



 @FletcherMoss

THE POISON BOY BY FLETCHER MOSS

SYNOPSIS

Poison boy Dalton Fly, an orphan and lowly food taster to the rich, has a lucky escape after drinking laced wine. But his mate Bennie Jinks is less fortunate, and Dalton wants answers. Who murdered his friend and what were they really after?

With the help of fellow poison boy Sal Sleepwell and aristocratic girl Scarlet Dropmore, whose life he unwittingly saved, he sets out to rescue his city from the poisoners within. However, after they get their hands on an ornate map of the city of Highlions, Dalton and his associates soon realise it is only a select few who are in danger – those who are named on the map and who stand in line to take over the running of the city from the recently deceased Duke Elber.

With the map in their possession, Dalton, Sal and Scarlet attempt to head off the poisoner, the hideously scarred Pallis Tench, before he kills those whose existence jeopardises his master's claim on the Dukedom. Dalton's gang grows in size as they manage to intervene in this murderous plot, but with time running out before the new Duke is named, they must make it to the Palace of Justice before the senators invest the illegitimate Doone De Bello.

In amongst this chaos, Dalton has another puzzle to solve. What is the 'buckle box' that his employer has given him, and what does it tell him about who he really is ...?



WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

This is a world to keep you awake at night. So astonishing visually that you could touch it and taste it – but beware of just who's poisoning who. And for what ... **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Fletcher Moss is an assistant head teacher at a school in Greater Manchester. He previously worked as a classroom teacher, shelf-stacker and van driver in France and Spain. Fletcher is currently working on his second novel for children. He lives in Manchester with his wife and young daughter.

Fletcher Moss won the *Times*/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition 2012 for his entry, *The Poison Boy*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I have been writing since infant school, inspired by an understanding teacher who let me skip lessons in science and geography in order to write clumsy Dr Who fan-fiction at the back of the class.

I studied English Literature at Manchester University, where I became obsessed with trying to write detective fiction. I repeated a series of mistakes for the next fifteen years, trying my hand at geeky existential lad-lit, food writing and screenplays before Philip Reeve's Mortal Engines series stopped me in my tracks. I've been frantically reading and writing YA ever since, having found the genre I've spent nigh-on two decades searching for. I am currently working on a sequel to The Poison Boy.

The real Fletcher Moss was an alderman of Manchester who, after his death, bequeathed a beautiful botanic garden to the people of Didsbury. As an author, I'm borrowing his name. **FLETCHER MOSS, AUTHOR**



THEMES

- Friendship
- Identity
- Class
- Trust
- Luck and superstition
- Love
- Adventure

WRITING STYLE

The Poison Boy is a thrilling, richly-imagined swashbuckling adventure, set in an historical, labyrinthine city. The writing is crammed full of visceral detail and, at times, has a claustrophobic quality that suits the story well. There is a strong emphasis on the development of friendships and trust, and the novel contains a wide variety of intriguingly-named characters. These characters often find themselves in perilous situations and there are intermittent depictions of bloody violence. 41 chapters, 336 pages, age 10+.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1: Disembodied voices

In *The Poison Boy*, Dalton Fly often finds himself hiding from view; trying to evade capture whilst listening in to other people's conversations. In chapter one, Dalton hides from two men who are searching for him. However, he is unable to clearly see what these men look like. Like those reading the book, Dalton can only imagine how the men look based on how they talk and what they say.



Using this and other examples from the novel as a starting point, pupils could be asked to write short stories in which two or more people are talking and moving, but are obscured from view in some way. These short stories can then be read out to the class, or passed to another pupil to read. Based solely on the contents of these short stories, other pupils could then try to illustrate – or demonstrate physically – how they think the characters in the stories look and act. A discussion could then be had as to why these decisions were made and what it was in the language that helped them make their choices.

2: Mapping out a story

In chapter thirteen, Dalton, Sal and Scarlet begin a pursuit of a mystery man which takes them on a frantic winding journey through Highlions. In studying this chapter, pupils could be introduced to the term ‘labyrinthine’ and a discussion could be had as to how this term might relate to the world Fletcher Moss creates in *The Poison Boy*. Pupils could then be tasked with writing their own chase sequence that is labyrinthine in nature, including street names, descriptions of buildings, and landmarks. Other pupils could then be given the task of creating a street map based on this writing, as Fletcher Moss does with *The Poison Boy* (see the map included at the start of the novel). Pupils could then build on this map, by developing new stories that incorporate areas already included on the map, but which extend the story beyond its boundaries (here it might be useful to remind pupils of the compass points to avoid too much confusion). This activity could continue until a whole town or city has been mapped. The activity could also begin with the map being drawn first (as opposed to the story being written), depending on the primary skills and interest of the class. Through this activity, links can also be made with the ‘mapping’ that takes place in other well-known fiction, such as Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.

3: Say what?

Throughout the novel, the poison boys use their own language for describing certain objects or when talking about things that have happened. For example, ‘chinkers’, meaning ‘coins’, or ‘ghosted’, meaning ‘died’ (for a detailed list, read *The Language of Highlions* on page 339).



Pupils could be asked to come up with their own language; one that relates to their own lives and environment. It could be interesting for pupils to act out some rehearsed scenes using these new words and having other pupils trying to work out what these words might mean. Obviously, some words might be easier to act out than others, but this activity could lead on to some interesting discussions around language choices, and what makes some word choices plausible and others arbitrary (perhaps introducing terms such as ‘onomatopoeia’). As a result of this work, it might be fun for a class to devise a general glossary of all the words they have come up with. This, in turn, could be used in a future writing project.

4: Build your own buckle box

When Dalton Fly and the others sift through his buckle box (page 214), they are attempting to make sense of the contents and work out where Dalton came from and who he really is. With just a few items (parts of a letter, newspaper article, small keepsakes, keys etc.) it is possible to develop elaborate back stories for a person or character – whether these are likely to be true or not! Pupils could be asked to create their own buckle boxes (either sourcing the contents themselves, or selecting items already collected), using the items as a basis for the development of a fictional character. Pupils should try and come up with a background for this character, relating it to the items in the buckle box. Alternatively, pupils could be presented with a number of items and asked to devise a character history based on the items they are given. The same items could also be presented to different pupils and the results compared. Clearly there need be no limit on how realistic these character back stories should be, and it might be interesting to see how far this activity could push the pupils’ imagination.

5: What’s in a name?

Many of the characters in *The Poison Boy* have weird and wonderful names, such as Pallis Tench, Gabriel Applefell and Bennie Jinks. Not only do these names make the reading of the novel a more colourful experience, but they also provide clues about the origin and nature of the characters.



On pages 166-167, for instance, we learn why Lungbutter and Saddlesore are named as they are. These particular characters get their names from their physical characteristics, but others, such as Dalton Fly, acquire their names more by their association with a particular event or brand name! Pupils could be asked to come up with new characters for *The Poison Boy*, naming them in the same sort of way. Perhaps drawing these new characters, devising a character back story, or acting out how the characters might move and look would help pupils find the most fitting and imaginative names. It might also be fun to link this work with the first activity, so that pupils already have a starting point for their character creations.

6: Dangerous jobs

Being a poison boy is a very dangerous job. Each time the boys are required to work, there is a good chance they will end up dead. As a career, it's clearly not a good choice! However, there are plenty of other jobs throughout history that have been dangerous (including some that people do today). Pupils could undertake a research project in which they find out about some of these jobs. It could be a useful group work exercise with students creating wall displays, however it might also be interesting for pupils to be given the task of compiling a 'top ten' of dangerous jobs. Each group having to try and convince the other groups that their job is the most dangerous!

The activities above could all perhaps be combined in a larger project, in which pupils construct their own literary landscape, complete with maps, characters and language. The pupils could create stories that take place within this setting and that overlap with those of other pupils – thereby creating stories that offer different perspectives on the same constructed world (with different characters being engaged in different jobs and positions).



WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Dalton Fly carries his 'lucky Jack' with him for most of the book. Do you believe lucky charms work? How might they make a difference to someone's life? Do you have a lucky charm, and do you think it makes a difference to your life? If you had to choose a lucky charm, what would it be and why?
2. Read the beginning of chapter four, pages 27-29. Why do you think Oscar and the poison boys are likely to be superstitious in this way? Would you be more likely to be a superstitious person if you had Dalton Fly's job? Why, why not?
3. In chapter six, we read that, 'Eyesdown was always saying how amazing it was what people threw away.' What does he mean by this? What do you throw away and what impression would this give of you to someone like Eyesdown?
4. In chapter eight, what makes Dalton and Sal feel like they are 'out of their depth' or 'out of place'? How do they deal with this? What would make you feel out of place? How would you deal with it?

