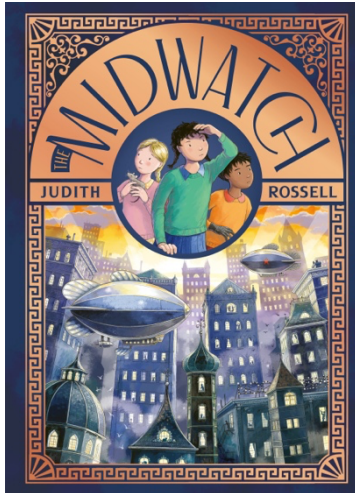


Teacher's Notes



The Midwatch

Written and illustrated by Judith Rossell

Teacher's Notes by Bec Kavanagh

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Primary aged readers (ages 9+, grades 5–6)

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
 - AC9E5LA02
 - AC9E5LE02
 - AC9E6LE02

THEMES

- Friendship
- Adventure
- Survival skills
- Mystery
- Feminism
- Resourcefulness

SYNOPSIS

When orphan Maggie Fishbone is sent to the Midwatch Institute, she's expecting another miserable institution full of rules, punishments, and terribly sad girls. But when she arrives, she is welcomed into a world of education and adventure – because at the Midwatch, steered by the intelligent, energetic Miss Mandelay, girls are taught to be quick-witted and resourceful.

The girls take full advantage of the fact that society would rather they were invisible; it allows them to remain unnoticed while they observe the adult world. Because at the Midwatch, girls are not only taught the skills they'll need to survive in the world, but the ones they need to solve mysteries, do good deeds, and fight bad guys.

Soon Maggie – and her new friends Nell, Harriet and Sofie – find themselves embroiled in a mystery. Where has Miss Fenchurch disappeared to? And who, or what, is the mysterious 'night monster' that has been terrorising the city? They'll need all their skills (and then some) to work out the puzzle and keep the city safe.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ILLUSTRATOR

Judith Rossell is the multi-award-winning author-illustrator of the bestselling Stella Montgomery series (*Withering-by-Sea*, *Wormwood Mire* and *Wakestone Hall*). Judith has written fifteen books and illustrated more than eighty. Her work has been published in the US and UK and translated into more than twenty languages. She has been a Writer in Residence in Heidelberg, Germany, and run illustration workshops with children around the world. She teaches at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and the Australian Writers' Centre. She lives in Melbourne, Australia.

THEMES

Resourcefulness

Judith Rossell credits the Girl Guides as one of the inspirations for the book. The movement was founded in the early 1900s when girls wanted to join the Boy Scouts. Girl Guides would learn a variety of skills and earn badges when they could demonstrate a high level of competence in them. Discuss the kinds of skills that kids learn in Guides and Scouts. Why is it useful to learn these skills even if you don't use them every day? What does the word 'resourceful' mean to you? Can you think of a time when you've had to be resourceful?

Friendship

Before Maggie arrives at the Midwatch Institute, she is alone in the world and doesn't have much hope for her future. But she quickly makes friends with Nell, Sofie and Harriet, and these friendships helps her to develop confidence in herself and her abilities. Discuss the ways that the characters in the book demonstrate the qualities of good friendships. How does friendship change the way each of the new girls sees themselves throughout the book?

WRITING STYLE

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is a genre of stories that are fictional (not real). They are often inspired by real people, events and/or places from history. This genre brings historical facts and details into the story but allows the writer the creative freedom of fiction.

The Midwatch is set in the 1920s, a time of extraordinary adventurous women resisting stereotypes of women and girls. In her letter to the reader (included at the end of these notes), Judith Rossell writes that she 'wanted to write a story set in that era because it feels like such an optimistic window in history, and I love the appealing, modern designs of the time: the airships and skyscrapers and jewelled cigarette cases.'

Read the author's letter out loud in class and discuss the various details and inspirations that Judith Rossell has brought into *The Midwatch*. As you read the book, keep a list of anything you think might be a historical detail and do some research to see if you're right. You might want to organise these details under the headings 'people', 'places' and 'events'.



COMPREHENSION

- What is Maggie named after?
- What are Maggie's first impressions of the Midwatch Institute? How and why do they change?
- Miss Mandelay says that most people 'just want girls to be quiet and do what they're told' (p34). How do the girls in the book use these stereotypes to their advantage? The book is set in the 1920s. How much has changed? What do people expect of girls now?
- What are the girls at Midwatch preparing themselves for? What are some of the classes they take?
- What are the names of the hidden entrances to the Midwatch?
- Maggie tells herself 'that a person who had been called after an old herring bone in a gutter could never expect to see their name spelled out like that, in shining, golden letters' (p69). Why does she feel this way? Is she right? What happens to change her mind?
- Make a list of all the clues you notice as you're reading. Once the mystery has been solved, discuss how each clue fits into the puzzle and which (if any) were red herrings.
- What bird does Maggie notice that leads them to Miss Fenchurch?
- Who is 'Natty'? What is her relationship to Miss Mandelay? What happened to destroy their friendship?
- Who, or what, is the night monster?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a short story in which a character (either one from the book or one of your own creation) uses one of the useful skills shown in the book to escape from a tricky situation.

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Design a badge to accompany one of the useful skills from the book.
- Using the 'useful things every girl should know' page as a template, write instructions for a useful skill that you know, with an anecdote to accompany it.
- Research the 1920s. How would you describe this era? What do you notice about it? What was going on in the world at the time? Make a poster about a particular person, place or event that interests you from this period in history and share it with the class.
- Miss Mandelay was inspired to start the Midwatch Institute because of her own adventures as a girl. Write a short adventure from Miss Mandelay's childhood. How do you think she might have been similar or different from the girls in the story?



AUTHOR LETTER – FROM JUDITH ROSSELL

Dear Reader,

I'm happy and excited and nervous that you are holding *The Midwatch* in your hands. I hope you enjoy it!

The Midwatch is set in the 1920s. I wanted to write a story set in that era because it feels like a such an optimistic window in history, and I love the appealing, modern designs of the time: the airships and skyscrapers and jewelled cigarette cases.

It was an important time for women and girls. I was inspired by reading about Camille du Gast. She was a balloonist, parachutist, horse trainer, concert pianist and motor-racing driver. She worked with disadvantaged women and orphans, and campaigned for animal rights. She had an extraordinary life. I based the character of Miss Mandelay in the story partly on her, and named the motor car in the book *Camille* in her honour.

The Girl Guide movement was still very new in the 1920s. When I was young, I was a Girl Guide. We learned many useful things, like bandaging, knot-tying and Morse code, and I felt sure I would rescue someone from a runaway train, or save a baby from bandits, or something like that. I was ready! Unfortunately, 1980s suburban Melbourne did not give me the chance to have adventures like this, which was very frustrating. So it was rewarding to send the brave and adventurous girls of the Midwatch Institute into danger, and see them solve mysteries, fight bad guys, and help to keep the city safe.

Thank you for reading *The Midwatch*.

Best wishes,

Judith Rossell

RELATED READING

The Mysterious Benedict Society

By Trenton Lee Stewart

Tensy Farlow and the Home for Mislaid Children

By Jen Storer

The Detective's Guide to Ocean Travel

By Nicki Greenberg

Murder Most Unladylike

By Robin Stevens

Enola Holmes

By Nancy Springer

Friday Barnes: Girl Detective

By R.A. Spratt

