The Shadow Garden

Matty Brand can see the spirits of the dead, and when she moves to Tagram House with her mother, her psychic powers reveal that two murdered children haunt the house. Matty realises that she must untangle the mystery of their deaths, in order to prevent another murder from being committed. Like cold fingers reaching from the grave, a chilling atmosphere of mystery and suspense seeps through this haunting ghost story. Inspired by the classic ghost stories of M. R. James, "The Shadow Garden" is a compelling tale.

by Andrew Matthews

Andrew Matthews has been writing for fun since he was seven, but was a teacher for twenty-three years before becoming a full-time author. He has written over sixty books for children and teenagers, including Cat Song, which was nominated for the Smarties Book Prize in 1994, and the critically acclaimed Love Street. He is a hugely versatile writer, and has retold many myths, legends and classic stories, as well as creating his own original picture books and novels. Andrew lives in Reading with his wife and their cat.

As soon as the sun set, a change came over Tagram House. Rooms that had been warm and cosy all day grew draughty. Corridors would suddenly turn so cold that I could set my breath on the air. Reuben had warned Ma and me that the house was noisy at night, and so it was. Lying in my bed I heard all kinds of trudging footsteps, creaking and groaning, and more than once a sorrowful sight that made me want to get up and give comfort to the poor soul who heaved it.'

The Shadow Garden (2005: 76)
INTRODUCTION

Curriculum Context

The Shadow Garden is an atmospheric ghost story in the classic tradition. It is a suitable choice for a class novel. Aimed particularly at teachers of year 6 classes, these notes could support work on a ghost story theme for a unit on fiction genres. The Shadow Garden is inspired by the Victorian ghost stories of M R James, these notes could also be adapted for use with a year 7 class working on the theme ‘Books in their Time’ where The Shadow Garden could be read alongside a selection of James’ stories.

The Shadow Garden could also be used as a guided or group reading text for confident fluent readers.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

First encounters: what’s in a title?

Write the title, ‘The Shadow Garden’ on the whiteboard. What do the children imagine a book with this title will be about? Share ideas.

What images are conjured by the words ‘shadow garden’? Pupils can be invited to draw and paint what they visualise in response to these words.

Exploring Genre: The Ghost Story

Create stimulus display of different stories featuring ghosts. Include some non-fiction texts (e.g. unexplained phenomena) and traditional ghost stories (folk tales).

Invite the children to share ghost stories they know. Encourage them to think about films as well as stories they have read. Reflect on the similarities and differences: What do these stories have in common? What differences are there? Categorise the stories. Which are funny? Which are frightening? Are ghosts used in different ways in stories for very young children (e.g. Jacques Duquennoy and Antonia Parkin The Loch Ness Ghosts; Otfrid Preussler The Little Ghost; Berlie Doherty Jinnie Ghost). Ask the children to consider why this might be the case. In these stories is an explanation offered for the ghost’s appearance, or is it left unexplained? What purpose does the ghost serve?

The Ghost Story Tradition

Ghost stories have their roots in the traditional tale. Read some of these early ghost stories. Why do you think they were first told? Help children to visualise what it might have been like to be huddled around a fire on a dark and cold midwinter’s night listening to stories with the lambent firelight casting flickering shadows on the walls.

Telling ghost stories

With due account taken of sensitive children in the class, recreate an atmosphere for telling stories, perhaps using a flickering lantern (you can buy battery powered flickering lights or use a large image of a candle projected on the IWB). Tell the class a ghost story you know, perhaps one drawn from your own experience. Children are likely to have their own ghost stories, which they can share in pairs or threes.

The Victorian Ghost Story

In respectful memory of M R James

The Master

Read the dedication that Andrew Matthews has included in The Shadow Garden. Ask if anyone knows or can guess who M R James is/was. Is s/he still alive? How do they know? Is s/he male or female? How do they know? What do they think The Master refers to? Master of what?

The Victorians enjoyed a good ghost story and masters of the genre included M R James and Charles Dickens. Provide a brief biography of the writer M R James. Pupils can research further using the internet and a range of bibliographic sources. Read one of his stories aloud.

How do ghosts function in traditional ghost stories? Ruskin Bond observed that, ghost stories often have important things to say about the way we live our lives, ‘The ghostly always represents...’
Reread the beginning of The Shadow Garden. Use this as a story starter for children's own ghost stories.

In the old days they used to tell stories like this in winter, with night and frost black and white in the windows, and a cold wind moaning in the tops of the chimney pots. This is the sort of story that makes people turn on more lights to chase the shadows from dark corners. It's my story.

The Shadow Garden (p9)

Recreating an atmosphere

Reread the description of Tagram House on page 76 (see above). How has Andrew Matthews created a suitable atmosphere for a ghost story? Demonstrate how to annotate the passage, highlighting the contrasts between warm and cold, dark and light. Notice how we are not only told that it was cold but that we are shown: ‘I could set my breath on the air’. Although the narrator doesn’t see anything at this point, there are unexplained noises, which build suspense. Consider how the fear of the unknown is often more spine tingling than full scale horror.

Why are so many ghost stories set in old houses? Invite suggestions from the pupils.

Make a collection of photographs showing atmospheric buildings. Use the internet to search for “haunted buildings”. Project an image onto the IWB and use a guided visualisation technique to help children make notes, which they can use later in their writing. To do this ask a sequence of questions, which they should answer as quickly as possible. Exercises like this can help children overcome the ‘empty page syndrome’. Exemplar questions:

You are standing outside the building, what do you see?
What is the weather like?
How do you feel?

You approach the door/ entrance? What sound do your footsteps make?

Describe the door.

In your mind’s eye open the door. What sound does it make?

You enter the building. Look to your left. What do you see? Look to your right what do you see?

You move into a room. Describe an object that you see on one of the shelves.

There’s a chair in the room. What does it look like?
What can you smell in the room?
What can your hear?

What are you feeling? What sensations do you feel on your skin?

You listen hard, all is silent except the pounding of your heart. Then you hear an unexpected noise behind you. You turn around. What do you see……

In pairs, ask pupils to share their notes. Take some feedback and use prompts to suggest how these
notes could be the beginnings of a story e.g. why did you come to this place? Have you been here before? What did you expect to find etc.

You could explore further with hotseating. Ask individual pupils to take the hotseat while other members of the class ask them questions about their experience in the haunted house. This activity can be carried out with the whole class or in pairs.

**Writing Ghost Stories**

Discuss some of the characteristics of ghost stories. For instance ghost stories might include:

- An atmospheric setting
- An impressionable or sensitive protagonist
- The discovery of an antiquarian object, perhaps an old book
- The discovery of a secret
- Build up of suspense
- A ghost or suggestion of a ghost
- A sense of foreboding
- Mystery

Ask pupils to identify the features of *The Shadow Garden* that are associated with the classic ghost story.

Revise a basic narrative structure with the class and analyse the story:

**Opening:**

*In the old days they used to tell stories….*

**Exposition (establishing characters and the setting)**

**Inciting moment (when the everyday is disrupted and we know that a story is to be told)**

**Development / suspense / mystery** (the incidents that advance the story)

**Final suspense**

**Denouement (how things are worked out)**

**Conclusion (how things resolved and what happens at the end)**

*I hope that what I’ve written will make the dreams leave me alone. Time will tell.*

**Extended writing**

Get pupils to write their own ghost stories. Make books for the school or class library.

**Further Reading**


Barber, A. (1972) *The Amazing Mr Blunden.* London: Puffin


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