



***Withering-by-Sea: a Stella Montgomery Intrigue***

**TEACHERS' NOTES**

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## Introduction

Stella Montgomery lives in the Hotel Majestic with her three unlikeable aunts – Aunt Condolence, Aunt Temperance and Aunt Deliverance – in the town of Withering-by-Sea. We first meet Stella lying flat on her tummy behind the ferns of the hotel’s conservatory. She hides here, daydreaming up adventures inspired by her most treasured possession – a small, damp atlas – an activity she prefers to the strict needlepoint, deportment and French lessons enforced by the aunts.

Stella doesn’t fit in with the other residents of the hotel. Old and sickly, they have come to drink and bathe in the water that spills up from under the ground of Withering-by-Sea. They shuffle along halls and loll around ‘like puddings’ in an assortment of bathtubs: wave baths, steam baths, plunge baths and ice baths. Whilst her aunts reside in large, ornate bedrooms (with access to a parlour *and* a pianoforte), Stella lives in a small dressing-room no bigger than a cupboard and eats unsweetened porridge.

We get the feeling that most days are pretty much the same at the Hotel Majestic, although Stella longs for an adventure. Then one *seemingly* ordinary day, events take an unexpected turn. In the conservatory, Stella witnesses a furtive guest (the kind, tree-like Mr Filbert) hiding an intriguingly tiny package, before a sleeping spell is placed on the entire hotel; a spell that works on everyone except Stella. Stella hides, watching as thieves enter the hotel, searching for the package. Mr Filbert is *murdered* and a small boy called Ben looks into the past – through a *pool of ink!* Mr Filbert begs Stella to keep the package safe and, swearing to do so, she embarks on a dangerous journey to keep her word.

Stella learns that the spell has been caused by a dark magic; the smoking, stinking ‘Hand of Glory’ is controlled by the evil Professor Starke and it is only the beginning of his desperate search to find the package (a small bottle). Quite quickly, Stella becomes the target of this search. In the town’s theatre she acquires a set of unlikely allies in Ben (with his ability to ‘scry’ into the past), Mr Capelli (a theatre performer with a troupe of singing cats) and Gert (a brave

and loyal dancing girl). With some quick thinking and bold moves (plus a little luck), Stella and her gang manage to outsmart the Professor and save the town from the Grimpen Sorcerer. This is an adventure story wrapped up in mystery and magic. It reminds us to keep the faith and never give up no matter how dire the situation seems!

### **About the author/illustrator**

Judith Rossell is a writer and illustrator of children's books. Her titles include the Children's Book Council of Australia's 1999 shortlisted title *How to Guzzle Your Garden* (by Jackie French), the popular *Blackbread the Pirate* (by Garth Nix), *The Lost Treasure of the Green Iguana* and *I Spy with Inspector Stilton*. She lives in Melbourne, Australia.

[www.judithrossell.com](http://www.judithrossell.com)

### **Study notes on themes and curriculum topics**

#### **a) Themes**

- Imagination and Curiosity

Stella Montgomery has a lively, vivid imagination. With no other children at the hotel, she must entertain herself. Armed with an old atlas – inherited from an African explorer – she has the tools to travel the world. She is curious about these distant lands and luckily the atlas has a new and interesting fact on every page. Her aunts do not encourage this curiosity (they think it vulgar) and believe firmly that all children 'should be seen and not heard', so she keeps her precious atlas a secret.

*Discussion Point:* How difficult would it be to never have any other children to spend time with? Do you think young people are naturally more imaginative and curious than adults? Why/Why not?

- Freedom, Escape and Adventure

Stella Montgomery dreams of freedom from her oppressive aunts, of having adventures in the Amazon and escaping from the Hotel Majestic. She never dreamt that she would have to free herself from a serious threat (the Professor), escape from a true terror (the tower in the marsh) or begin an adventure with outcomes that will affect so many people. Notions of freedom, escape and adventure take on entirely new meanings over the course of the novel.

*Discussion Point:* When do you feel free? Do you have to 'escape' somewhere to feel free? Can you escape without actually 'going anywhere'? Why/Why not?

- Magic and Mystery

Magic is often clouded in mystery and there are elements of both in this book. The hotel itself (serving water that cures sickness and disease) is a little magical. Ben and the seven singing cats from the theatre are a little magical too ... but there is something more. The town – Withering-by-Sea – *feels* magical (and mysterious). The aunts have never explained why Stella is different but we begin to think it might have something to do with being 'fey' (as Ben and Gert call it). There are lots of references to magical beasts too. Sea serpents, giants, fairies and seal people are all mentioned by Ben and we later learn that Mr Filbert is really a *dryad* – the spirit of a hazel tree! This is not quite an ordinary world. So by the conclusion of the novel we end up with as almost as many questions as answers.

*Discussion Point:* What mystery stands out to you as the most significant? What questions would you like to ask the author, Judith Rossell?

- Good versus Evil

We meet two archetypal characters in this novel. Stella Montgomery is quintessentially good. She promptly takes on the task of protecting the tiny bottle and is the hero of the novel. By contrast, the Professor (like the Grimpen Sorcerer) is evil. He is set on retrieving the bottle at any cost and he is violent and cruel, even to children.

*Discussion Point:* Can people be both good and evil? Why/Why not? What might motivate 'evil' characters like the Professor to pursue their own goals at the cost of others?

- Friendship and Bravery

'Don't say *I'll try*, girl. Say *I will* ... You have to say to yourself, *I can do this*, and believe it.'

Gert, P 197

Stella has no close friends at the hotel but over the course of her adventure she makes a few. Ben (a timid orphan boy) blossoms through his friendship with Stella and they are both helped by a brave girl called Gert. Judith Rossell demonstrates how friendship can be found in the most unlikely places and at unexpected times. She shows us how sometimes you just need someone to believe in you to feel brave.

*Discussion Point:* How important are friends? Has a friend ever made you feel like you could 'do anything'?

## **b) Curriculum areas and key learning outcomes**

### **Speaking and Listening**

Interact effectively in pairs and small groups. EN2-1A

Use information to support and elaborate on a point of view. EN2-1A

Students express their point of view. EN2-1A

Identify the purpose and audience of specific texts. Distinguish between different forms of English. EN2-6B

Listen and contribute to discussions to share ideas. Use information to support and elaborate on a point of view. EN2-1A

### **Reading and Viewing**

Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning. EN2-4A (ACELY1680, ACELY1692)

### **Thinking Imaginatively, Creatively and Interpretively**

Respond to a text. Justify interpretations of a text. EN2-10C

Identify creative language features in imaginative texts that contribute to reader engagement. EN2-10C (ACELT 1605)

Use visual representations, including those digitally produced, to represent ideas, experience and information for different purposes and audiences. EN2-10C

### **Expressing Themselves**

Draw connections between themselves and the worlds of texts, and share responses with others. EN2-11D

Plan, compose and review imaginative texts. EN2-2A

### **Writing and Representing**

Understand how a range of language features can shape readers' understandings of subject matter. EN2-7B

Express a point of view for a particular purpose in writing, with supporting arguments. EN2-7B

- Language and Literacy

**Adjectives:** Judith Rossell includes a lot of detail about **objects** and **people** by using **adjectives** that turn simple things into much more *interesting* images. For example, instead of taking a bite of an apple, Stella takes a bite of a 'small, green, hard and sour' apple (P. 2), which is far more interesting. The adjectives give the reader more language tools to picture the fruit.

**Activity:** Underline the adjectives from the list below:

- Aunt Temperance's 'immaculate stitches'. P. 13
- An 'autocratic voice' rang out. P. 60
- Ben 'wore a thick coat and a grimy woollen scarf'. P. 64

**Character Descriptions:** Consider the way Judith Rossell uses **adjectives** to describe her **characters**.

**Activity:** Read the description of **Mr Filbert**.

'He was small and frail, almost insubstantial. His voice was whispery, like rustling leaves, and his manners were old-fashioned. Every morning, he bowed to Stella across the breakfast room. His

eyes were twinkling and alert, but his skin was pale, almost greenish, and stretched tightly across the bones of his face.' P. 4

Now consider someone you know very well. Close your eyes and imagine how they look, sound, smell, move, behave. Brainstorm a list of adjectives you could use in a description of them *before* writing a passage to describe them. After thirty minutes of writing, stop and swap with a partner and edit each other's writing. While you're reading your partner's work, consider if you can picture their character in *your* mind. Suggest where they may like to include additional information or adjectives. Also edit spelling and grammatical errors before swapping back.

**A Narrator:** The novel is written in **third person** – meaning it has an **absent narrator** who describes the events and explains what is happening.

**Activity:** Choose one of the scenes and rewrite it from a character's perspective in **first person narrative**. For example, you may decide to be the stone lions watching Stella climb along the window ledge to rescue her atlas. P. 18

You will need to select and use the first person pronoun 'I' and give some insight into what the character is thinking throughout the scene.

**Setting:** Judith Rossell also uses a variety of adjectives and interesting details to describe different **places** in the novel. She does not just describe the way the room *looks* but also the way it *smells* and *sounds*! Read the beautifully detailed description of the theatre on the pier (P. 126) and consider details like the way the light falls on the room, the objects, the shapes, the colours and smells.

**Activity:** Working in pairs, take turns describing a place you know well using all five of your senses. What can you *see* there, *hear* there, *smell* there, *feel* there and *taste* there? If you close your eyes, it might be easier to remember. If you are listening to your partner describe their place, then prompt them to elaborate. Record each other's descriptions as they're told aloud and then share with the class.



**Sounds:** Judith Rossell also includes very interesting descriptions of **sounds** in the novel. Consider the below examples from the text:

‘The breakfast room was buzzing with anxious chatter, hammering noises and the sounds of broken furniture being dragged around.’ P. 53

‘Whining snores from Aunt Temperance, pig-like grunts from Aunt Condolence and more distant, booming snores from Aunt Deliverance’s bedroom.’ P. 16

**Activity:** Listen to the below recording of a city soundscape. When you are ready, begin to write down the different sounds that you hear. Work with a thesaurus to help you find interesting synonyms and antonyms. This will assist in diversifying your descriptions. Can you compare the sounds that you hear to something else? This is a great technique. For example: ‘She listened to the conversations at the neighbouring tables. Many of the residents were twittering like startled birds.’ P. 53

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EPD4K7SYqU> City Sound Ambient Soundscape (1 hour)

**Adverbs:** Judith Rossell also uses lots of interesting **adverbs** (words to describe verbs – the ‘doing’ words) in her writing. These give us more information about the way characters move and do things.

**Activity:** Underline the adverbs in the below list before changing one adverb to another. Share your changes with the class and explain the effect they have had.

- Stella ‘chewed grimly’. P. 2
- Stella ‘studied it wistfully’. P. 2
- Stella ‘walked softly’. P. 5
- Ada ‘strode briskly’. P. 6
- Aunt Deliverance ‘rolled majestically into the parlour’. P. 14
- Stella ‘sat stiffly at the parlour table’. P. 12

**Animal Movements:** Sometimes Stella moves a bit like an animal, like a jaguar from the atlas perhaps. Consider the below examples from the novel:

- She ‘slithered down into the room’. P. 19

- Stella 'glided through, as silent as a cat'. P. 20
- 'She threaded her way between cane chairs.' P. 23

**Activity:** If you were an animal, what animal would you be? How does your animal move? Form a circle with the class and choose an animal. Around the circle, explain how you would get ready for school as your chosen 'animal'. For example, if you were a tiger, you might have 'pounced' on the breakfast cereal.

**Alliteration:** Judith Rossell uses the language technique **alliteration** to create some interesting word combinations. For example: 'Colonel Fforbes appeared, his **magnificent moustache** confined in a complicated-looking hairnet.' P. 43

**Activity:** In pairs, spend five minutes picking out five features on one another and creating five different alliterations for each. For example, a nose may become a 'noble nose' or a 'noisy nose' (the alliteration doesn't have to reflect your partner's actual features so make sure you tell them that!). Spend five minutes sharing your most amusing combinations with the class.

**Vocabulary:** Judith Rossell includes interesting vocabulary in her writing.

**Activity:** In your English book, create a small dictionary where you can record new words that you find in the novel, alongside their dictionary definition and your own sentence, using the word in context. Examples of some words from the novel you might like to include are:

- pinafore P. 6
- urn P. 32
- iridescent P. 55
- perambulators P. 57
- sordid P. 78

**Funny Phrases and Invented Vocabulary:** There are lots of funny phrases and invented words in the novel that are specific to the magical world of Withering-by-Sea. Consider some of the examples below:

- The Professor is in a 'right maggoty flummox'. P. 33

- 'My gran said fey is like an echo of the old magic.' P. 67
- Selkies were 'seal people'. P. 68
- 'They think it's a trick. A swizzle.' P. 83
- 'Stinking gumbleguts.' P. 189
- 'Well, then sniggle it away somewhere.' P. 194

**Activity:** Imagine you are living in the world of the novel. Consider what some of these ordinary things might be called in the town of Withering-by-Sea: teapot, jacket, table, snake, boots, toast (you can add your own ordinary words).

**Intriguing Names:** Stella's mum was called Patience and her aunts all have real words as names (Condolence, Temperance and Deliverance). Mr Capelli tells Stella that her name means 'star'.

**Activity:** Look up the **synonyms** and **antonyms** of the aunts' names – Temperance, Deliverance and Condolence – and record them in your English book. Why do you think Judith Rossell may have chosen these three names?

**Structure and Plot Points:** This Stella Montgomery mystery has a storybook structure that includes an **Orientation** (beginning), **Complication** (middle) and **Resolution** (end). Within this structure there are major **plot points** where significant developments in the story happen.

**Activity:** In a group (and on a large piece of paper) create three boxes called Orientation, Complication and Resolution. Within each, map out the major plot points in the story. Include the setting and the significant characters involved. Include as much detail as possible and once you have finished, your group can add drawings of the characters, places and events.

### **Creative Writing Tasks**

**Activity:** Create your own dramatic scenes inspired by the novel. In pairs, select a piece of dialogue from your favourite chapter and use this as the basis for a short dramatic performance. Write some of your own conversational dialogue to extend the scene. Perform your scene to the class.

**Activity:** Read the posters and playbills from the pier advertising each of the theatre acts. Design some of your own act names and create a series of small, coloured posters advertising these.

**Activity:** Otto Capelli and his cats Alfredo, Violetta, Annina, Gastone, Flora, Georgio and Guisepe (P. 138) are all 'singing artists'. You are a reviewer and you have just seen their show. Write a review for the local Withering-by-Sea newspaper (P. 140 will give you some hints).

**Activity:** Design a folding menu for the hotel luncheon of 'Mock Turtle Soup, Collared Eels, Pickled Tongue and Vegetable Marrows, Cabinet Pudding and Custard'. P. 56

- SOSE

### **Adventures in the Amazon**

**Activity:** Research the Amazon and prepare a short research report. Remember to include a map clearly showing the Amazon as well as images, which should be labelled and referenced.

### **Mapping Withering-by-Sea**

**Activity:** Create a map of the town Withering-by-Sea using accurate information from the novel. The map should be created on A3 paper. Consider using mapping symbols and grid referencing to identify key landmarks from the novel. The novel contains some **clues** to help you:

Page 10 describes the view from the aunts' rooms; the sea, the lighthouse and the marsh beyond the town.

Pages 57 and 58 describe the view walking down the hill from the Hotel Majestic; the smaller hotels along the front of the hotel, the sea, the lighthouse and the pier with its spindly legs.

Page 59 includes details about the marsh, the shipwreck memorial and the boarding house. Think about the other landmarks you know of (i.e. the theatre). Can you add in these other landmarks?

### *Key learning outcomes*

- Apply research skills and evaluate the relevancy of information.
- Organise and present information clearly.

- Visual Arts

**Activity:** The Hotel Majestic is so beautifully described that it is almost a character itself.

Study pages 10 and 11, which include Judith Rossell's description of the hotel and an illustration alongside it.

'The Hotel Majestic stood high on a cliff, overlooking the town of Withering-by-Sea. It was enormous and white and had towers and turrets and curlicues and columns and chimneys and balconies and lots of curly metal sprouting here and there. It looked like a gigantic marzipan wedding cake.'

Create a three-dimensional model of the hotel using mixed-materials and found objects. Find materials with interesting textures and shapes – egg cartons, aluminium foil, buttons, strainers, cotton, material and garbage – and collect these in the classroom. Give yourself a one-hour time limit to construct the model. Challenge yourself to add as much detail to the model as possible without *drawing* anything on with pen.

**Activity:** Create the 'file of neatly dressed girls from Miss Mallard's Academy for Young Ladies' and their 'grim-looking governess' on page 58 as a series of uniform, paper dolls.

Watch the tutorial on *pinterest* to learn how to create three-dimensional dresses for the dolls:

<http://www.pinterest.com/lesdeed/paper-dolls-and-dresses/>

**Activity:** Re-read the detailed description on page 55 of the bottle containing the Grimpen Sorcerer. Draw your bottle in very light pencil on watercolour paper before filling it in with watercolour paint. Watercolours will help you capture the iridescent quality that Judith Rossell describes. Melt a small portion of red wax and drip onto the page to create the bottle top.

Remember to give your bottle a label, and if you like, you can hint at what has been captured inside it.

**Activity:** Every time Stella steps out into the town of Withering-by-Sea, the weather is gloomy or rainy and this adds to the mysterious mood of the novel. You may like to paint a scene from the novel and then experiment with creating a vicious storm behind it.

Watch the below 'How to Paint Lightning Tutorial'. In this resource a comic book artist shares some tips for painting storms. Rather than use a small paint gun in the final step, you can get a similar effect with a plastic drinking straw. Use the straw to blow a small amount of paint onto your lightning bolts. Just remember not to breathe *in*!

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxUc\\_He-wdE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxUc_He-wdE)

**Activity:** Stella's three aunts are three very distinctly different sizes and shapes, each with their own physical characteristics.

'**Aunt Temperance** was sitting, bony and upright, by the window, sewing a pattern of violets in immaculate stitches onto an antimacassar.' P. 13

'**Aunt Deliverance** rolled majestically into the parlour, like an enormous boiled pudding, in her wickerwork Bath chair.' P. 14

'**Aunt Condolence** was very short and extremely wide. She wore a Particular Patent Corset of springs and whalebone, which creaked and twanged as she moved.' P. 14

Create each of them out of modelling clay (fimo is good) and then exaggerate these characteristics. Once they are finished, you can photograph them in different positions, maybe interacting or bobbing around in the wave pool, before printing these and making a small flip book. If you have a basic video camera and editing software, you can also experiment with the techniques of stop animation.

Flip Book Resource:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29SCiHN9zCI> Flip Book Tutorial

Stop Animation Resources:

<http://www.stopmotioncentral.com/articles-6.html> Stop Motion Central

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkUo6ObVFhM> Stop Motion Animation: The Basics of Stop Motion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrZMpA2DSe4> Stop Motion Tutorial

*Key learning outcomes*

- Visually express characters and places described in the novel.
- Experiment with mediums and techniques to create artworks.

### **Questions for reading and discussion**

1. What is the significance of using the *italics* on pages 1 and 2?
2. What topics do you imagine the book *French Conversation for Young Ladies* to include? P. 12
3. 'Stella had tasted the water once. It tasted exactly as it smelled, as if rusty nails and bad eggs had been boiled up in a puddle.' What is the worst thing you have ever smelled? P. 3
4. The hotel has a 'wave bath', a 'steam bath', a 'plunge bath' and an 'ice bath'. What do you imagine these look like?
5. What is significant about Lady Clottington's bad-tempered little dog?
6. What is the significance of Stella calling her aunts '*the Aunts*'? P. 16
7. On page 12 the second sentence in italics is also enclosed in brackets: (*The pattern of this carpet is exceedingly vulgar*). What function does this formatting have?
8. Stella hides her atlas (her 'greatest treasure') in a biscuit tin to keep it safe on page 12. What are some of your own treasures? Where would you hide them in the Hotel Majestic?
9. Doctor Frobisher was an African explorer who stayed at the hotel for several months with jungle fever, sleeping sickness, scurvy and malaria. How hot do you think jungle fever makes you? P. 13
10. What might the tiny package be? P. 24

11. When Stella meets Ben on page 64 he explains that looking into the ink to see the past is called 'scrying'. Can you think of two words that sound like scrying and what this combination makes you think of? (crying, spying)

12. What does the word 'withering' mean? How do you think the town got its name?

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## **About the author of the notes**



Simone Evans attended Newtown High School of the Performing Arts before completing a Bachelor of Media and Communications at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst. She has produced theatre and festivals in Australia and England, taught primary school classes in sunny Byron Bay and is now the Education Coordinator at Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney.