



Teachers' Notes

Castle of the Zombies

The Fixers Book 1

SEAN WILLIAMS
Illustrated by Nial O'Connor

Teachers' Notes written by Anita Jonsberg

OMNIBUS BOOKS

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THE STORY

When Ollie (Ollie) moves house, the first thing he notices is that his new street seems 'wrong'. Balls roll in unexpected directions; the power goes off too often; the Internet is slow, or doesn't work. Even Trevor the cat is unsettled.

One night, awakened by a strange noise, Ollie peers out of his window to see men in silvered suits banging at his door. Terrified, Ollie ventures near the door, which is glowing an eerie blue. He opens it and tumbles into a world far removed from his own, a world where a castle is alive and villagers are frightened.

The story follows Ollie as he tries to make sense of an alien landscape where, unexpectedly, his only ally wears a Swatch watch.

THE AUTHOR

Sean Williams has been writing full-time since 1999, ten years after he wrote his first short story. He has been nominated thirty times for the major Australian awards (Ditmar, Aurealis & McNamara) and has won ten times. Jack Dann has described him as 'One of the hottest writers in the country ... a major Australian talent', and added in the bio accompanying his opening story in the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology, *Dreaming Down-Under*, that he 'cooks a mean curry'. He lives in the centre of Adelaide, South Australia, where he was Chair of the SA Writer's Centre from 2001 to 2003. For a change of pace, he enjoys DJing any chance he can get.

Sean recently finished working on three series simultaneously: The Books of the Change (a solo fantasy trilogy generously supported by the Australia Council), the Orphans series (a post-Spike space opera co-written with Shane Dix), and the Force Heretic trilogy (set in the Star Wars: New Jedi Order universe and also co-written with Shane Dix).

Future series include the Books of the Cataclysm, a prequel/sequel series set in the same universe as the Books of the Change, and a diptych of science fiction novels (Geodesica) in collaboration with Shane Dix.

As well as novels, Sean has had over 60 short stories published in a variety of places around the world. 'Ghosts of the Fall' was first published in Volume IX of the annual anthology series of the Writers of the Future Contest, in which it was a prize-winner. Three stories were reprinted in the Strahan and Byrne *Year's Best Australian SF & Fantasy* series. 'Going Nowhere' appeared in *The Oxford Book of Australian Ghost Stories*, 'A Map of the Mines of Barnath' was chosen for

inclusion in *Centaurus*, a collection of the best short Australian SF published in the last 25 years, and 'Evermore' was reprinted in Gardner Dozois' *Year's Best SF 17* (2000). His work has been translated into French, Japanese, Hebrew, Russian and Polish, and collected in the Ditmar Award-winning *New Adventures in Sci-Fi* (1999) and *A View Before Dying* (1998), both from Ticonderoga Publications, and *Doorway to Eternity* (MirrorDanse Books, 1994).

He won two Aurealis Awards in 1996, one of them for Best Horror Short Story ('Passing the Bone'). The other was for Best SF Novel (*Metal Fatigue*, reprinted by the UK's Swift Publishers in hardcover in 1999). His 1998 novel *The Resurrected Man* won the Ditmar Award for Long Fiction for that year. He was short-listed for the SA Great Literature Award in 1999, and received it in 2000.

He is also known as a collaborator. A non-fiction piece with Simon Brown, 'No Axis, No Boundary: the Search for a Definition of SF', was nominated for the William Atheling Jr Award. Together they also won the 1999 Best Horror Short Story Aurealis Award (for 'Atrax') and were reprinted in Gardner Dozois' *Year's Best SF 15* ('The Masque of Agamemnon').

THE ILLUSTRATOR

Nial O'Connor (aka Zeldz Magnoonis) is a Shanghai-based illustrator and comic artist who works on major ad campaigns (including Dove chocolate) as well as his own original work. O'Connor was born in Ireland but moved to Australia when he was 7 years old.

BEFORE READING THE TEXT

Time Travel (Physics)

As a class, watch the following clip about time travel (links to science curriculum: Occam's Razor, Einstein's theory of relativity and wormholes.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLF9_Mt5CNo&NR=1 It features a young narrator, and the clip includes scientist Michio Kaku and Einstein's theory of relativity (if YouTube is blocked in your school, ask your IT co-ordinator to temporarily unblock it for you, or give you setting for a proxy server). There are also clips of the popular film *Back to the Future*, which focuses on time travel. Watch *Back to the Future* and have students create a description of what they would expect to find here on Earth in a hundred years' time.

Biology

Have students explore what an organism is.

Have them find out:

- What is the smallest organism on Earth
- What is the largest
- What organisms are made of

White blood cells and antibodies:

Have students locate and write down answers to the following:

- What very important job do white blood cells do in the human body?
- Find a picture of a white blood cell
- What is an antibody?
- What is an antigen?

A useful Internet site is:

<http://www.fi.edu/learn/heart/blood/white.html>

NB: Please check all websites for suitability on the date of proposed use.

READING THE TEXT

To get the most out of the novel, it is recommended that you read and discuss it as a class.

Chapter 1: The Wrong Street

For discussion:

1. In pairs, have students note down what makes Ollie's street 'wrong'. Collate their ideas on the whiteboard.
2. What other reasons might Ollie have to dislike the street?
3. What else does the reader know about the street from the illustration?
4. Discuss the function of the opening sentences of each section. How does the font help to achieve their purpose?
5. Narrative perspective: highlight Ollie as a first-person narrator, and discuss why this type of narrator might not always be reliable.
6. How does the author create suspense at the end of the (each) chapter?

Activities:

1. How do readers know what Ollie's parents are like? Have students draw outlines of a man and a woman on large paper, and then fill in the outlines with quotes from the novel that act as 'proof' (ongoing).

2. Ollie refers to optical illusions: you can share some excellent examples with your class at:
<http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/illusion/illusions.htm>
<http://www.mcescher.com/>
3. Ollie describes 'one of those nightmares where you can't run or fight back.'
Have students describe a similar experience – this would work well as an oral activity.

Chapter 2: Caught in the Castle & Chapter 3: A Nasty Case of Heartburn

For discussion:

1. How has Ollie ended up where he is? (Link back to pre-reading activities.)
2. How does the author make his destination seem sinister?
3. Discuss the personification of the castle: what human characteristics does it possess? Keep an ongoing list throughout the novel.
4. What role do the 'armours' play in the organic castle? How did Ollie work it out?

Chapter 4: Wanted: One Brain

For discussion:

1. Niff is wearing a Swatch watch. What is the significance of this? (Bring in the term 'anachronism' and explain.) Have students come up with more examples of anachronisms – encourage them to be as creative as possible.
2. Explore what makes Niff and Ollie become 'friends'. Have students think about what friends *do* for each other.

Activities:

1. Discuss what the definition of 'zombie' really is, and have students find out where in the world they are believed to really exist. Discuss how 'zombie-like' states can be induced using chemicals.

Chapter 5: Zombie Camouflage & Chapter 6: The Hall of Ideas

For discussion:

1. Is Wight a villain? Does he see himself as such? Explore why he might not.
2. What role do villages play in keeping the castle alive?
3. Are the zombies real? What has happened to them?

Activities:

1. Make a chart which shows the different jobs completed by zombies with red, blue, green and yellow cloaks.

2. Look at the structure of veins: what is the 'fairy floss' that Ollie refers to when Niff is injecting the castle with poison?
3. The castle brain is referred to as 'the Hall of Ideas'. List three good ideas you have had recently, and then three really bad ones.
4. Make a list of possible reasons for the collection of items in the hall.

Chapter 7: Going Home a Hero

For discussion:

1. Why is there another version of Ollie in his bed? What has happened?

Activities:

1. Imagine you go home today and find yourself already there. Describe what might happen, and how you might (both) react to the situation.

AFTER READING THE TEXT (ASSIGNMENTS)

Creative:

1. Using magazine and Internet images, design a large poster which shows Ollie's journey. Write a commentary that explains how the images used relate to each part of the text.
2. Produce a diorama that focuses on an exciting moment from the novel, and explain why you chose that particular moment.
3. Produce a cross-section model of the castle (Lego could be used, with extra self-sourced parts). Ensure it is a close representation of what Williams describes in the novel.
4. Write a newspaper article as reporter who has witnessed 'the fixers' and their activities in Ollie's Street.
5. Produce a data-bank of resources featuring time and space travel.
6. Pretend you are Niff. Write a letter to a friend (not Ollie) describing what happened to you, and what your life is like now you are free of the castle.
7. Write a summary of what happens to Ollie after the end of the novel.

Analytical:

1. Is Ollie a reliable narrator? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
2. How does author Sean Williams make events in the novel seem real?
3. Discuss how Nial O'Connor's illustrations help to tell the story: think about what extra elements they suggest.

FURTHER READING

Planet of the Cyborgs

Book 2 of The Fixers (ISBN 978 1 86291 855 9)

Curse of the Vampire

Book 3 of The Fixers (ISBN 978 1 82691 856 6)

Invasion of the Freaks

Book 4 of The Fixers (ISBN 978 1 82691 857 3)

WEBSITE

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