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# THE GIRL OF INK & STARS

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

## TEACHING NOTES



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# THE GIRL OF INK & STARS

BY KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE

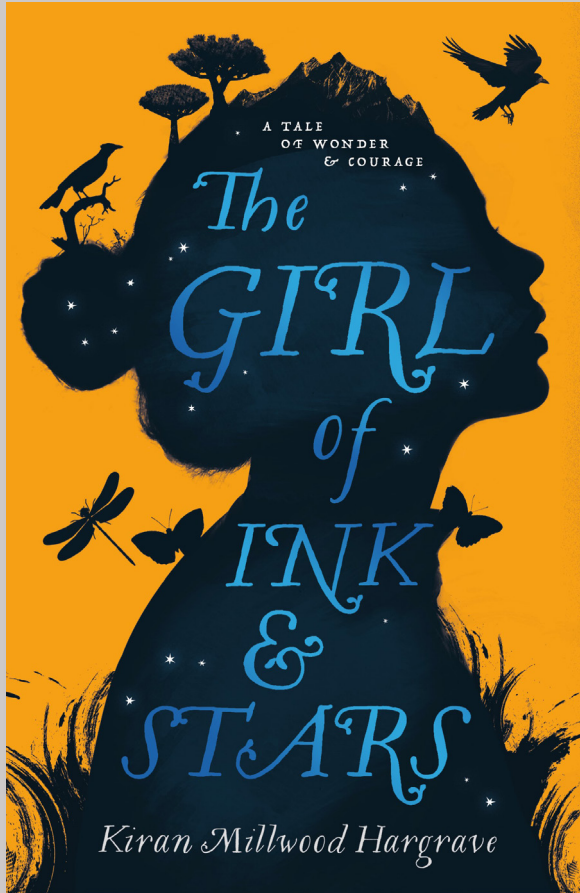
## SYNOPSIS

Thirteen-year-old Isabella lives on the island of Joya with her cartographer father (Da). Isabella loves to listen to the myths and legends Da tells her – her favourite being the tale of Arinta. Legend has it that the once free-floating island of Joya became tethered by Yote, a fearsome fire demon who resides deep beneath the island's surface. An island-girl called Arinta journeyed to Yote's lair with the intention of preventing him from devouring the island. As Arinta threatened Yote with the crushing weight of the sea, an uneasy truce was established. However, the myth goes that Yote remains in his lair waiting for an opportunity to take the island.


Myths are Isabella's only means of exploring her beloved Joya, though, as the island's Governor Adori has forbidden any journeying beyond the forest that borders the harbour town of Gromera. The ports and borders of the island have also been sealed, preventing Da from continuing with his explorations and mapping of the world.

Having lost her mother and her twin brother Gabo, Isabella finds solace in spending time with her neighbor, fifteen-year-old Pablo, and her best friend Lupe (who happens to be Governor Adori's daughter). When a careless and selfish act by Lupe leads to the death of their classmate Cata, Isabella turns on her, accusing her of being 'rotten to the core' just like the rest of the Adori family.

Determined to prove Isabella wrong, Lupe makes the brave and reckless decision to go into the forest to face the man or beast responsible for Cata's death. Meanwhile, unrest on the island has been building due to



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the Governor's inadequate response to Cata's death. The trouble results in Pablo and Da's incarceration in the island's jail. With her father absent, Isabella resolves to go into the forest to find Lupe.

Pretending to be a boy, she earns a place as navigator on the Governor's expedition to find his missing daughter. Though her primary reason for going is to find her friend, Isabella is in part drawn to the expedition by her own sense of adventure and a deep desire to chart the Forgotten Territories of the island. Pablo, who is good with horses, is dragged out of jail to accompany the expedition.

As they journey deep into the Forgotten Territories, the group realize just how ravaged and destroyed the island has become. It is clear that the island is dying. The Governor and his men come up against the Banished (inhabitants of the Forgotten Territories), and packs of fearsome demon dogs (Tibicena). As the group comes head to head with the Banished, Lupe is found. But the Tibicena have closed in and, as the Banished and the Governor's men form an unlikely alliance to fight the beasts, Isabella, Lupe and Pablo run back towards Gromera.

Using a basic map of the island (her mother's only heirloom) as a guide, Isabella does her best to lead them back home. But when they are set upon by the dreaded Tibicena once again, the girls are separated from Pablo and are plunged into the island's terrifying underworld after falling through a waterfall.

Seemingly trapped in the labyrinth of tunnels of the cavernous underworld, things look bleak – until, that is, Isabella's mother's map proves to have magical properties unleashed by the waters of the river. Following the map leads the girls to the lair of the Yote, though a sudden rockfall separates the friends. Despite promising to stay close to Lupe, Isabella cannot resist the lure of adventure and discovery. But she quickly realizes she cannot defeat the demon alone. Just when it looks as though Isabella is certain to perish, she is saved by Lupe.

The girls find Arinta's legendary sword embedded in the rock and though Isabella fails to successfully retrieve it, Lupe wrests it free and Yote's fire is quashed by the crashing weight of the sea. The fire demon is vanquished and the island floats free once more. But Lupe has been seriously hurt and is trapped in the underwater cave. As Isabella struggles to free her friend, Lupe performs one final brave act of self-sacrifice, sending Isabella back to the surface alone.



Isabella is reunited with Pablo and together they free the jail's inhabitants – including Da. With Joya restored to its former glory, Isabella sets about creating a detailed and beautiful map of the island. She remembers her friend by dedicating a large dragon fruit tree to Lupe, picking it out on the map in a starburst of golden thread.

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'The Girl of Ink & Stars is a simply told, deeply magical tale about an island, the girl who travels to the heart of its story, and the myth that guides her path. On our heroine's journey, you'll encounter danger and fear – but also heart-warming courage, love and friendship. Can Isabella map out a new future for her island? Kiran Millwood Hargrave's debut is full of startling ideas and wonderful invention. It's really rather fiercely beautiful too.'* **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Kiran was born in London in 1990. She completed her undergraduate studies in English and Drama with Education at Cambridge University, and performed as part of Footlights, the university's renowned theatre group. She graduated with distinction from the Creative Writing MSt at Oxford University, and was President of the Poetry Society there. She is an award-winning poet, with three published collections and has had work appearing in international journals such as *Room*, *Agenda* and *Magma*. She was a Barbican Young Poet, and has performed her work internationally, from Banff to Tokyo. She lives in Oxford with her artist boyfriend and writer friends. Connect with her on Twitter (@kiran\_mh) or by visiting [kiranmillwoodhargrave.co.uk](http://kiranmillwoodhargrave.co.uk).

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'When I was growing up one of my favourite things to do was to stop on a random page in my parents' atlas and make up a story about the place I landed on. The best stories always happened on islands: the tiny ones, the ones that might have been biscuit crumbs (and sometimes were). These felt like places where the magic was hiding.

I knew magic was real, of course, because of stories. For as long as I can remember my mum has told me



Indian myths, and my dad read *Beowulf* to me so many times I was sure he'd conjure Grendel. Later, writers like Ursula Le Guin, Philip Pullman and David Almond showed me worlds where angels were found in garages, and souls slunk on our shoulders in animal form. Books were the first maps I navigated the world by.

It makes sense, then, that writing my debut middle grade novel *The Girl of Ink & Stars* began with a trip to a tiny, magical island: La Gomera, the second-smallest and wildest of the Canary Islands. I looked out over the mountains, formed by volcanic eruptions hundreds of years ago; at the wild sea foaming at the base of cliffs; at the forests blackened by fires; at the unbroken horizon and thought, 'What must it have been like to be a child living here before you really knew what 'here' was? Before atlases and Google maps, when you thought monsters lived just past sunset?' And so, Isabella Riosse awoke up on the tiny island of Joya, to the smell of sulphur.

*The Girl of Ink & Stars* is about maps, myth, and magic – but also friendship. Not picture-perfect friendship like we so often see in books or films, but fierce friendship that makes you as angry as it does brave. And it is about forging your own fate: thinking you know how a story is going to end, and realizing you can make your own ending. Which, incidentally, is the best thing about writing them.' **KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE**

## THEMES

- Myths and storytelling
- Cartography and the beauty of maps
- Exploration of the unknown
- Friendship, loyalty and betrayal
- Adventure and ambition
- Bravery and endurance
- Punishment, redemption and sacrifice





# WRITING STYLE

*The Girl of Ink & Stars is a lyrical and imaginative fantasy-adventure novel. The action takes place on (and below) the fictional island of Joya. The story is told using the third person perspective and follows thirteen-year-old Isabella Riosse as she embarks upon an intrepid journey with the hope of saving her best friend and a burning desire to chart the forbidden heart of Joya. The novel centres on an ancient myth, and Isabella encounters an assortment of terrifying beasts and beings throughout her journey. The writing is beautiful and languorous, laden with powerful imagery and symbolism. The action moves at a pace and the adventure builds to a gripping climax. There are some quite violent fantasy scenes and some very mild romance. **25 chapters, 222 pages, age 10+***

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## *1. Precious objects - a wall of hidden meaning*

*'It had always felt like a sign that Ma and Da were meant for each other, that he was a cartographer and her only heirloom was a map.'* (Page 6)

Though Isabella's family are far from wealthy, there are a number of objects they possess whose value is beyond measure. A forest green jug – special because it was the last thing Isabella's mother made; a walking stick, used by Isabella's father – carved from a fragment of Isabella's great-great-grandfather's fishing boat; and a map of the island of Joya – passed down through Isabella's mother's family for generations.

Think of your own possessions. Select one that would seem, to an outsider, to have little value, but one that holds a special meaning for you. Study your chosen object carefully. On paper, describe the object exactly as it is. Pay attention only to what is in front of you, describing the object in a factual and dispassionate way. This may be a very short piece of writing depending upon the simplicity or complexity of the object. Next, take pen to paper and describe exactly what the object means to you – is it the happiness of a glorious holiday? A precious memento



from a special person? A symbol of a difficult time? Try to convey the importance or significance the object has in your life.

Together the class should create a display of 'hidden meaning' out of these pieces. Each person will need to contribute a photograph of their object, as well as their two pieces of writing (all printed at A4 size). The three pieces should be stapled together with the photograph on top, the factual piece in the middle, and the piece about the object's meaning on the bottom. These should all be pinned to the wall so that observers can 'peel back' the layers to find out more about each of the precious objects on display.

## **2. A pin in the map ...**

*'When I was growing up one of my favourite things to do was to stop on a random page in my parents' atlas and make up a story about the place I landed on.'* (Author, Kiran Millwood Hargrave)

With your eyes closed, pinpoint a location on an atlas or globe. Research your country/city/landmark and use what you find out about it as the basis for a short piece of creative writing. You could write a poem, a piece of prose, or a short story. Whatever your chosen form, try to capture the essence of your chosen place, paying particular attention to the landscape, climate, and the flora and fauna.

## **3. Colouring the tale ...**

Colour plays an important role in *The Girl of Ink & Stars*. The author uses colour to create a strong sense of atmosphere and to reflect both environment and mood. It could be said that each of the novel's three sections has its own 'palette' of colours with a number of 'signature colours' (such as the Governor's blue).

Firstly, divide the class into three and assign each group one of the novel's three sections. Each group should write a list of the colours mentioned in its section, keeping a tally of how often each colour is mentioned.

Using the 'palette of colours' from its section, each group should work on a large abstract painting. Each



painting should serve as a visual representation of the corresponding section of story. In creating the piece of art, the group should consider how else (other than by colour) they could reflect the atmosphere or feeling of their part of the novel. For example, the group might play with the materials they use (paint, fabrics, chinks etc.), the shape and size of the brush strokes or shapes, and any embellishments added.

Once finished, the pieces could be displayed in the classroom as a visual reminder of the novel.

#### **4. *The lost art of the map***

*'... Map the route from here to the square. I want buildings - accurately scaled - field boundaries, the location of north, a wind indication, an estimation of time, walking and on horseback. Do it. Quickly.'* (Governor Adori, page 64)

Isabella lives and breathes maps. They are the passion that she and her father share - maps are in their blood.

Since the advent of digital maps and satellite navigation, it has been argued that map reading has become somewhat of a lost art for younger generations. Does anyone in your class ever use a paper map to navigate? What are the benefits of being able to read a map over simply following the directions on a smartphone?

The following is an exercise in navigation. The activity should take place in a familiar locality. This could be the school grounds or the nearest town/city depending upon accessibility and the time available. Depending upon the age of the students, the groups could each be accompanied by a teacher or responsible adult or the groups could be trusted to work alone and unaccompanied.

The class should divide into four groups. Without using any reference materials (i.e. the internet or printed maps) and without walking around the location, each group should work together to draft a detailed map of the chosen location from memory. There can be no written words on the maps, so landmarks and details will need to be indicated by symbols or small drawings. Each map should have marked upon it the same agreed starting point (i.e. a particular building at the school, or a known landmark in the town). Each map also needs to have marked upon it a finishing point. Once the maps have been completed, they should be swapped around so that each





group is working from another group's map.

Setting out from the starting point, each group should use the hand-drawn map to navigate to the finishing point. Once there, the group should take a group selfie, with the location plainly in view as proof, before returning to the starting point.

Once all the groups are back together there should be a debriefing session. Did all of the groups reach their intended location? Were the maps they were working from accurate? Were there any discrepancies, errors or red herrings? How difficult was it to draft the maps? How difficult was it to follow them? Do you think it is important to be able to draw/read a map nowadays?

## WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The inhabitants of Joya live on an island they are forbidden from leaving or exploring. The island's ports have all been closed and the sea is strictly out of bounds. How do you think it would feel to grow up on Joya? Would you risk your life to escape or to explore the island's forbidden areas? Do you believe people should be allowed to move freely around the globe without restrictions or do you think controlled borders are necessary?

2. *'No, Lupe, you choose not to know! You don't care about anything, anyone, outside your life. You don't understand about your father, about Cata, about anything—'* (Isabella, page 202)

For much of Lupe's life she has lived in ignorance of much of what is going on around her. Do you think Isabella is right when she says that Lupe has 'chosen' to be ignorant? Is it a choice? If you believe it is a choice, why do you think Lupe chooses to be ignorant? Do you think Isabella is right to be so hard on her friend for being ignorant? Do you think ignorance can ever be bliss or should we always seek to find out the truth?

3. *'... It's not a story. It's a myth.'*

*'What's the difference?'*



*'A myth is something that happened so long ago people like to pretend it's not real, even when it is.'*

(Isabella and Lupe, page 179)

Myths play a large part in many cultures. Myths can often have a direct impact on people living within a culture, and can form the basis for many of the superstitions that bind us as communities. Do you think there is a difference between myths and stories? Do you think people are silly for paying attention to myths? Do you think it matters whether or not a myth is based on the truth? What cultures do you know for whom myths play an important role? Are there any myths that you believe in?

4. *'They say the day the Governor arrived, the ravens did too.'* (Page 3)

Ravens are mentioned at various points throughout the novel. Why do you think this is? What, if anything, do you think the ravens might symbolize? Why do you think the ravens arrived whilst the songbirds departed? Are there any other symbols in the book that you can think of?

5. *'We are all of us products of our surroundings.'* (Page 109)

What do think Isabella's father means by this? In what way do you think you are a product of your surroundings? What is it about your surroundings, the place you grew up, that shapes you? Do you believe it's possible for us to not be shaped by our surroundings or to escape the influence they have on us?

6. Isabella lives on an island she doesn't know much about but which she longs to explore. How well do you know your own town, city or country?

7. The Governor is a tyrannical leader and is not well loved by his people. Even his daughter, Lupe, is critical of his actions and is desperate to prove to Isabella that she is not 'rotten' like her dad. What do think it takes to be a truly great leader? What qualities do you think a leader should possess? Are there any natural born leaders in the novel?

8. Do you think Isabella is right to leave Lupe on the other side of the rockfall towards the end of the novel? Would you have done the same thing? Why? Why not?

