



Reading Notes

Tensy Farlow and the Home for Mislaid Children

Jen Storer

SYNOPSIS:

Dumped in the River Charon, hunted by an accursed river creature and betrayed by the wicked Matron Pluckrose, Tensy Farlow is in mortal danger. She has no parents. Worse still, she has no guardian angel. When she is thrown into the Home for Mislaid Children – a gloomy orphanage where ravens attack, Watchers hover over your bed, and even the angels cannot be trusted – it seems that all hope is lost.

Yet could it be that a plucky, flame-haired orphan with a mysterious past is precisely what this dark world needs?

A wonderful gothic adventure story about a horrid orphanage, fallen angels, wicked water spirits, and a gutsy little orphan called Tensy Farlow, who has something that everyone wants ... and are willing to get at all costs.

WRITING STYLE

This has all the elements of a wonderful gothic adventure fantasy: an orphan with a secret, an orphanage mistress (with all the menacing melodrama of Cruella de Ville), an evil water spirit Lythia, two hopeless earthbound angels, and a trio of orphans who band together to battle evil. It's visually lush – very filmic – and the writing is extravagant and sophisticated, perfect for the enthusiastic reader. It has echoes of Lemony Snickett in its olde worlde setting and characters. I can imagine this as a film and the author has done a book trailer which is wonderfully creepy and can be viewed on youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HNXppMc3rQ>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Storer has written many books for kids but most of them have been about serious topics such as rainforests and bones and the history of ice-cream. She has written four books for Penguin: a picture book called *Sing, Papi, Sing*; *I Hate Sport* (an Aussie Chomp written under her old nickname, Prue Storer); *Tan Callahan's Secret Spy Files*, illustrated by Caroline Magerl and short-listed for the 2009 Clayton's Awards for Younger Readers; and *Tensy Farlow and the Home for Mislaid Children*, a wicked gothic adventure story for 10+ readers about an orphan, a horrible orphanage, fallen angels and lost souls.

There is a fantastic Harry Potter-style i-movie trailer for *Tensy Farlow* that can be viewed on Jen's website: www.jenstorer.com or on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HNXppMc3rQ>

Jen lives in Melbourne and works in a studio at the wonderfully gothic Abbotsford Convent.

Jen Storer writes

Tensy Farlow and the Home for Mislaid Children is definitely not the story I set out to write. My initial idea was to write a short comedy (sort of Roald Dahl) about a girl with an incompetent guardian angel. However, when I began writing I simply couldn't make it work; the story kept shifting and changing and wanted to be something else entirely. It wasn't until I gave in and went right back to the beginning of this girl's life, right back to her babyhood, that the story began to take shape...and to make sense. This is one of the things I find most curious about writing fiction – you have to be prepared to allow yourself to be led, not by your ego or by your logical brain which has loads of other agendas, but by your intuition. Only then will the ideas flow and only then will the characters reveal themselves more fully and begin to cooperate. I don't mean to sound too esoteric and I know other writers like to plot and write blueprints and outlines and character profiles before they begin, but that approach is impossible for me. If I knew what was going to happen in advance, if I knew my characters intimately before I set out, I would not be able to summon the energy to write the story. It would hold no interest for me. For me, a huge part of the pleasure of writing is finding out what will happen next. And so it was with *Tensy Farlow*. What began as some scribbled notes about a red-headed girl who could see her guardian angel when she looked in the mirror, evolved into a gothic fantasy with a host of outrageous characters I never would have met had I not given in and allowed myself to be led.

EDITORIAL COMMENTS

This fabulous story will appeal to both girls and boys 10+ with its adventure, mix of male and female main characters, and eerie gothic fantasy atmosphere.

STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

THEMES:

Strong themes for classroom discussion: positive and negative energy; religion, the mythology of angels and evil spirits; souls.

- ☐ Orphans
- ☐ Superstition and the Spirit World
- ☐ Greed and corruption
- ☐ The impact of war
- ☐ Evil and Good

Pre-reading

Read the first chapter of the novel. What elements can you find that are similar to a traditional children's story:

- baby abandoned on a doorstep of a red-brick hospital
- unsuspecting hero
- a guardian angel
- an evil creature that watches the pair closely

Can you make any predictions as to how this story may turn out?

CHARACTERS:

Albie

- Albie is a kind hearted if somewhat simple man. At the age of thirty he still lives at home with his mother and drives his father's old Farlow (truck). Although he rescues the baby by sheer accident, he quickly falls in love with her and wants to care for her. He even lies about her parentage in order to protect her, and the reader gets the impression that telling lies does not sit easily with Albie

Gribble. He eventually marries Violet Bell, but feels an emptiness in his life after being informed of the death of Tensy Farlow. When, some ten years later, his wife produces a letter confirming that the baby in fact lived, Albie sets off determined to rescue her and raise her as his own.

Hortense Gribble

- When we first meet Mrs Gribble she appears to be an uncaring and unsympathetic character. She has no tolerance of Albie wishing to keep the abandoned baby and does nothing to help him. In fact it is she who reports the baby's existence to Matron Pluckrose at the Home for Mislaid Children. As the story progresses and she is reunited with her husband, we see a much softer side to Hortense Gribble. Perhaps her bitterness was the result of the premature death of her husband. In death she appears to be much more capable and compassionate than she was in life. Perhaps this is because of her change in status: *It wasn't often anyone confided in her, let alone an angel (244)*. What might this imply about the ways in which angels work their 'magic'?

Matron Pluckrose

- Matron Pluckrose is very stereotypical of women of her time. She is in charge of the Home for Mislaid Children, a role that provides her with great personal benefit, but for which she has no aptitude given that she clearly hates children and goes out of her way to make them miserable. Her sole motivation is to utilise the children to raise as much revenue as possible, thereby improving her life at the expense of theirs. To her, Tensy Farlow is simply a source of great potential wealth and her desire to protect her has nothing to do with the child's own welfare. She uses her power to manipulate those around her, especially Beadle and Cook, but even exerts power over Doctor Pillock. Yet her great undoing is her vanity and she allows herself to be manipulated by Lythia in return for her natural hair. In doing so, she readily sacrifices the lives of Queenie, Tingle, Howard and Polly to appease Lythia and seek personal gain.

Tensy Farlow

- Tensy Farlow is unlike any other child, or indeed any other person. Unlike anyone else, she has no guardian angel to protect her, a situation that causes great concern amongst the other angels. From birth she appears to be an unusual child with her wild orange hair and her unsettling manner. Yet all who meet her seem to feel attracted to her and comforted by her. Albie Gribble names her Tensy Farlow after his mother, Hortense and his beloved truck, the Farlow. Yet he is unable to keep her, and Tensy is initially adopted out to the wealthy Cecil and Vanity Wollan-Tweed, but they return her to the Home ten years later, revealing that they never liked her and only kept her because their wealthy grandmother adored the child. As a lost soul, she becomes particularly important to Lythia, a wayward angel who wants her in order to increase her own power on earth. Eventually Tensy is forced to confront Lythia. Tensy successfully defeats the fallen angel, as she is a way-shower, sent by the Archangels to restore peace and tranquillity to the scared society.

Howard Humberstone, Queenie and Polly

- Howard is a sickly, odd baby who is never adopted out. He spends much of his life in the infirmary at the Home and as a result knows much about its goings on. He quickly befriends Tensy and becomes her greatest ally.
- Queenie and Polly are sisters in the home who become unwitting victims of Lythia and Matron Pluckrose's alliance. Queenie is sacrificed to Lythia in an effort to appease

her and allow Matron Pluckrose to keep Tensy for as long as possible – not out of any sense of affection, but in an attempt to use her to extort more money from her adopted parents.

Tom and Joan Brian

- The Brians provide a marked contrast to Hortense Gribble and to the lives of the children in the Home. Tom is a huge, but gentle and caring man. His house smells of shepherd's pie with bacon and always has a warm fire in the grate. It is through them that Albie receives any form of love and affection. Theirs is the sort of home of which any orphan dreams, and it is to them that Howard and Tingle finally go once they manage to leave the Home.

Ruby Jane and Maldwyn

- Ruby Jane and Maldwyn are guardian angels, sent to protect their charges, Albie and Howard respectively. It is through them that the reader comes to understand the parallels between the celestial world and the earthly one. As guardian angels they cannot determine a person's actions, merely *inspire you, guide you, and sometimes protect you. But at the end of the day we are only angels. We have no magic wand* (p244).

Ellen Armitage

- Ellen Armitage was a local woman who murdered her husband out of rage because he was sent to war in a foreign country leaving her behind and limiting their prospects of having children. Whilst this is obviously not a good thing to have done, she herself was not evil. Why might war lead a normally harmless, gentle person to such an act? Can you excuse Ellen's behaviour in any way?

Lythia

- Lythia is Ellen Armitage's guardian angel who lost her way. She broke one of the cardinal realms of the angels, seeking power, control and influence in the human realm. In anger and desperation it was she who drove poor Ellen to madness. Therefore she was really to blame for the murder of Mr Armitage. As a result of her behaviour, Lythia was condemned and banished from the celestial spheres, sentenced to dwell at the scene of her crime as a humble water spirit (p97). Not content to do so, Lythia continues her quest for power. She wants to claim Tensy's unprotected soul as a means of consolidating her power on Earth.

Duncan

- Duncan is in charge of the guardian angels, although his appearance belies his status. He and his team are very different from what we would expect of an angel: *He was wearing baggy corduroy trousers, red and navy braces, and a rumpled white shirt. His collar-length auburn hair was tucked behind his ears and he was slightly unshaven* (p93). They reside not in heaven, but in the *celestial spheres*.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

Orphans

What does it mean to be an orphan?

Life for any orphan would be hard without the presence of a mother or a father and with the constant uncertainty as to whether or not you may be adopted into a family. But for these

children, life was particularly hard.

Matron Pluckrose refers to the different ages of children as: Dribblers, Twerps, Fribbles, Misfits and Vagrants (p91). What do these names reveal about her attitude towards the children?

Any unclaimed children are thrown out of the home once they reach the age of sixteen.

What sort of life could they expect after this?

What sort of person should be running an orphanage? In what ways is this description the antithesis of Matron Pluckrose?

Why are women like Matron Pluckrose able to exploit poor, needy children in this way?

What does this reveal about human nature?

Superstition

Many people believe in superstitions – guardian angels, wiggly twigs that protect people, four-leaf clovers etc

Make a list of all the superstitious talismans that you can think of.

Do you believe in any of these?

What message is this particular novel telling us about their presence and their effectiveness?

The Spirit World

What do you picture when you think of an angel? In what ways are all of the angels in this book different from what you would expect?

When Mrs Gribble asks why Duncan and his team didn't stop Lythia's behaviour, Sophia (her guardian angel) replies *We cannot see all things at once, Hortense. Why would we need to? You have been given free will. It is your greatest gift. You cannot have free will and be constantly watched. It would hamper your evolution (p243)*. What does she mean by this?

Many people believe too much in the spirits, guardian angels etc looking after them and ensuring their safety and success. To what extent do you believe in angels? What could be the dangers in having too much belief in their presence?

The River Charon's amorphous river creature turns out to be Lythia, a guardian angel who goes bad. Lythia is referred to as a fallen angel. What do you understand by this term?

Greed and Corruption

Why is it to Matron Pluckrose's advantage to keep the children uneducated and unhappy? *Dyspirited children are extremely easy to manage and can be assigned any number of unpleasant tasks (p47)*

What other examples can you think of in which the people were kept uneducated and unhappy in order for more powerful people to achieve their aims?

What are the dangers inherent in this practice?

Why were many schools shut down during the war? What impact would this have had on society?

How does Matron Pluckrose take advantage of the war-torn country and the unfortunate position of her charges?

In what ways is she shown to be opportunistic and corrupt?

What might her character reveal about people in powerful positions within society?

There is a well known saying 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

How might this statement apply to the characters in this novel.

War

Although this book is not about war, its impact is made very apparent.

Which war do you think is referred to in the novel? What reasons do you have for this response?

Make a list of all of the consequences of the war as they are depicted in the story (for example):

- the swans all vanish
- the Home stops being an educational facility
- buildings are replaced by piles of rubble
- the children are readily welcomed into the workplace

What do you think Mumbles Fell might have been like before the war? How have people's lives changed since the war?

Evil

There is a great deal of evil in this story, and all of it has significant impact. Consider all of the things that are bad:

- the murder of Mr Armitage
- Lythia's desire for power
- the outbreak of war
- Matron Pluckrose, Cook and Beadle's treatment of the children
- using children as the labour force
- restricting freedom and education
- Matron Pluckrose's sacrificing of the children

With the war, the river began to lose its soul. Fear, corruption, cruelty, they all leave an imprint on nature, Hortense, not just on people....it's energy darkened and turned inward (p243). Do you agree that negative human behaviour can have an impact on nature? Give some examples.

Good

Given the amount of unhappiness, greed, power and evil in Mumbles Fell, could the situation have been resolved by a mere mortal, or did it in fact require intervention by the Archangels? Does extreme evil require an extreme resolution?

The novel has an uplifting feeling, despite the fact that Tensy is no longer there. After she manages to vanquish Lythia and Matron Pluckrose, Cook and Beadle are stood down from their positions, the fear and corruption are removed from society. Before long, great changes can be seen to take place. *The energy's getting lighter. Nature's waking up. The people are waking, too (p336).*

Re-read chapter 33: Tensy Farlow's legacy. Consider the changes in writing style, tone and mood in this chapter from the rest of the novel. In many ways, it is like a breath of fresh air. Why has the writer made this chapter so different?

Symbolism

In many ways, Tensy Farlow's character can be seen to be Christ-like. Like Him, she came to the Earth as a baby, one who seemed different from others. Her mere presence seems to exude love and has a marked affect on all who come in contact with her. She is not human, but a way-shower, sent by the Archangels above to weave her magic and restore peace, harmony and happiness to those in need. Even the very language in the final chapters is Biblical in its tone: *And so it came to pass that the Home for Mislaid Children was freed from the tyranny of Matron Pluckrose (p337).*

What other religious parallels can you find in the novel?

The final chapter is indicative of a new beginning – the arrival of light after a long period of darkness. What new beginnings are evident in this chapter?

When the war starts the swans leave the river. But they return at the end of the novel. What significance do swans usually have? What is implicit in their disappearance and reappearance?

MARKETING AND PROMOTION:

ADVERTISING

- Full page advert in Total Girl - on sale 24 August

CO-OP

- Feature in Leading Edge Spring Reading Guide 2009

PUBLICITY

- Widespread review mailing to children's magazines and websites nationally
- Review coverage expected across the children's pages of major newspapers nationally

EDUCATION MARKETING

- Review mailing to educationalists, academics, children's specialists and journals
- Advertising in *Magpies* Cover/editorial
- E-newsletter feature - academic/public library edition
- Featured in mailing sent to all primary schools nationally
- Author to meet and greet key booksellers and sales team
- 2010 festival invitations sought

ON-LINE

- Feature in *the squawk* - kids' consumer e-newsletter
- Feature on penguin.com.au