

# **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

- **The Alchemist's Portrait**
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## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Alchemist's Portrait**

*A school trip to the art gallery at the city museum leads Matthew into an eerie meeting with Peter Glimmer, imprisoned inside his own portrait by his villainous uncle in 1666. Entrusted by Peter with recovering the one object that can save the world, Matthew is sent hurtling over 300 years into the past.*

*Encountering magic, mayhem and murder, Matthew also has to contend with Peter's uncle, the ruthless and seemingly immortal Nicolaas van der Leyden, at every turn, in a desperate race through time to save the future.*

### **Character Creation**

In *The Alchemist's Portrait*, Matthew's adventure begins following a trip to the local art gallery. Portraits or even photographs can be an excellent starting point for character creation exercises. Have the students create a character based on their impression of the person in the picture. This can include:

- Mannerisms and personality traits
- Family and friends
- Occupation and education
- Favourite foods and drinks
- Pets and hobbies

There are many more items that could be added to this list and the students should be encouraged to use whatever they feel makes their chosen character more realistic and believable.

### **Historical Eras**

In the novel, Matthew's travels in time transport him to specific historical periods, some involving dramatic events, which provide a host of great ideas for student projects.

- The French Revolution
- The American Civil War
- The Russian Revolution

Mathew also visits Amsterdam in 1666, which could serve as the basis for studying some aspects of this particular time period.

- The Flemish school of art, which produced many famous artists and paintings
- The Dutch East India Company's international trade and commerce
- European expansion around the world following the Age of Discovery

There are links to websites about all these time periods, plus those related to the history of alchemy, at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com) on the page concerning the historical background of The Alchemist's Portrait.

### **Time Travel Tales**

The Alchemist's Portrait is about time travel, which has been a common theme in books and movies for a long time and continues to be popular.

Have students create their own time travel machines, devices or methods, devising a way to travel back in time and return safely home again. Here are a few things for the students to consider when creating their time travel story.

- What time travel methods do they know of from books, television and movies?
- What types of research do they need to do when writing a story set in the past?
- If they could travel back in time, where would they visit in the past?
- Why would they go to that particular place in history?
- How would they get there and how would they return home safely?

Make sure that when they create their means of traveling back in time, they are very specific on how it works.

The method has to be believable and fully explained, rather than a character simply pressing a button, pulling a lever or making a wish to travel into the past. The device or method has to be plausible in order for the story to make sense.

## **Doorways and Portals**

In *The Alchemist's Portrait*, Matthew travels in time by using the frame of the portrait of Nicolaas van der Leyden as a portal between different historical eras. This lends itself to some ideas for creative writing projects for students.

For example, have them imagine they're in the school library, searching for an elusive book, perhaps one that they really need for a project. They notice a strange door that they've never seen before and for some reason, are compelled to open the door and step through it. Where would it take them?

- Another time
- A different dimension
- An alien planet
- A parallel universe

This is merely a suggestion and portals and doorways could really be situated just about anywhere, with endless possibilities for stories.

## **Museum Mysteries**

Matthew's initial meeting with Peter Glimmer takes place in the art gallery at the local museum, which not only has collections of paintings but also ancient Egyptian artifacts, suits of armour and historical objects from many different eras. After a field trip to a museum, there are so many ideas that can serve as story starters.

- A time travel story based on one of the objects at the museum
- A mystery story featuring the theft of one of the museum's exhibits
- A writing project about how an object may have been used in the past
- Conducting research into an item's historical era

There are certainly lots of possibilities, all based on the students' favourite memories from their excursion.

## **The Art of Inspiration**

The world of fine art is one of the themes of *The Alchemist's Portrait*. Pictures often serve as a source of inspiration for writers and paintings other than portraits can also be used to devise creative writing projects.

Have the students select a piece of artwork and simply write a short story about it, based on their own perception of the picture they're studying. It's usually quite remarkable to see what children can devise during this process.

Depending on the number of students in your group, you may only be able to use a limited number of images in the session. In this case, it's always interesting to see the widely different stories two or more children come up with, based on their impression of the same picture. This exercise in creative writing gives full reign to your students' imagination, whatever form that may take.

## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Sorcerer's Letterbox**

*In a hidden drawer in the base of an old wooden box, Jack discovers a letter from a boy calling himself Edward. Penning a reply, Jack is astonished to be corresponding through time with the boy king Edward V, one of the famous Princes in the Tower, murdered by King Richard III.*

*Traveling back in time, Jack attempts to rescue Edward V and his brother from their fate, but is soon fighting for his life in the terrifying London of 1483.*

In *The Sorcerer's Letterbox*, Jack travels back in time to the late Middle Ages for an exciting adventure based on actual events and featuring real characters from history. The novel can be used as the basis for a wide variety of creative writing projects.

### **The Wars of the Roses**

The time period depicted in *The Sorcerer's Letterbox* is near the end of the Wars of the Roses, which took place during some of the most tumultuous decades in the history of medieval England. Student projects could include detailed research into this fascinating era.

- The intricate political events of the time
- The ambitions of the various branches of the rival royal families
- The deadly plots of kings and queens
- The tragic life of Edward V, who became King at age fourteen

### **The Tower of London**

This formidable fortress is one of the world's leading tourist attractions and a World Heritage site. The Tower plays a major role in *The Sorcerer's Letterbox* and is a great topic for student projects.

- Research into the fascinating history of the Tower of London
- Projects about castles and other medieval fortifications

- Medieval warfare, weaponry and battle strategies
- The justice system in the Middle Ages

There are links to websites about this time period, plus those related to the Tower of London, at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com) on the page concerning the historical background of The Sorcerer's Letterbox.

### **Medieval Detectives**

The famous story of the Princes in the Tower has often been described as history's greatest murder mystery. Many theories have been advanced, with most historians believing that Richard III had his nephews murdered. However, many other intriguing possibilities remain. Student assignments could include:

- Conducting an investigation into the disappearance of the princes in 1483
- Investigating Richard III's possible motives
- Research into the other suspects in the mystery
- Studies of forensic techniques used in modern police investigations

There are links to websites about the Princes in the Tower, plus a link to my video about the story behind the story of The Sorcerer's Letterbox, at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com).

### **Life in the Middle Ages**

The Sorcerer's Letterbox takes place in 1483, towards the end of the Middle Ages. This can provide the basis for countless projects regarding the later medieval period.

- Daily life in the Middle Ages
- Literature and culture
- The early years of the Renaissance
- Medieval architecture
- The origins of the Reformation

- The history of the famous London Bridge
- The impact on Europe of the voyages of Columbus

At [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com), there are links to websites related to the historical background of The Sorcerer's Letterbox.

### **The World of Words**

The mysterious scroll Jack discovers is written Middle English, one of the many versions of the English language that existed before the modern era. This could provide the framework for a study of the way the language has evolved, and how modern English differs from that spoken in medieval times.

### **Incredible Journeys**

In The Sorcerer's Letterbox, Jack's own incredible journey into the past begins following his discovery of a mysterious medieval wooden box. Students could be asked to imagine where such a magic box might take them in history. They could also use a different ancient object as their starting point for an exciting time travel story.



## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Clone Conspiracy**

*At the dawn of the twenty-first century, nervous governments around the world reacted quickly to pass legislation banning human cloning. Panicked as technology rapidly advanced, they didn't realize that the genetic genie had already escaped from the bottle.*

*When Luke's best friend Patrick vanishes and the police quickly close the case, Luke is determined to uncover the truth. Tantalizing clues lead Luke and Patrick's sister Emma to LennoxGen, where they stumble across a shocking international conspiracy with catastrophic consequences for the future of mankind.*

The Clone Conspiracy involves secret experiments, unethical scientists, government cover-ups, human cloning and genetic engineering. Here's just a selection of projects that could be generated from the novel.

### **Clone for a Day**

What if you had a clone for the day? What use would you make of a duplicate of yourself for twenty four hours?

- Send the clone to school or work on your behalf
- Do things you've always wanted to do but never had the opportunity
- Ways to keep your clone a secret from friends and family
- Consider what complications might occur if the clone didn't behave as expected

These are just a few suggestions. This exercise can really tap into the students' creative energy, as they explore the many possible scenarios that could result from this situation.

### **Medical Marvels**

Human cloning has been the topic of many stories, TV shows and movies over the years. However, some aspects of the technology could have many potential benefits for mankind. Have the students consider:

- Ways in which cloning might be applied to current medical procedures
- The pros and cons of developing cloning technology

- Ways in which cloning might help with incurable diseases and medical conditions
- Future medical inventions that at the moment seem like science fiction

### **Future Technology**

Students could explore potential inventions that may transform the way we live in the coming decades. Have students invent an imaginary product, which could be related to transportation, medical, sports, entertainment, lifestyle, habitat or even household appliances. Students can then:

- Explain the features and benefits of the product
- Design a newspaper or magazine advertisement for the product
- Write the script for a radio commercial
- Create a product's TV commercial, which can be acted out as a skit

In each instance, the ads must be exciting and commercial enough to be able to sell the product to potential customers.

### **Making Mammoths**

Students are usually familiar with the premise of Jurassic Park. However, they may not be as knowledgeable about the serious attempts to use frozen mammoth bodies to attempt to recreate these long extinct beasts, with the help of DNA from modern elephants. There is also ongoing research into how current animal species threatened with extinction might be able to survive with technologies developed from cloning. Studies and projects could include:

- Discussions about the ethics of using cloning to resurrect long dead creatures
- Research into extinct species, other than dinosaurs, that may be revived
- Examining current threatened animals that might be helped by cloning technology
- Creating imaginary creatures by combining two or more animals

## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Emerald Curse**

*Charles Kelly was the world's greatest comic book artist, until he disappeared without a trace. Two years later, his grandson Sam discovers a mysterious pen in Kelly's attic studio. Sam is soon propelled into a bizarre dimension, where super villains are all powerful and disturbingly real, and finds himself in a deadly confrontation with an evil entity, imprisoned inside a mystical gemstone since the dawn of time.*

In *The Emerald Curse*, Sam has adventures inside a strange comic book universe. The novel can inspire a range of student projects related to the superhero genre and the wonderful world of comic books.

### **Create Your Own Superhero**

In this exercise, students invent their very own hero, complete with:

- An appropriate name and a colourful costume
- Amazing powers, weapons or devices to fight crime
- A secret identity
- Friends and family
- A secret headquarters
- An archenemy

Students could also craft detailed character outlines for their hero, along with all the supporting players, including their main adversary and even a sidekick.

### **The Beginning**

Once they have invented their very own hero, the students can create an exciting origin story, detailing how the hero got his or her powers in the first place.

Most superheroes the students are familiar with, such as Spider-Man or Batman, have very distinctive origin tales in which they acquired their powers or were inspired to become heroes and students will have a great time creating these stories. For example, students could create a superhero origin story with a distinct beginning, middle and end.

- Beginning - This deals with the character's ordinary daily life, before the event that gave them super powers and changed them forever
- Middle - The character discovers, perhaps by accident when recovering in hospital, that they have superhuman abilities
- End - The character decides to become a hero, devises a costume and perhaps weapons, builds a secret base, and vows to fight crime

This is of course only a guideline and students are welcome to compose a completely different type of origin tale for their hero.

### **Headline News**

In the style of a traditional newspaper front page, students can write an exciting, dramatic story, describing a battle between the hero and his archenemy. Students can research other front-page newspaper stories for some ideas.

- An attention-grabbing headline
- An action-packed story describing the battle as it happened
- Quotes from witnesses who are questioned by reporters
- Interviews with the chief of police after the villain's defeat

In addition to the catchy headline, the story should make effective use of descriptive words to convey a truly great picture of all the action that took place.

### **Comic Books**

The inspiration for *The Emerald Curse* came from the superhero comics I read while growing up. Comic books can provide many ideas for student projects.

- The storyline in *The Emerald Curse* could be transformed into a comic book, using the few illustrations that are scattered throughout the text as a starting point
- Students can create their own comic book, depicting an adventure starring the superhero they've created

The covers of comic books are always very distinctive and this can form the basis of a separate student project. Covers are usually action-packed, show the hero flying through the night above the city skyline and so on.

Students will have their own ideas, but here are a few guidelines.

- Lots of action to grab the reader's attention and drag them into the story
- Large lettering in imposing blocks for the hero's name, usually taking up at least a third of the cover
- If it's the first ever issue, it can be called something like 'Introducing the Amazing Spider-Man'
- A different title might be something along the lines of 'The Return of Doctor Octopus' or 'The Joker Strikes Again'
- The comic's price, date and issue number

Whichever of these you choose, students are sure to have fun creating their project based on any of these elements from the comic book genre.

### **Board Games**

In the novel, Sam is propelled into the comic book universe and has adventures in several different worlds, before arriving in the realm ruled by the evil Baron Midnight.

Sam's travels into the comic book illustrations and subsequent journeys elsewhere in the superhero dimension could form the basis of a board game. Students could develop this once they're familiar with the storyline of The Emerald Curse.

## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Heretic's Tomb**

*While exploring a medieval archaeological site containing the ruins of an ancient English abbey, Annie discovers the long-forgotten tomb of Lady Isabella Devereaux, who had been condemned to death as a heretic in 1349.*

*When Annie curiously examines a mysterious amulet she finds in the tomb, she is suddenly sent hurtling back to the Middle Ages, encountering sorcery, treachery, treason and the ghastly horrors of the Black Death.*

The Heretic's Tomb takes place in England in the year 1349, at the height of the Black Death, which is estimated to have killed between thirty and forty percent of the population, or approximately two million people. In Europe as a whole, it is estimated that over twenty five million perished as a result of the devastating plague between 1347 and 1351.

### **The Black Death**

The great plague of the mid fourteenth century offers a wealth of opportunities for student projects.

- Research into the disease, its causes and effects
- Medieval medicine, scientific knowledge and doctors
- The effects of the Black Death on society at the time
- The Black Death as a factor in later developments, such as the decline of feudalism and the Peasants Revolt of 1381

At [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com), you can find details and links regarding the Black Death and a lengthy article about medieval medicine.

### **Ancient Artifacts**

In The Heretic's Tomb, Annie's means of time travel is an artifact from the Middle Ages, which can provide themes for student projects.

- The discovery of a long forgotten object with the power to travel in time
- The object may not be a time travel device, but play a major role in a story set in a particular time period
- An object with incredible powers, such as the power to conquer death possessed by the medallion in The Heretic's Tomb
- The artifact could also simply serve as the starting point for a story

### **Uncovering the Past**

In the chapters of The Heretic's Tomb set in the present day, Annie explores an archaeological site in London. Students could study:

- Different types of archaeological excavations
- The techniques and equipments used
- The kinds of things that might be uncovered during excavations
- Famous archeological sites around the world such as those in Rome or in Mediterranean countries

### **The Middle Ages**

The Heretic's Tomb takes place in the mid-fourteenth century and the history of the medieval period has so much to offer for student projects.

- The Hundred Years War
- The reigns of Edward II, Edward III and Richard II
- The Peasants Revolt
- Medieval warfare, knights and chivalry
- Feudalism and systems of government
- Medieval society and living conditions

There are lots of links to websites about the medieval period at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com) on the pages dealing with the historical background of The Heretic's Tomb.

## **The Medieval Church**

The church was a powerful presence in medieval society. The church's influence over the daily life of the people is evident throughout *The Heretic's Tomb*. Students could study:

- The role of the church in the Middle Ages
- How monasteries and convents operated
- The construction of Europe's majestic cathedrals
- Medieval heretical movements and the seeds of the Reformation

On the pages dealing with the historical background to *The Heretic's Tomb* at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com), there are lots of links to websites about the medieval period.

## **Girl Power**

The Middle Ages is often seen as an era dominated by the daring and heroic exploits of men. However, students could also learn about prominent medieval women, including:

- Eleanor of Aquitaine
- Isabella of France
- Margaret of Anjou
- Joan of Arc

Lady Isabella Devereaux is one of the leading characters in *The Heretic's Tomb* and many women played important roles in this time period.

## **The History of Books**

Two books from antiquity are important parts of the plot of *The Heretic's Tomb*. A student project could involve the development of the written word.

- Scrolls used in the ancient world
- Parchments illustrated and embellished by monks in medieval monasteries
- The beginnings of bound copies of books
- The invention of printing and the effect on medieval society



## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Doomsday Mask**

*The legendary crystal ceremonial mask of Kulkaan, high priest of Atlantis, was believed to have been endowed with incredible powers. In the ancient civilization's destruction, the mask was thought to have been shattered and irretrievably lost, eventually being forgotten.*

*Long considered to be a mere myth, the mask's crystal fragments have now been found and the mask of Kulkaan reassembled, with deadly consequences for all mankind. In a desperate race against time, Josh and Erica must prevent the mask from falling intact into the hands of the shadowy Crystalline Order to save the world from catastrophe.*

The Doomsday Mask features the legend of Atlantis, stolen treasure in World War II, mysteries of Central America and prophecies about the end of the world, all great topics on which to base student projects.

### **The End of World War II**

Part of The Doomsday Mask takes place in Berlin during the chaos at the end of the Second World War. Large parts of the city were destroyed and the army recruited anyone strong enough to hold a weapon in the waning days of the war, including children.

Art treasures and other valuables were stolen by the Nazis from all over Europe. One treasure horde hidden in a mine contained thousands of bags of gold, silver, and valuable coins worth over \$500 million, along with jewelry and priceless works of art. Students can explore:

- What life was like for children during World War II
- How children served as soldiers during the conflict
- The kinds of valuable objects that were stolen during the war
- The types of treasure found by Allied armies in the last days of the fighting

The Doomsday Mask's historical background page on my website has links to online resources about this time period.

## **The Legend of Atlantis**

The Mask of Kulkaan featured in The Doomsday Mask is a crystal ancient artifact and a remnant of Atlantis. The legendary city can be the inspiration for a number of projects.

- Legends about Atlantis, the city and civilization
- Theories about how Atlantis may have been destroyed
- Plate tectonics and the Earth's shifting surface
- Theories about where the city may have been located, if it existed
- Crystal skulls and other mysteries of Central America

There are links on my website to online resources on the above topics.

## **The Pleistocene Extinction**

Paleontologists suspect that a catastrophic event happened 12,000 years ago, or around 10,000 BC, which is about the same time as the supposed destruction of Atlantis.

Vast numbers of large mammals such as mammoths, mastodons, sabre-toothed tigers and others vanished almost overnight in what was known as the Pleistocene Extinction. Here are a few ideas for student projects on this topic.

- The types of animals that existed at the end of the Pleistocene
- Other theories about the great extinction that occurred at this time
- Other major extinctions, other than those related to dinosaurs
- Species that have become extinct in recent centuries
- The threat of extinction faced by some species in the modern era

You can find links to websites about the Pleistocene Extinction at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com).

## **Ancient Cities of the Americas**

The ancient cities of Central and South America served as an inspiration for parts of the story in *The Doomsday Mask*. Here are some that students can investigate for writing projects.

- The city of Tenochtitlan, established in 1325 and the capital of the Aztec Empire
- Teotihuacan, one of the most visited archaeological sites in Mexico
- Chichen Itza, built by the Mayan civilization in the Yucatan peninsular
- Tiahuanaco, located near Lake Titicaca in Bolivia
- Machu Picchu, the lost city of the Incas, located high in the Peruvian Andes

There are links to sites about all these ancient cities on *The Doomsday Mask*'s historical background page at [www.simon-rose.com](http://www.simon-rose.com).

## **Study Guides and Classroom Resources**

### **The Time Camera**

*The massive explosion in which Eleanor Chamberlain died at her research laboratory was widely seen as a tragic accident. Or was it the perfect crime?*

*Two years later, Jake and Lydia discover a mysterious camera, capable of taking pictures of the distant past and more ominously, of the future. As they uncover the shocking truth and learn of secrets that someone will kill to protect, Jake and Lydia are soon propelled into a deadly and desperate race against time in order to save the future.*

The Time Camera is an exciting adventure that involves incredible inventions, the development of an advanced form of camera, time travel and the ability to photograph both past and future events. It can form the basis for projects related to digital cameras, photography and computer editing but also inspire a number of creative writing exercises.

### **The History of Photography**

Children often don't realize how long photography has been around and can research the history of the technology. Projects could involve:

- The development of photography in the early nineteenth century
- The different types of early photographic processes
- Early portraits of prominent people
- Spirit photography and hoax pictures
- History's most famous photographs

### **What If?**

In the novel, pictures are taken of the future, allowing people to become wealthy due to their knowledge of coming events. Students can:

- Invent future newspaper headlines for important events
- Imagine daily life fifty years in the future
- Create advertisements for future inventions, technology and products
- Imagine how far into the future they might want to travel and why

## **Changing the Past**

In *The Time Camera*, Lydia and Jake use the camera to travel into the past to try and prevent Lydia's mother's death. This idea can be useful for student projects too.

- What kinds of time travel methods and devices are you familiar with from books, movies and TV?
- Where would you go if you could travel into the recent past?
- Which historical events would you change if you had the power to do so?
- What problems might result from altering the past?

## **Every Picture Tells a Story**

Photographs can provide great inspiration and be a wonderful starting point for creative writing projects.

Select some general photographs featuring people and situations as story starters, with students giving full reign to their imaginations to create a story from their picture. For example:

- What do you think is going on in the picture?
- Who are the people in the picture and how are they connected to each other?
- What might have lead up to this scene and what might happen next?
- What might be happening outside the borders of the picture?

Whatever picture the students choose, you can be sure they will come up with great story ideas and it's always interesting see how children have very different interpretations of the same photograph.

This exercise in creative writing really stimulates your students' imagination, whatever form that may take.