

The Hidden Monastery

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Teachers' Notes

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Summary

When Jax was just a baby, a tiny creature known as Peng fell from the sky and nestled into his palm, leaving a scar he would carry for life. Although he doesn't know it, Jax's destiny links him to Peng from that moment. Jax and his family travelled from China to Australia when he was seven years old, to 'make a better life for themselves'. Jax doesn't know whether their life is any better, though. He recalls the time in China as one when they were happy together as a family, whereas now his parents work day and night to make a life for them in this new country. Jax's Chinese name is Mingzi – meaning *bright one* or *clear one*.

When Jax discovers that his dog Ruby is gravely ill, he takes his mother's treasured gold necklace, hoping to pawn it to pay for a visit to the vet – only to discover that his dog is so old she needs to be put down. The dog escapes the vet's surgery and leads Jax towards *Whispering Cloud* rainforest park, where she gives up her fight to stay alive. Jax buries her deep in the forest and in his sorrow, he accidentally leaves his mother's necklace at the foot of an old Chinese Banyan tree. Late at night he returns to find the necklace is no longer where he left it. A sly fox has taken the necklace for his own – but this is no ordinary fox, it is a fox spirit, and it gets great strength from the gold it thieves.

Frightened by the sound of a loud cry, Jax flees deeper into the forest, and finds himself at the gates of Whispering Cloud Monastery. He meets a mysterious girl called Yu Yu, who lets him into the safety of the monastery after ensuring he is not a hungry ghost spirit. Jax is surprised to find that, although Yu Yu speaks perfect Chinese, she is in fact a blond-haired, green-eyed girl who was left on the steps of the monastery as a baby and raised by the monks. She forms an immediate and strong friendship with Jax. Yu Yu introduces Jax to the Abbot, the leader of the monastery, who knows about the scar on Jax's hand, and tells him that it is the mark of a Peng Master. He promises to teach Jax *gongfu* to strengthen his mind and body. Jax agrees to stay, and he begins his lessons with the Abbot immediately.

In the meantime, Peng is growing in strength and preparing for battle, and the fox spirit also grows stronger and attempts to get in to the monastery by taking on the form of Jax's friend Buzzy. Fortunately Jax and Yu Yu are able to fight the fox spirit and eject it from the monastery grounds, but they now know the great strength the fox spirit has gathered. The fox spirit plans to take control of Peng but first he must get rid of Jax.

As the great storm grows in strength and comes closer, the Peng mark on Jax's hand comes alive and the Abbot tells him he has heard the call of Peng. The time has come for the two to come together and fight to restore the balance of nature. The Abbot tells Jax the history of Peng, and that nature is in such violent unbalance because the last Peng has died and the previous Peng Master (who we later discover is the Abbot) is old and ready to step down. It is

now time for Jax to come together with his own Peng and to stop the silver wind before it reaches land and causes great destruction.

As Jax prepares to leave to meet his Peng and battle the silver wind, Yu Yu decides to sneak away with him to help him on his journey. As we discover, Yu Yu is destined to become Jax's spirit watcher.

After a great battle, Jax and Peng, with Yu Yu at their side, are able to overcome the silver wind and restore the balance of nature, and then use ancient hand signals to rid the fox spirit of his power. Peng leaves Jax but promises to return to him every year. A new cycle of Peng and master has begun. Jax and Yu Yu return to Jax's family, who reveal that they have always known Jax's destiny, and they welcome Yu Yu into their family.

Before Reading the Novel

- What is a monastery? Have you ever visited one? It might be interesting to do some internet research into monasteries, to find out what they are for, what purpose they serve. Why do you think the author might have chosen to set a book in a monastery? Why might this particular one be hidden?
- Consider the cover. Does it give you any clues as to what the story might be about? There is a line drawing of a creature on both the front and back covers. What might this signify? The cover gives off a bit of an 'eerie' feeling. What do you think that might mean?
- What about the blurb? What sort of creature might be calling? Could it be the creature from the cover? A fun exercise would be to write a brief paragraph on what you think the story might be about. It will be interesting to come back to this during your reading, and at the end to see whether you were on the right track.

Understanding Characters

Jax

Jax is a 12-year-old boy who was born in China and then brought to Australia with his family when he was seven. His life has changed a lot since that move: his parents, both professionals in China, are now working in a factory, alternating night and day shifts like ships in the night. Jax has become the person most responsible for his sister with his parents' odd working hours, and he takes on this responsibility with love and pride. Jax is the smallest boy in his class, which he is greatly aware of, and there is really only one boy, Buzzy, who he considers his good friend. Jax has a dog called Ruby, who he and Buzzy rescued from the road. Jax has the scar of a small creature on the palm of his hand. Although he is not sure what it signifies, he has learnt to keep it a secret as much as he can.

Yu Yu

Yu Yu is a particularly interesting character, as an 'Anglo' child who has been raised in a very traditional, spiritual Chinese environment. She has long blonde hair and green eyes, and as Jax describes her, "her actions, the way she used her chopsticks, her body movements and her speech were exactly like a Chinese girl's. She even giggled like one, covering her mouth with her hand." (p.71) She is a strong girl, both physically and emotionally, and as we discover, she is being trained by the Abbot to be Jax's spirit watcher.

The Abbot

The Abbot is the head of Whispering Cloud Monastery. We are told that he came to the monastery as a young man, originally from a very rich family. When he arrived he put on the robes of a monk, and he continues to wear the same robes, which are now worn and threadbare. The Abbot seems to understand the demons Jax battles with, and offers to teach him and “help him grow in many ways”. (p.67) The Abbot teaches Jax *gongfu*, which is Chinese martial arts, and other important life skills to assist him in becoming a Peng Master. Only when Jax answers the call of his Peng does the Abbot reveal to him that he, too, had been a Peng Master. The Abbot has great wisdom and teaches Jax and Yu Yu many things about life in the time they spend together.

Peng

Peng begins life as a tiny creature inside an orb, that falls through the sky and lands softly on the palm of a baby’s hand. It is then blown back into the wind and falls to the sea, down into the darkness of the Black Abyss. Peng lives for years in a dark sea cave but one day is carried off by a violent underwater storm where he finds himself at the mouth of a river. He then enters the rainforest, where he knows instinctively that he must wait for his master. Peng is a part of nature, and he is linked by destiny to Jax. Together, they must balance the violence in nature, which has tilted far out of alignment due to man’s mistreatment of the earth and the death of the last Peng. Peng is described as “a handsome creature. His head was like that of a magnificent lion and a gentle buffalo all mixed into one. Around his mouth, white whiskers stood out like a bright sunburst. His eyes were the colour of emeralds, and all over his body were glistening scales, each one edged in fine gold hairs. A silvery blue mane ran down his back and finished in a stallion tail so that when he moved, he looked like a slip of liquid mercury swimming through the water. And in the middle of his forehead, a small golden horn could be seen breaking through the surface of the skin.” (pp.18/19) Peng will live for a thousand years, and have many different Peng Masters, yet it is in this instance that both Peng and Master are newly born.

Buzzy

Buzzy, Jax’s friend from school, is a troubled boy who goes from being friendly and outgoing to seeming sullen and withdrawn. Jax discovers that Buzzy’s parents have separated, which might explain his change in behaviour. At one point the fox spirit takes on a likeness of Buzzy to gain entrance to Whispering Cloud Monastery in an attempt to control Jax and Peng.

Themes

Environment

- The future of the human world as we know it is in question with the coming of the silver wind. The Abbot tells Jax that “humans, too, have been treating the earth carelessly, greedily. So you two must calm Nature’s spirit, as humans must also calm theirs.” (p.122) The Abbot and the monks of Whispering Cloud Monastery tread lightly on the earth – both literally and figuratively – and the message here is one of living in harmony and balance with the earth and with nature. What we are being told is that once these things become unbalanced it is a great challenge to repair the damage.
- One lesson the Abbot is trying to teach Jax is that everything on the earth is linked. “A Peng Master must understand that everything in the universe is interconnected. To see things on a much broader scale. We are connected to the trees, to the sea, to the earth, to the sun, to the moon. Therefore what we do today will affect tomorrow. Every act you perform, no matter how small, impacts on something else.” (p.88) In essence this is the philosophy of

“think globally, act locally” that many people try to apply to the way they live their lives. Think Globally, Act Locally refers to the argument that global environmental problems can turn into action only by considering ecological, economic, and cultural differences of our local surroundings. This applies directly to what the Abbot says about humans treating the earth carelessly.

- It might be interesting to search for this phrase on the internet and discuss as a group the ways in which we can take care of the global world by doing things differently on a local scale. Perhaps your class could introduce a recycling program, look at ways to reduce water wastage in the school, discuss the ways you can reduce greenhouse emissions such as riding a bike to school instead of being driven in the car, using less heating and cooling in the classroom, thinking about the chemicals you use in your day-to-day lives, etc.

Physical and emotional wellbeing

- When Jax begins to learn *gongfu* with the Abbot, he thinks of it only as “real fighting” (p69), but soon comes to realise that it encompasses much more than just a physical element. Through the calming elements of *gongfu*, Jax learns to overcome the feeling he has had his whole life, feeling “distracted, confused and muddled” (p100) and learns to “see everything clearly for the first time”, as if the world was in “such sharp focus”. (p100)

Working together

- After Jax arrives at the monastery, he and Yu Yu very quickly become a team, training together and learning more and more about each other. It is only when Yu Yu decides to risk everything and run away to help Jax that it is revealed to us that the Abbot had been hoping she would do exactly that. “I had to pretend that I did not want her to go. I needed to know whether she could take risks and be true to her own heart. Only then would I be sure that she would fulfil her destiny as a spirit watcher... Every Peng Master must have a spirit watcher to protect him...” (p.132) Through his lessons with the Abbot, Jax learns that he must be as one with Peng if they are to truly win against the power of the silver wind. “Jax placed his hand back on Peng’s forehead. He felt himself melting into Peng, their minds, their souls, coming together. And then he began to see through Peng’s eyes as if they were his own. They were separate entities, the creature from the stars, the boy from the earth, and yet they were as one.” (p146) Peng tells Jax, “We must be as one mind if we are to engage in this battle, Mingzi.” (p146) Is it always easier to work with someone else, to share the load? Ask your students to think about their own lives, and examples of when they have worked together with someone else (a sibling, classmate, parent, friend, etc) and what the outcome was. Talk about the positives and negatives of working with another person to achieve a common goal. Is this a new skill for Jax to learn?

Different ways of learning

- Compare the two experiences Jax has of learning, one at school where “each subject melted into the other, becoming one long boring blur” (p.16) and the second with the Abbot where at the end of the day his “muscles were sore and his mind, exhausted.” (p.90) It is clear which he likes the best, but why is this the case? In both he is being pushed to learn something he didn’t know before by a teacher or instructor, and both are providing him with things that will be important to him later in life. Discuss the many different ways of learning that exist around the world, and the many different types of ‘classrooms’ that students attend in different places and cultures. The Western style of learning is very rigid, sitting in a classroom with other students, all learning at the same time and level, whereas in some African countries, or in traditional indigenous Australian experience, the idea of a classroom

might be a very different one. You could do some fascinating internet research on this subject, and then come together to pool your findings on the many different ways that we learn.

- Is one style of learning best for everyone? Does it depend on the sort of person you are? For example, some students might learn more from having someone explain in detail, whereas for others they are much more likely to take information in if they are able to actually do a task for themselves. It might be interesting to look at some basic Meyer-Briggs personality testing to see the different ways we learn. Visit <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=younger> with your students and try the VARK learning styles questionnaire. VARK stands for Visual, Aural, Read/Write or Kinaesthetic, which are the four common learning styles. Students will enjoy finding out more about how they learn, and as this questionnaire is designed specifically for younger people, it offers some useful advice on better ways to learn in the classroom and beyond.

Self-Esteem

- One of the lessons Jax learns at Whispering Cloud Monastery is an improved sense of self-esteem. When the fox spirit comes to the monastery, taking on the form of Buzzy, Jax immediately recalls the feelings of inferiority he has always felt with Buzzy. “Everything came back to him – how small he felt, how he envied Buzzy for being good at sport, for being tall and popular. It was as if a net had been pulled tightly around him.” (p.105) These feelings are very real to Jax, making him feel “small and insignificant”.

Language and culture

- Is Yu Yu Chinese? Technically we can say no, as she has no Chinese lineage, however she has been raised in a totally Chinese environment, speaking only Chinese language and being immersed in Chinese culture, history and mythology, and surrounded by Chinese people. What is it that makes us who we are? This is a question that we can think about on many levels. For example, if a person of Chinese (or African, or any other) heritage is born and raised in a totally Anglo-Saxon environment, speaking only English, and immersed in Australian (for example) culture, why is it that it is difficult for that person to be accepted as Australian? When Jax says that “Where and how you grow up has so much to do with who you are” (p.71) is he speaking only about Yu Yu or does this look beyond her experience to his own?

- This could make for an interesting debate in the classroom. Most classrooms today have a wide representation of cultures, but most of the students will have been born and raised in Australia. You could look at some of the arguments that are used in society to support the view that not everyone is ‘Australian’ even if they have been born in Australia, and perhaps debate the subject as a class. Of course, this will be dependent on the maturity of your students, and the teacher will need to ensure that this subject is handled sensitively, and does not lead to any inappropriate attitudes or behaviour being raised.

Family and responsibility

- Jax’s family includes his parents, himself and his sister Mai. With Jax’s parents working shift work, it is left to Jax to take care of his sister for much of the time. Jax handles this responsibility very capably, and it is clear that his sister Mai is also very responsible for her age. “Mai pushed her chair over to the sink and began to wash her dishes. ‘Hurry, Jax,’ she said, rinsing her plate and putting it in the rack to dry.” (p.9) We can assume Mai is some years younger than Jax, but she already has a level of maturity to her behaviour that comes out of necessity.

- Do many children in the class have both parents out to work? Do many have some level of responsibility for their younger siblings? Kids who came home to an empty house after

school used to be called 'latchkey kids' and it was quite uncommon, whereas these days many children take care of themselves in the afternoons. Talk as a class about the sorts of tasks kids have to do to help run the family home to help parents who are working. You could make a list on the board of the tasks, such as helping to prepare dinner, taking care of siblings, doing housework or garden work, etc.

- While Jax is at Whispering Cloud Monastery he starts to forget about his family at home. The Abbot takes on the role of protector or guardian and the monks Jax learns from become his teachers, with Yu-Yu seeming like a sister. "As Jax became used to temple life, his old life with family and school seemed to fade into the distance. He didn't miss home like he thought he would. It was as if he had wrapped up all the old parts of himself and put them away for a while. The monastery was his whole world now." (p.98) How might you feel if you were separated from your family in this way? Is it normal to forget your family when you are so busy like Jax, or is it some sort of magic coming from Whispering Cloud Monastery that helps Jax to focus on the tasks set before him?

The desire to belong

- Jax has a great desire to belong, and there is a strong sense of the need for belonging in the story. Just as Jax longs to fit in, and worries about how he appears to other people, Yu Yu longs to "belong to a real family. I want a real mother and father like you have, and a little sister. I want to see what it's like on the outside." (p.127) The image that Yu Yu has of 'real' families is quite different to the real experience of Jax's family life, but perhaps Yu Yu also helps to remind him of what he has in his family.

- The Abbot tells Jax that he needs to relax his idea of himself. He means that Jax needs to be willing to let himself "look stupid. To learn, here, you must lose and lose, and by losing, learn to win." (p.101) Jax's reaction to this advice clearly shows his weakness. "Jax found that almost the hardest thing of all. He still cared what he looked like in front of people, especially Yu Yu." (p.101)

- When Buzzy comes to the monastery (the fox spirit in disguise) Jax is surprised to feel all his old feelings of envy coming to the surface again. "Everything came back to him – how small he felt, how he envied Buzzy for being good at sport, for being tall and popular. It was as if a net had been pulled tightly around him . . . forcing him to be the old Jax – the small and insignificant and incomplete Jax." (p.105) Jax feels an intense envy of Buzzy's natural popularity and this just increases his own lack of self-esteem and confidence. Opposite to this are Jax's feelings when he is with Yu Yu. "Jax realised that Yu Yu was like the other side of his being." (p.115) His comfort with Yu Yu may stem from the Chinese connection they share, even though Yu Yu is not actually Chinese.

- Yu-Yu was left on the monastery steps when she was just a baby. The only thing she has from her life before is a pendant-watch that was left with her, which she assumes was her mother's. When she describes her place at the monastery she says "This is my home and the Abbot is like my father and the monks are like my uncles. I have good food three times a day, I know how to fight, to grow vegetables, to cook, and everyone spoils me. I think I am a very lucky girl." (p.81) As she says this, however, Jax senses a "deep sadness" behind her words.

- Is there more to life than just the basic necessities of food and shelter (although Yu-Yu obviously gets more than just that)? What does it mean to truly belong? If you have known only life with a family around you it might be hard to imagine Yu-Yu's position, and perhaps her situation even sounds exotic or exciting. An activity around this idea of belonging could be to make a list of what you get from a family. This could include the basics such as food, shelter, clothing, education, etc. but if you tease it out a bit more you might find your students are able to add some more intangible things such as comfort, love, security, etc. Talk about the differences between Jax's life at home and Yu-Yu's life at the monastery.

Significant Scenes and Quotes

The following quotes are taken either from key passages in the novel, or are significant in their own right for the being thought-provoking, or being a springboard to further discussion and debate. These quotes could be used in several different ways. For example, you could break students into small groups and give each group a quote to discuss, or you could run mini debates arguing for and against the viewpoint put forward in the quote. It might also be interesting to ask students to keep their eyes open for other significant lines in the text, and to give reasons for their choices.

“Learning this way wasn’t boring like sitting in a classroom.” (p.90)

“A caged cricket will never sing as sweetly as one that is free.” (p.100)

“Every act you perform impacts on something else.” (p.88)

“Revenge is for people who haven’t grown up inside. It never fixes things, it just keeps going round and round.” (p.80)

“Where and how you grow up has so much to do with who you are.” (p.71)

“Night changes everything.” (p.49)

“...every creature in the world was connected in some way. Everything depended on everything else, whether it be for food or protection or shelter. It was a complex balance that maintained life.” (p.19)

Text, Style, Mood and Structure

- Most novels fit within a specific style, or ‘genre’. A genre, as it relates to literature, is a specific style of expressing oneself, and a way of categorising a particular piece of writing. Some examples of genre include comedy, romance, science fiction, horror, etc. How might you classify *The Hidden Monastery* in terms of genre? Can it be defined as fantasy? How might you define the genre of ‘fantasy’? Students might like to find different ways of doing this by using the Internet. What other books have you read in this genre? How do they compare with this book, in relation to their place within the style, or genre? If not fantasy, how else would you define this book?
- Look at the chapter headings at the start of each chapter, or on the list at the beginning of the book. Have you seen chapter headings before? How common are they in books for this age group? What purpose do you think they serve? As a writing exercise, students could take a chapter heading from the list that appeals to them and write their own short story based around it. The story does not need to relate to *The Hidden Monastery*, but it might be interesting to what sorts of stories students write about ‘The Monster in the Lake’ or ‘The Stench from the Outside’.
- There are several instances in the text where the author has used the Chinese words for a passage followed by the same passage in English. “*Shenme shi?* What’s wrong, Mingzi?” (p126) “*Gui, zou kai!* Go away, ghost”. (p57) What purpose does this serve? Does it aide in the telling of the story? Is it necessary? Talk about whether you find it adds to the enjoyment of the story, or detracts from it? Why might the author have chosen to include these passages?

Think of some other examples where you might come across this type of inclusion, and whether it was successful in that instance. Often the English is not included, so you need to rely on the context of the passage to understand what is being said. What are your thoughts on this type of literary technique? Discuss these questions as a class.