of ten was Trixie Belden, who was brave and tenacious and honest, with a loyal circle of friends and family around her.

So a few years ago, I started tinkering with mystery stories, mostly set in modern times, but none of them really gelled for me.

Then, one day, I had an idea about a boy named Reeve who really wanted to be a knight. As I got to know Reeve, I realised that he was charming and observant and very good in a social situation, and I began to wonder if he might not make a good detective.

I also realised that he had a secret that was big enough to end his dreams forever.

So I began writing *The Fire Star*, bringing Reeve to Castle Rennart, introducing him to his new life as a squire and ... taking a step back when he met Maven, maid-companion to the Lady Cassandra.

At first I thought Maven might make a good sidekick for Reeve, sort of the Watson to his Holmes. But I soon realised that Maven was nobody's sidekick. Not only was she very clever, but she followed her own path and had big secrets of her own. So Maven elbowed her way into the story, bringing a whole underground society with her, and demanded her own voice and her own stake in solving the mystery at hand.

The Fire Star grew out of my love of mysteries and history, and my subconscious preoccupations with the education of girls and women, the #metoo movement, and the role of girls in literature and beyond.

It was inspired by, among other things, a 2017 newspaper article about a discovery in a farmer's field

in Shropshire, England, that a 'rabbit hole' led to an entire underground cave network possibly once used by the Knights Templar. I also found inspiration in my fascination with famous secret organisations like the French Resistance of WWII, the Underground Railroad in the US, and more.

On one level, it's a story about two teenage friends solving the puzzle of a missing jewel, navigating the world around them and holding fast to their dreams. On another, it's about rebellion (large and small), secrets and how small decisions can lead to big events.

PRE-READING

1. Look at the cover. What do you think the story will be about? Based on the images, what themes do you think might be a part of the story?
2. Based on the cover, *when* do you think the story is set?
3. Look at the use of colour on the cover. Do you think these colours have been used deliberately?
4. The cover illustration is based on the stylistic devices of medieval heraldry and the coats of arms that knights wore to symbolise their family and other affiliations. Design your own coat of arms. What symbols, colours and shapes would represent you and the qualities that are important to you? For instance, a lion might symbolise bravery, or a stag might represent wisdom. Find out more about the different elements of a heraldic design here: english-heritage.org.uk/guide-to-heraldry

WRITING STYLE

Questions

1. How is the language used in this novel different from other novels you have read? Do the characters use words and sentence structures that are not so commonly used today? Why do you think this is so?
2. What other literary devices has the author used to give this novel an historical feel?
3. Look at the timeline of the story. Over how many days is the story set? Is this normal for a novel? Have you read any other books set in such a short timeline? What effect do you think this has on the pacing and tension of the novel? How different would the novel be if it was set over a period of a month?
4. What is the main difference between the sections from Maven's and Reeve's points of view? (For instance, what do you notice about the



perspective and tense?) Why do you think the author has made these decisions?

5. A lot of symbolism is used in the story. For example, the beech tree and robin represent the Beech Circle. (*The Beech trees, a symbol of knowledge and wisdom; the robin, which makes its home in hidden places but can fly as it pleases. Roots and wings, all in a circle.* p. 171) Can you find other examples of symbolism in the story? How do these symbols add to the meaning of the story?

Activities

- Choose a section of the novel where either Maven or Reeve is reflecting on their own situation. Make sure it is a scene that you found particularly important or meaningful. Turn this scene into a monologue and present it to your classmates.
- In the narrative, the missing Fire Star jewel is found at the very end. Write a closing chapter to this book, describing what would have happened if Maven and Reeve *hadn't* found the stone. Think of the reactions of all the main characters – Maven, Reeve, Sir Garrick, Lady Cassandra, Airl Buckthorn and Myra. How would they react to the Fire Star not being found?
- After reading the novel, take another look at the cover ... can you pick out the meaning in all the symbols used in the illustration now that you know the story?

KEY STUDY TOPICS

Genre: mystery

On the cover, the story is described as 'A Maven & Reeve Mystery'. Read what the author says about mystery stories in the Author's Inspiration section.

Questions

1. What is a mystery? Have you read other books in this genre? What are the titles of some other mystery stories you have read? Why do you think they fit into this genre?
2. What are some common tropes of the mystery genre? How do they differ from other genres in literature such as romance, science fiction or fantasy? Is it possible to have a mixture of genres in a story? What other genres could *The Fire Star* also fit into?
3. What is a red herring? Are there moments when Maven and/or Reeve come across red herrings in the narrative?
4. *Reeve and I look at each other. I wonder if he feels as reluctant as I do. I am used to working alone to*

solve my problems. (p. 158) Mystery novels often have two characters working together. For example, A. L. Tait mentions Sherlock Holmes and John Watson in her Author's Inspiration section. Can you name other well-known crime solving partners? Can you also name any characters who work alone?

5. How does the structure of writing from alternating characters' point of view contribute to the mystery of the story? What secrets are Maven and Reeve keeping from each other? At what point in the story does each decide to share a secret or to trust each other and work together to solve the mystery more quickly?
6. The Beech Circle is a source of mystery for Reeve and the reader throughout the story. Can you name other secret societies in novels you have read? Are there elements that these stories all have in common?
7. *Reeve had to agree with her, but he also knew from his experience of completing colourful picture puzzles with Lady Rhoswen that every piece had a place. Some seemed as though they would never fit anywhere until, all of a sudden, they were the perfect shape to slip into a space.* (p. 147) Reeve's analogy could refer to the process of solving a mystery. What other analogies or comparisons could be made to solving a mystery?

Activities

- The quote from Amie Kaufman says the book was a 'page turner'. Research covers and reviews for other mystery novels and make a list of the ways people describe stories in this genre. Do some of these descriptions overlap? Are there common phrases that are used?
- List all the elements you need for a good mystery story. Come up with the outline of a mystery story idea, using these points as a framework. For example, you'll need an inquisitive character or characters to solve the problem, red herrings to scatter through the story and an interesting setting. Don't forget to also think about *when* your story will be set ...

Friendship

Questions

1. The main relationship in the novel is the friendship between Maven and Reeve. Do they like each other when they meet? What evidence do you have of this? How do their opinions change over the course of the book?
2. Can you list some other friendships in the story? For example, do you think that Maven and Lady



Cassandra are friends? Are Sir Garrick and Airl Buckthorn friends? What are the main elements that make up a friendship?

3. Do you think that the class structure of the society in the novel affects characters' relationships with each other? What evidence do you have of this?
4. Why do you think Maven and Reeve make such a good team? How do their talents and strengths complement one another?

Activities

- Find a moment in the story that shows Maven and Reeve trusting each other. Turn this scene into a play script and act it out for the class.
- Imagine that Maven was the maid of Lady Anice instead of Lady Cassandra. Re-write the scene on pages 169–171 (or a different scene between Maven and Lady Cassandra) with this in mind.
- There are a lot of characters in the story apart from the main players of Maven, Reeve, Lady Cassandra, Sir Garrick, Airl Buckthorn and Lady Anice. (For example: Kit, Myra, Cook, Derric, Polly, Sully and Lorimer.) Do you think any of these characters would have been friends? Write a scene involving two of them talking about the missing Fire Star or the upcoming wedding.
- Maven and Reeve both keep secrets from each other. By the end of the story most secrets have been revealed, but one is still secret. Write a scene where this big secret is revealed to the other character.

Belonging and identity

Questions

1. Reeve is desperate to become a knight, despite not being able to stand the sight of blood. Why do you think it is so important to him? Do you think he would be able to do a different job? Why do you think his blood phobia doesn't force him to give up on his dream of becoming a knight?
2. Maven has been through a lot when we meet her in the story. Her sense of identity has been shaken as she has gone from being a lady herself to being lady's maid. What do you think has enabled her to cope with this transition? What gives her a sense of identity? How do her dreams of escaping affect her actions?
3. Out of the main characters (Reeve, Maven, Lady Cassandra, Sir Garrick and Lady Anice), who do you think has the strongest sense of belonging? And who seems to be the most confident in themselves? Is this the same person?

Activities

- Choose one of the characters from *The Fire Star*. Brainstorm ideas for options that character might have for changing the direction of their life, within the boundaries and rules of the world they live in.

The role of women in society and through history

Questions

1. A. L. Tait has set her story in a world where women aren't allowed to receive an education or engage in society in a way that can change their opportunities and lives. (See in particular pp. 138 to 140, where Maven reveals her secret education and how she feels both lucky and cursed.) Can you think of other stories you might have read that have similar themes? How do you think this reflects our world history?
2. Why do you think the author has written about women living in a male-dominated society? Do you think it reflects what is going on in our world today? What has changed across the centuries? Are some of these attitudes towards women still reflected in today's society?
3. How does class structure affect the women in the story and their level of autonomy in society?
4. *If black myths and rumours of sorcery are all we have as women to protect what is ours, then they must be preserved.* (p. 301) The women in the society represented in the book have little power due to a lack of education and autonomy. In what small ways do they try to gain autonomy and to support each other?

Activities

- How do you think the Beech Circle was formed? Write a letter or a short story about the woman (or women) who began this organisation. Include her background, motivation and details about the first woman she helped.
- The author has based a lot of the story on facts about women in history and the society that existed in the Middle Ages. Look at the list of resources below, choose an aspect in the story you are interested in, connect it to one of the sources below and use it as a starting point for further research. Create a Powerpoint presentation on that research and present it to the class.
- How do you think Maven has managed to stay strong during the upheaval in her life? Can you find a moment in the story where this is evident? Do you think Lady Anice would have been so strong? Re-



write the moment you have chosen from Lady Anice's point of view.

KEY QUOTES

- *Reeve looks pained at that specific detail. 'I had never thought of it that way. When I thought about it at all, I assumed it was, er, her husband who liked his lady safe at . . . in the country.'* (p. 155) Reeve is quite shocked to learn about the Beech Circle, especially to find out that Lady Rhoswen is a member. Do you think the Airl would be aware that his wife was part of such a group? Would they have talked about it at some point? Or do you think he perhaps suspects there is more to his wife than meets the eye, but hasn't mentioned it?
- *'I was in the courtyard and I saw nothing,' he says. 'Everyone was looking up at the Lady Cassandra.' Myra turns to him. 'I wasn't,' she says . . .* (p. 157) The power of distraction is used to help make the Fire Star 'disappear'. Can you find other instances in the story when distraction is used?
- *'If I am talking to someone and I wish you to interrupt me with a message,' she told him with a tinkling laugh, very early during his days at Harding Manor, 'my feet will be pointed away from the person, to one side, almost as though I am ready to escape.'* (pp. 22–23) Lady Rhoswen teaches Reeve many techniques for reading people, including body language. What are some other ways to tell how someone is feeling based on their body language? Can you find any other examples in the story?
- *Reeve says nothing, seeming to digest her words. 'But you are not witches?' he asks, uneasily. Myra laughs, and I join in. 'No,' she says. 'Not unless witches are just women who choose to ask questions.'* (pp. 154–155) Why do you think Reeve believes Myra and Maven to be witches? Why do you think this type of attitude towards women exists? Research historical attitudes towards witches and the persecution that women accused of being witches faced. How does Myra see herself in this scene?
- *It is just a stone, but it represents so much more: choices, freedom, social standing.* (p. 299) What different things does the Fire Star jewel represent to different characters in the story?
- *The truth is, the whole notion of chivalry bores me. What is the point of taking part in a charade when there are real conversations to be had?* (p. 62) Research the meaning of chivalry, particularly in the medieval period. Why do you think this concept was so important during medieval times? Why does Maven think so little of chivalry?

- *To them, we are outsiders, Reeve, and nobody is more vulnerable than a person who is other.* (p. 120) Do you think Maven is right that she and Reeve are 'outsiders'? Why would someone considered an outsider be vulnerable in this society?
- *To his surprise, Maven laughed. 'I have made you complicit,' she said and groaned. 'Reeve, have you not yet realised that you and I "make" nothing. Your Sir Garrick will decide for you, just as the Lady Cassandra decides for me. The only choices we have are what we do with those decisions. Can we make them work and therefore save ourselves? Or will we be dragged to rack and ruin under their loving care?'* (p. 133) Do you think Maven and Reeve have choices? What decisions can they make in their own lives? What control to others have other them? Do Sir Garrick and Lady Cassandra treat Reeve and Maven with 'loving care'? What difference is there in how they each treat Reeve and Maven?

RESOURCES

The author did a lot of research to create the world of Cartreff. Below is a list of some of the sites, books and resources Allison used to find inspiration.

The Beech Circle

- This is the article that inspired the idea for the Beech Circle's secret meeting place: bbc.com/news/uk-england-39193347
- The hidden meaning of the beech tree. The beech tree is a symbol of study and knowledge: urnabios.com/beechn-slender-companion/
- Books were once made from thin slices of beech wood: cambrianwildwood.org/species/beechn
- The beech is associated with femininity, and known as the 'Queen of British trees' or the 'goddess' tree: woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/a-z-of-british-trees/common-beech/

The Middle Ages

- The Kids Rule! Guide to Castles: english-heritage.org.uk/members-area/kids/guide-to-castles/
- The Middle Ages for Kids: medievaleurope.mrdonn.org/index.html
- Medieval Life: medieval-life.net
- Heston's medieval feast [video]: youtube.com/watch?v=KIC5bUX5RGE



Children's books about knights, castles and maids

- *A Street Through Time* by Steve Noon
- *Medieval Fashion Picture Book* by Laura Cowan and Elena Selivanova
- *Look Inside a Castle* by Conrad Mason
- *Stephen Biesty's Cross-Sections Castle* by DK
- *Medieval Castle: Inside Out* by Justine Ciovacco
- *The Making of a Knight* by Patrick O'Brien
- *St George and the Dragon* by Margaret Hodges and Trina Schart Hyman
- *A Kid's Life During the Middle Ages* by Sarah Machajewski
- *Horrible Histories: Dark Knights and Dingy Castles* by Terry Deary
- *Horrible Histories: Measly Middle Ages* by Terry Deary
- *The Squire's Tale* by Gerald Morris
- *Women and Girls in the Middle Ages* by Kay Eastwood
- *The World of the Medieval Knight* by Charles Phillips
- Protector of the Small series by Tamora Pierce

General books and documentaries about knights, castles and maids

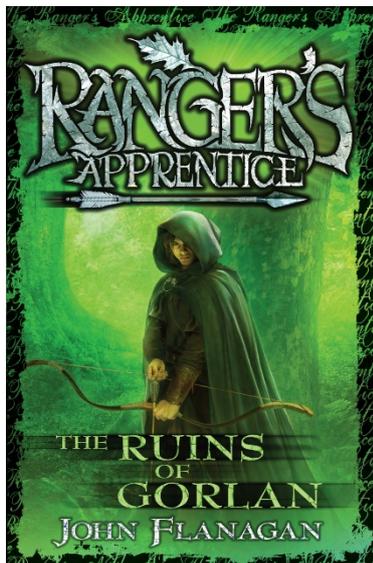
- *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* by Paul B. Newman
- Secrets of the Castle [Documentary series] imdb.com/title/tt4388710/
(Episode 1 on YouTube here: youtube.com/watch?v=ydoRAbpWfCU)
- Secrets of Great British Castles [Documentary series]: channel5.com/show/secrets-of-great-british-castles/

Activities

- Developing observation skills in younger students: sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/2071-developing-observation-skills-in-younger-students
- Secret Societies: Codes, Ciphers and Philosophy Activity: ontarioteachers.wordpress.com/2018/04/03/secret-societies-codes-ciphers-philosophy-activity/
- Medieval Women Teaching Pack: teachingwomenshistory.com/teaching-resources/medieval-women/



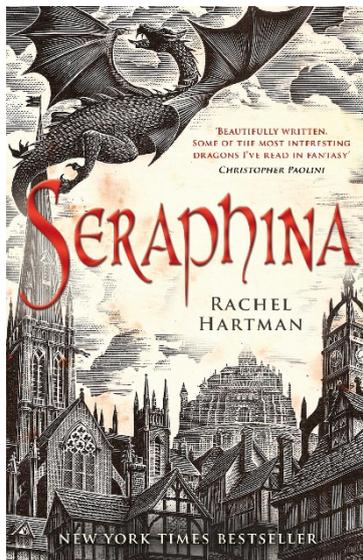
FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



Ranger's Apprentice 1: The Ruins of Gorlan
by John Flanagan

Will is small for his age, but agile and energetic. All his life, he has dreamed of becoming a great knight like the father he never knew, so he is devastated when he is rejected as an apprentice to Castle Redmont's Battleschool. Instead he is apprenticed to Halt, the mysterious Ranger whose uncanny ability to move unseen is thought to be the result of black magic. Reluctantly, Will learns to use a Ranger's secret weapons: a bow and arrow, a mottled cloak and a stubborn little pony. It may not be the sword and battlehorse he longs for, but when Will and Halt set out on a desperate mission to prevent the assassination of the King, Will finds that a Ranger's weapons are not so useless after all . . .

[Teachers' resources available.](#)



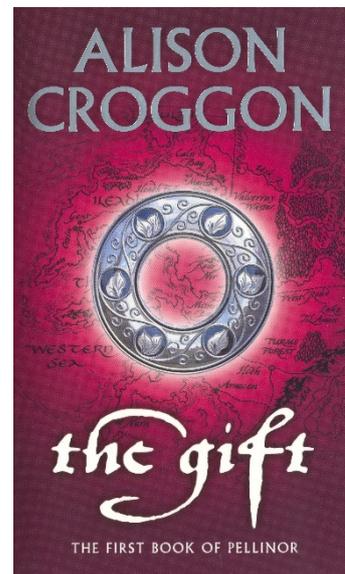
Seraphina
by Rachel Hartman

The kingdom of Goredd is populated by humans and by dragons who fold themselves into a human form. Though they live alongside each other, the peace between them is uneasy.

But when a member of the royal family is murdered, and the crime appears to have been committed by a dragon the peace and treaty between both worlds is seriously threatened . . .

Into this comes Seraphina, a gifted musician who joins the royal court as the assistant to the court composer. She is soon drawn into the murder investigation and, as she uncovers hints of a sinister plot to destroy the peace in Goredd for good, finds herself caught desperately in the middle of the tension.

For Seraphina hides a secret – the secret behind her musical gift – and if she is found out, her life is in serious danger . . .



The Gift: The First Book of Pellinor
by Alison Croggon

Maerad is a slave in a desperate and unforgiving settlement, taken there as a child when her family is destroyed in war. She is unaware that she possesses a powerful Gift, a Gift that makes her a member of the School of Pellinor. It is only when she is discovered by Cadvan, one of the great Bards of Lirigon, that her true heritage and extraordinary destiny unfolds. Now, she and her teacher Cadvan must survive a perilous journey through a time and place where the dark forces they battle with stem from the deepest recesses of other-worldly terror.

This epic fantasy about Maerad and her astonishing yet dangerous Gift is an unforgettable tale. Steeped in the rich and complex landscape of Annar, a legendary world few have yet discovered, it is one of literature's most exciting stories.



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
The Fire Star: A Maven and Reeve Mystery	A. L. Tait	9781760897079	6-10	\$16.99		
Ranger's Apprentice 1: The Ruins of Gorlan	John Flanagan	9781864719048	5-10	\$17.99		
Seraphina	Rachel Hartman	9780552566001	6-10	\$19.99		
The Gift	Alison Croggon	9780143008897	6-10	\$22.99		
TOTAL						

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