

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron

Written by Dave Luckett

The author

Dave Luckett was born in 1951 in New South Wales, the son of a Presbyterian minister. He lived in Sydney until he was thirteen, when the family moved to Western Australia.

Dave was educated at Scotch College, Perth, and the University of Western Australia. He graduated in 1983 with a BA, majoring in medieval history, and in the following year received a Dip. Ed. He has worked in various fields, including teaching, and is now a full-time writer. Dave describes himself as living in a 'leafless, non-riverine suburb of Perth' and leading 'a very ordinary life. I ... read, and I love cricket, my own home and my family - my son Evan, who likes cricket too, and my wife Sally, who doesn't.' He has been a fan of science fiction and fantasy for more than twenty years.

Dave's first published book, *The Adventures of Addam*, was released by Omnibus in 1993, and was followed by *The Best Batsman in the World* (1994) and its sequel *The Last Eleven* (1997). Two young adult novellas, *Night Hunters* and *The Wizard and Me*, were published in 1995 and 1996 respectively; and then came the impressive Tenabran Trilogy: *A Dark Winter* (1998), *A Dark Journey* (1999) and *A Dark Victory* (1999).

Dave's work has received glowing recognition. *Night Hunters* was listed as a Notable Book by the CBC in 1996; *The Wizard and Me* won the WA Science Fiction Foundation prize for short fiction in 1996; and the Tenabran Trilogy has received a host of awards. *A Dark Winter* was a joint winner of the Fantasy Division of the Aurealis Awards, was shortlisted in the WA Premier's 1999 Book Awards (YA category) and was a CBC Notable Book; and both *A Dark Journey* and *A Dark Victory* were shortlisted for the Fantasy Division of the 2000 Aurealis Awards, with *A Dark Victory* winning both this and the YA division.

The first book in the Rhianna series, *Rhianna and the Wild Magic*, was judged a CBC Notable Book in 2001 and was shortlisted for the WA Premier's 2000 Book Awards.

Dave Luckett is a craftsman writer for whom the telling of a good story, and telling it well, are paramount. His prose style is rich and allusive, with many of the stylistic overtones of traditional storytelling. In all his novels there is a highly moral conscience at work, and classic themes, especially the struggle between good and evil, underpin all his stories. He believes strongly in the importance of presenting his readers with positive outcomes — of showing, without didacticism, that goodness and hope will always prevail.

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Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron

Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron is the second volume in the Rhianna trilogy, and continues the story of Rhianna Wildwood, 'a girl ten or eleven years old, brown-haired, with a freckled nose'. Rhianna, a blacksmith's daughter, lives in the coastal village of Smallhaven, in a country ruled by the Queen in Avalon. In this Land nearly everything is governed by magic, and everyone in Smallhaven knows the spells that make life run smoothly. The only activity not assisted by magic is blacksmithing, because iron and magic cancel each other out.

Rhianna knows the power of magic better than most, for she herself is a phenomenon: she possesses Wild Magic, the magic that comes from the Land itself: the air, wind and fire, rain and sunshine. Others learn spells and charms, but Rhianna cannot. She must study rigorously to control her magic, or else things go spectacularly wrong. At all times she must wear a jewel, a beautiful pendant made from rubies and gold, for this stops the Wild Magic from rushing in. Rhianna's gift is so strong that if unchecked it takes up all the magic for the whole district. When she takes the jewel off — something her Master, Antheus Northstar, has forbidden — she possesses a power that is virtually limitless. Magister Northstar is the most powerful magician in the land, a Mage on the Queen's Council, and Rhianna is his apprentice.

Adjoining the Queen's Land is the land of the Eldra, a race of elvish people who live in complete harmony with nature. Magic is part of their lives, something as natural as breathing.

The story begins with Eriseth, a young Eldran girl, making her way from her home forest towards Smallhaven village. Like Rhianna, Eriseth is a phenomenon. She has no magic. Her Wisewoman, Arwenna, has sent her to Rhianna's world so that she can learn, instead, the craft of iron, and bring it back to her own people. But unknown to Eriseth, another Eldra woman is shadowing her. This woman, known as the Watcher, is in the employ of another Wisewoman, Merched, who is intent on overturning the rule of Arwenna. She plans to incite strife between the Eldra and the Queen's people, known to the Eldra as the Clumsy Ones.

Rhianna's father, Loys, is overjoyed to have an apprentice to help him at the forge, especially one as talented as Eriseth. Involved with teaching his new pupil, he neglects his own daughter, who is increasingly resentful. Worse, Rhianna's Master, Magister Northstar, is also obsessed with Eriseth's progress, and unthinkingly ignores Rhianna's obvious need for his attention. It's a volatile situation, and one that shows how easily the Wild Magic can be used for ill.

One day, delivering food to her father at the forge, Rhianna's envious dislike of Eriseth results in her determination to outdo the Eldran girl. Taking off her pendant in a fit of rage, she bespells the iron fire dogs her father and Eriseth have been making. The dogs, dangerous products of malice and fury, escape, and despite the girls' attempts to track them down, both vanish. Rhianna's father is wounded by one of them and becomes gravely ill.

The Magister is horrified by what has happened — less so by Rhianna's disobedience than by the fact that she has somehow done the impossible: worked magic on cold iron. 'Anger is a fire-caller, and iron is made in the fire. But I don't know how it was done. I didn't realise it could be done.' (page 65). Even more frightening is the potential outcome: 'Suppose you could make a blade, a fine blade, and

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have it bespelled — so that it never lost its edge, was as fine as a willow wand, and carved through shield and armour like paper. How much do you think a pirate, or a warlord, or an enemy king would pay for such a thing?' (page 66).

Rhianna and Eriseth must undo the harm they have done. They must find the dogs of iron — dogs made live by the power not only of the Wild Magic, but, as the Magister says, 'with fire and iron, envy and jealousy and rage and bitter gall. Fear and foolishness, ignorance and neglect' — and unmake them. In their hunt for the dogs they put their own safety, and the safety of the Queen's Land, very much at risk. They discover the first dog, and Rhianna uses her magic and her knowledge of iron to destroy it, but this triumph is short-lived. The Eldra spy has done her work, and a trap has been laid for the girls' abduction. Renegade elements of the Eldra — those intent on removing Arwenna from power — have conspired with mercenaries of the enemy Hrothwil, King of the Western Isles, to abduct the girls and deliver them to Hrothwil, giving him access to bespelled steel. Hrothwil's mercenary, Kaldi, overpowers them and drags them away to his ship.

Ultimately Rhianna gains freedom for herself and Eriseth. The second iron dog savages Kaldi to death before it dies itself, victim of Rhianna's magic and its own inherent weakness.

The final chapter brings all the threads together, reuniting Rhianna with her family and bringing Eriseth into the fold.

Themes

Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron contains a number of themes that take up and amplify some of the related subjects in the first book, *Rhianna and the Wild Magic*. Many of these themes are woven around the opposite characters of Rhianna and Eriseth.

1. *Good and evil.* As always in Dave Lockett's novels, this underpins everything. It is Rhianna's ability to conquer the bad things in herself that leads to her redemption, and saves her father from death. The evil plans of the Wisewoman Merched and the mercenary Kaldi are made to fail miserably, and the positive values prevail. However, 'good' and 'evil' are never clear-cut. All characters, even the good ones, have their failings and weaknesses, and the combined effect of all these negative things can be disastrous.
2. *The need to belong, to have one's place in the world.* Rhianna's Wild Talent, her excess of magic power, makes her something of a freak, an outsider in her own world. She needs the constant love and support of her family and her Master. Eriseth is an outsider too, but for different reasons: unlike other Eldra, she has no magic at all. Poised between two worlds — the world of the Eldra and the world of the Clumsy Ones — she strives to please her blacksmith Master, Rhianna's father, and shows great talent with that most unmagical of skills, the ability to forge iron.

Throughout the book there are hints that Magister Northstar has more than a passing interest in Eriseth because he has had a long-ago relationship the Eldran Arwenna. Is Eriseth, then, a mixed-race child? She has skills from both sides of her heritage, but 'belongs' to neither.

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Eriseth's final realisation that her real home is with Rhianna's family is one of the high points of the story.

3. *Love and compassion.* There are many kinds of love expressed in this novel: love of family, love of homeland, and a wider love embracing respect for all living things. Rhianna's volatile behaviour stems from her feeling that she isn't loved, that Eriseth has usurped her special position in the eyes of her father and her Master. Eriseth, on the other hand, envies Rhianna the love and security of her family, for the Eldra have no such social system: children are abandoned by their parents as soon as they can look after themselves.

Rhianna's greatest achievement is ultimately to learn understanding and show compassion even to those whom she has feared and tried to destroy. It is this that destroys the poison her rage has created.

4. *Power.* In the fantasy world of this novel, magic is the greatest power. Rhianna has the power of the Wild Magic — but she is not always able to use it wisely. This is something she needs to learn. Her magical power is something greatly desired by others, who may use it to their own ends. Bespelled steel gives power of a different kind: the power to subjugate others. The lesson Rhianna learns is that anger and violence are far less powerful than their opposites — 'Pity, mercy, responsibility, charity, honour, decency' (page 116).
5. *The natural world.* As in *Rhianna and the Wild Magic*, this book highlights human attitudes towards their world. The Eldra live in total harmony with nature, whereas the Clumsy Ones subjugate it to their will. 'The Eldra never felled a tree. The forest was their home — it would be like hacking down their own doorposts. But the Clumsy Ones cleared the forest, ploughed the ground and planted crops ... they made of the earth a thing to be used, with iron axes to scrape it bare and iron ploughshares to scar it, so it might grow the captive crops that were their food.' (page 4).

Fire and iron on the one hand, the gentleness of trees and earth and rain on the other. Although she has no magic, Eriseth embodies affinity with both; Rhianna, with her greater power, is still learning understanding — something she has in far greater measure by the novel's end.

Notes for teachers

Points for discussion with a class might include:

- Compare the characters of Rhianna and Eriseth, listing the qualities and characteristics of each. Why is each jealous of the other?
- What do the iron dogs represent? What gives them their destructive power?
- Many traditional stories are based on the struggle between good and evil, or on the idea of a journey towards understanding. Discuss these ideas in relation to *Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron*.
- Rhianna is growing up! Compare her character in *Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron* with her character in *Rhianna and the Wild Magic*. How is she changing?
- In what ways might the Eldran way of life reflect today's 'green' ideals?

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- Cold steel and magic cancel each other out: until Rhianna's actions at the forge, it has been 'impossible' to bespell steel. Why might steel be impervious to magic?
- How would swords of bespelled steel benefit an army?
- In the story of *Rhianna and the Iron Dogs* there are many different kinds of courage. Think about the sort of bravery showed by Rhianna, Eriseth, Rhianna's father Loys, and the mercenary seaman Kaldi.
- Discuss ways of dealing with negative emotions — anger, envy, jealousy.
- The Eldra and the Clumsy Ones are in general suspicious of each other and intolerant of their different lifestyles. 'Difference' is seen as a negative thing. Discuss the ways in which *Rhianna and the Dogs of Iron* shows the importance of difference, and the need for tolerance.

Classroom activity:

- Using information given in the book, draw up a map showing the Queen's Land, the Eldran territories and the Western Isles in relation to each other.