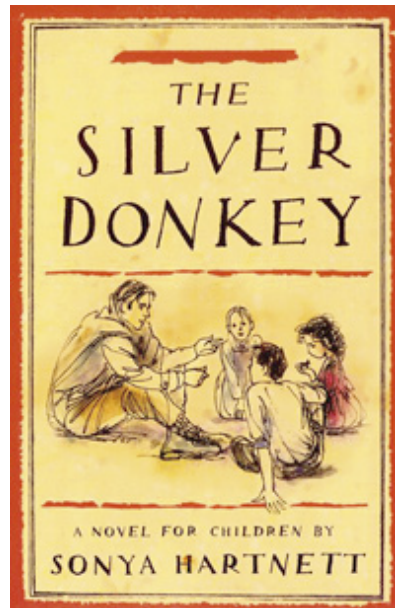


TEACHER NOTES

THE SILVER DONKEY

by Sonya Hartnett



One spring morning, Coco and her sister Marcelle find a man in a French forest. At first, the girls are not sure if he is dead or alive. Perhaps he is a soldier killed in the war that is raging not too far away.

'Monsieur Shepard' is a lieutenant who has wandered away from the war, blinded and trying to find his way home again. In his pocket, he carries a tiny silver statue of a donkey, a symbol of honour and dignity.

The girls decide to help him return to the home he dreams of in England, but he must be their secret. Each day after school, the girls return with cheese and bread, and blankets and clothing for the soldier. In return, Monsieur Shepard recounts tales of a distant time, and always at the centre of each enchanting tale is a kind and honourable donkey.

As time passes and war rages on, the girls must admit their brother Pascal and his lame friend Fabrice into the secret. They are old enough to hatch a plan that will get the soldier across the English Channel.

When he finally leaves, 'Monsieur Shepard' does not forget his friend Coco; he leaves behind a treasure meant only for her.

Sonya Hartnett is one of the best prose writers in Australia. She has written *The Silver Donkey* in a clear, gentle style, reminiscent of the best of children's classics. For a writer who has traditionally explored the dark byways of the human psyche, Sonya shows that she has sharp memories of what it means to be a child, the anxieties and the moments of joy. By employing the 'stories within stories' style, she manages to break the boundaries of her own narrative, allowing a wider world to creep in, mixing fable, wartime reminiscences, Bible story and a touch of the fairytale. The book has a lovely dreamlike quality, enhanced by Anne Spudvilas's pared-back illustrations.

Teaching Notes

- The futility of war, and its impact on those (like Marcelle and Coco) who are unwillingly involved in its darkness and tragedy.
- Ideas of family, both biological and emotional, and what lengths we will go to for the love of family.
- The theme of honesty raises an interesting point. Some readers have suggested that John, the ailing brother in England, may not exist. Discuss this idea within the classroom. Has Monsieur Shepard created the image of his brother to lead him away from the brutality of war, or is it more calculated than that? Has he created the brother to encourage the children in their desire to help him? Or neither? Have readers find passages from the text that support their argument.

- Are Marcelle and Coco right in their decision to bring Pascal into their secret? Although they are aware that his help is needed in order to save the soldier, they are very hesitant about 'sharing' their find with anyone. What does this say about the children's awareness of the gravity of their situation? How would your students react in such a situation?
- What do students think about the behaviour of Marcelle, Coco and Pascal? Was their behaviour brave or foolhardy? Use examples from the text to support their arguments.
- What do your students know about the two world wars in which Australia was involved? What about the geography of the area in which *The Silver Donkey* has been set?

This is a perfect time to explain to students how close England and France are to each other, and the part the Channel plays in the story of our soldier.