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THE WAY PAST WINTER

Kiran Millwood Hargrave


TEACHING NOTES



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THE WAY PAST WINTER

BY KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE

SYNOPSIS

In a land of eternal winter, Mila lives in a small house in the forest with her three siblings: oldest sister Sanna, youngest sister Pípa – not yet even old enough to receive her given name – and older brother Oskar. Their mother died when they were young, and they've lived alone since their father unexpectedly left them five years before. The siblings grew up listening to their father's stories: of Thule, a magical island trapped in ice; and of Bjørn, the bear spirit who protects trees.

One day, they receive a visit from a mysterious, wild man swathed in furs, accompanied by a horde of boys, all on horseback and all with gold cord wrapped around their legs. Oskar agrees to let the group stay on their land overnight. The sisters wake in the morning to find the group is gone, and Oskar with them. Mila is sure he's been taken, even though there's no sign of a struggle.

The three sisters journey out into the snow to search for their brother, though Sanna thinks it will be a fruitless trip. Unlike her younger sisters, she is sure Oskar left willingly, frustrated of a quiet life with his sisters and chasing adventure. The three travel to the nearby village of Stavgar, where they meet the town jarl, Bretta, and find all the boys have also disappeared, including Sanna's crush Geir – all except one, a mysterious boy mage called Rune.



Rune tells Mila that the shadowy man is none other than Bjørn – the Bear – determined to protect the forest at all costs, and destroy anyone who harms it. She learns the boys are under his control, and he has taken them north to Thule. The two decide to follow their trail, and Pípa joins them. After an incident with one of the taken boys during their journey north, Mila realises the gold cord around the boys' ankles is used by the Bear to control them.

The three continue their journey, manoeuvring past wolves and avalanches, and safely make it to the near-abandoned town of Bovnik – the last town before snow meets frozen sea. As they climb to the top of the waterfall and reach the passage to Thule, Rune gives Mila a breath-skein – an orb used for breathing underwater – and tells her he has unfinished business here, and won't be going with her. As Mila and Pípa are about to leave, they're intercepted by Sanna and Bretta, who have followed them. Rune quickly realises that Bretta is being controlled by the Bear, and she retaliates by trying to push him over the side of the waterfall – but she misses and hits Pípa instead, who falls into the icy water below. Mila jumps after her, and unbeknownst to her, Sanna follows.

The three sisters follow a golden current, which takes them to a leafy, green land of spring – Thule. They find the Bear's cave, where he keeps his heart tree – and there they find the boys, some now more tree than human, planted within the heart tree to keep it, and in turn the forest, alive. The sisters find Oskar and Geir embedded in the roots, and come face-to-face with the Bear.

The three fight the Bear and free Oskar. Mila realises that her father, far from leaving them, was taken by the Bear too – and is still alive, trapped in the heart tree. Mila releases him and the tree begins to burn. The three sisters, Papa and the boys escape the cave – but the Bear isn't far behind.

The group is intercepted by Rune, who tells Mila he is the one who must finish the Bear. Rune transforms into a gyrfalcon – his animal spirit – and sacrifices himself to defeat the Bear, who fades into nothingness.

As the family prepare to head home, Sanna tells them she'd like to stay, and explore the world beyond the forest with Geir. Pípa, now old enough to receive her given name, decides to instead choose one for herself: Rune.



WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'In The Way Past Winter, Kiran writes "stories are just a different way of telling the truth" – and the truth is exactly what you'll find in her most poignant story yet. We start with a winter that threatens to stay for ever, and a family undone. In order to find healing, three sisters must face a deep and frightening truth about their relationship with the natural world – and perhaps our own. Awesome, exciting and full of rich images that will always stay with me, this is classic storytelling by a brilliantly talented writer.' **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is an award-winning poet, playwright, and bestselling author. Her debut *The Girl of Ink & Stars* won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2017 and the British Book Award's Children's Book of the Year, and was shortlisted for numerous awards including the Jhalak Prize, the Branford Boase Award and the Little Rebels Prize. Her second novel *The Island at the End of Everything* was released in April 2017, and was shortlisted for both the Costa Book Award and Blue Peter Children's Book Award. Kiran lives by the river in Oxford, UK with her husband, Tom, and their cat, Luna.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'The idea for the eternal winter in The Way Past Winter arrived in the heart of summer. I was on holiday with my family on the Isle of Harris, in the north-west of Scotland. It is a beautiful, remote, rugged place of extremes. In our two weeks there we experienced thunderstorms, freezing nights, scorching days. When talking to local fishermen, they told us the weather was getting wilder, that even in this unpredictable place it felt like it was swinging out of control. Our planet is undergoing enormous shifts due to human pollution, and I wanted to write a story that had some sort of ecological comment at its centre, but that explored this theme in my favourite way: an adventure story.

And so, Eldbjørn forest was born: a wood locked in a mysterious winter. In its deepest, darkest place, I placed



a small family undergoing their own change: Mila, Sanna, Pipa and Oskar – siblings struggling to survive after their father's disappearance. After a visit from a dangerous stranger, Oskar goes missing, and the three sisters strike out on a perilous adventure north to try to save their brother. The main questions I asked myself were: what caused the winter? Why was he taken? And can the sisters not only find their way to him, but also a way past winter?

I want readers to think about our impact on something as small as a bird living in the garden, and as large as the weather. I want them to think about what positive changes, large and small, we can make in our lives and to the environment around us. Most of all, I want them to feel empowered to do so. Too often we feel powerless, and so carry on living the way we always have. But if each of us takes control over the way we live: like cutting down on plastic, eating less meat, or not littering – wonderful, momentous things can happen.' **KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE**

THEMES

- Myths and legends
- Fairy tales and fables
- Family and sisterhood
- Determination and resilience
- Exploration and adventure
- Bravery and fortitude
- Environmentalism and preservation

WRITING STYLE

The Way Past Winter is a lyrical magical-realist adventure novel. The action takes place in a land of eternal winter, and Kiran Millwood Hargrave describes the gorgeous setting through wonderfully evocative descriptive passages. It is written in the third person, past tense, told from the perspective of twelve-year-old Mila as she journeys to the mythical land of Thule to save her brother. The story has elements of folk and fairy tales, and showcases



the author's trademark poetic and lyrical style of writing. **31 chapters, 240 pages, age 10+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. Map it Out

All of Kiran Millwood Hargrave's books are set in richly-imagined, visual locations which the characters have to journey through, and *The Way Past Winter* is no exception. When writing her novels, one of the ways Kiran imagines her world is by drawing a map, and plotting the characters' journey through the world.

As a class, list the things that you'd need to think about when creating a fictional location. Try to think about all five senses of the characters that would live there – as well as its size and appearance, what does the place smell like? What would the characters hear? Do lots of people live there, or is it very remote? What is the climate like? Is it on the coast, inland, or perhaps an island?

Once you've done this, it's time for you to have a go at creating a map of your own fictional place. Using A3 paper, draw your location and add some landmarks or place names that you think would feature in the story. You might find that the story starts to form as you're drawing! Be sure to add a compass and scale. Once you've finished, create a class display out of all your maps.

2. A Different Point of View

One of the main themes in *The Way Past Winter* is sisterhood and sibling bonds. Although Sanna, Mila and Pípa are different in lots of ways and often disagree, ultimately their love and care for one another surpasses everything else. It's this bond between siblings that drives them to undertake such a perilous, impossible journey to bring their brother home.

We see most of Mila and Pípa's journey, but Sanna only joins them towards the end. Mila often paints Sanna



as harsh and strict, but there is more to her than initially meets the eye. Why do you think Sanna acts how she does in the beginning chapters? As a class, discuss how you would feel if you were Sanna, and found your sisters had left you – would you feel angry? Scared? Guilty?

Now, have a go at writing part of the story from Sanna's perspective. It could be when she wakes to find her sisters gone, or a part of her journey to Bovnik to meet her sisters. Think about the complexity of her character, her age, and how she is portrayed by Mila. How do you think she would behave on her own with the jarl?

3. Winter Magic

'Frost glittered like finery on the bare branches of the trees: the night air was crystalline and bright. The stars were as thick as clouds above the branches, bunching over Mila's head.' (Page 97)

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is known for her beautiful, lyrical prose, and the writing in *The Way Past Winter* is no exception. The descriptions of the wintry setting are hugely evocative, and really make you feel as if you're in the icy forest with Mila.

Divide into small groups and assign each group a couple of chapters each (up to chapter 23, where the setting changes). Each group should go through their chapters and pull out any adjectives, similes or metaphors the author has used to describe the wintry scenery. Which do you think are most effective?

As a class, try and come up with some phrases you think are effective in describing spring, summer and autumn. As well as phrases, list anything you can think of that reminds you of that season – for instance, you might associate the smell of freshly cut grass with spring, or the sound of crunchy leaves with autumn. Once you've done that, write a short poem or descriptive passage on the season of your choice.

4. Once Upon a Time ...

'They changed their stories too. Gone were tellings of honey and plenty: tales became warnings, sharp as bee



stings.' (Page 4)

In chapter one, the author writes of how the people of Stavgar adapted to fit their frozen climate, giving examples of how stories changed in order to fit a new purpose. Often, fairy tales have a message – known as a 'moral' – intended for the reader to take away. Do you think *The Way Past Winter* has a moral? Is it written as a cautionary tale of some sort? What do you think Kiran Millwood Hargrave wants her to reader to think about after finishing the story?

As a class, discuss what you think the features of a fairy tale are, before dividing into small groups. Each group should be assigned a different well-known fairy tale by your teacher to research. Look into its history: how did the story begin? Can you see when and by whom it was written, or has it simply been passed down over the years? From where does it originate? Have there been film or TV adaptations of your fairy tale? Why do you think it's still popular today? What do you think the moral is of the story, and do you think it is effective? Present your findings to the class.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Mila had always known she was not a particularly brave person.* (Page 165)

Mila doesn't consider herself brave in her everyday life, but she shows tremendous courage when it comes to saving someone she loves. What do you think it means to be brave? Do you think Mila and her sisters are brave? Are there different kinds of bravery? In what ways does each character show bravery? Do you think it's important to have courage? Would you consider yourself courageous?

2. *'Girls are often disarming. That's why I usually do not bother with them.'* (Page 201)

Some of the characters in the novel think the roles of men and women are different. For example, the Bear refers to Oskar having three sisters as 'a curse', and the jarl, the most important person in the village, is a woman – but refers to Sanna, Mila and Pípa as 'only sisters' without Oskar. Why do you think the characters have these opinions? Do you think men and women are perceived differently in the novel? Do you think the sisters'



actions challenge the characters' views?

3. *'Eldbjørn was never your home. It was mine. Humans brought nothing, planted nothing, and took everything.'*
(Page 203)

The Bear does what he does to protect what he loves – no matter the cost. Do you think his actions can be justified? Can you empathise with him? Do you think he believes he is doing the right thing?

4. *'I'll have Agneta as my middle name,' she said hurriedly to Papa. 'But my name, if you don't mind, is Rune.'* (Page 231)

Why does Pípa choose to take Rune's name as her own, rather than her mother's? What do you think the sentiment behind this is? If you could choose a new name for yourself, what would you choose? Would you like to be named after somebody, or create a new name entirely?

IF YOU LIKED *THE WAY PAST WINTER*, WHY NOT TRY ...

- *The Girl of Ink & Stars* by Kiran Millwood Hargrave
- *The Secret of Nightingale Wood* by Lucy Strange
- *The White Tower* by Cathryn Constable

