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THE WHITE TOWER

BY CATHRYN CONSTABLE

SYNOPSIS

When thirteen-year-old Livy Burgess's father is unexpectedly given the job of chief librarian at the mysterious Temple College in London, Livy is offered a place at the school. She moves there with her family – happily married parents, and young brother Tom – but she soon realizes just how out of place she is. Her best friend Mahalia has recently died, and she struggles to feel normal. In fact, Livy feels like a complete outsider. Her classmate Celia has been given the job of looking after her, and this makes Livy feel worse – especially as the two cool girls who are Celia's friends don't like Livy at all.

Temple College is an ancient place of imposing towers and temple-like buildings, its walls inscribed with obscure medieval symbols. And the closed White Tower seems to be harbouring a dark secret. Added to which, headmistress Miss Pernilla Smythe – an impossibly glamorous scientist – seems to have another agenda and a particular interest in Livy's family. The first master of the school – and the last person to use the White Tower – was Peter Burgess, Livy's supposed ancestor.

Since the death of her best friend, Livy has felt a sense of 'otherness', and has been having strange vertiginous episodes, almost as if she were floating. She doesn't confide these feelings to anyone, but finds herself irresistibly and inexplicably drawn to the roof of the school, which she climbs to from the window of her attic bedroom. It is there, amongst the enormous carved 'Sentinels' – medieval statues of angels – that she feels accepted,



happy, and closer to Mahalia somehow. Sometimes, when she's climbing on the roof, it feels like she could fly.

On the roof of the school, Livy meets a curious boy – Ralph – who warns her that she is not welcome there. Warnings come from other places too – namely, the previous librarian, a Mr Hopkins, who is now homeless but still drawn back to the school. Mr Hopkins drops hints and clues about the history of the school, which encourages Livy to investigate further. Soon, Livy finds a way into a secret room in the White Tower, where a mysterious tract about alchemy and gravity awaits. She becomes obsessed by the book, experimenting well into the night in the secret room. One night, she cuts herself by accident, drops of her blood falling into the purified metal of her experiment.

For the White Tower's darkest secret concerns a different kind of alchemy. Not base metal to gold, but human to angel: by discovering the secret of flight, humanity can ascend to an angelic status. In the dramatic climactic sequence, Livy spots her younger brother on the roof of the White Tower – and beside him, holding him captive, Mr Hopkins. Miss Smythe, struck by vertigo, is trying unsuccessfully to stop him carrying out the ultimate experiment with the metal Livy has been purifying. Her blood was the secret ingredient, and Hopkins is determined to test it on her little brother. Livy saves him – miraculously taking flight as her brother falls – but when Hopkins tests the experiment on himself, he falls and turns to dust. Ralph, the boy she met on the roof, turns out to be the boy on whom Burgess successfully experimented centuries ago. He's lived for hundreds of years – but now he's tired and lonely. Livy helps weigh him down so he falls, finally finding peace in death. Part of her wonders whether she's sent Mahalia a new friend.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'I've always dreamt of flying – haven't we all? – but what if that dream was rooted in an ancient memory, or a lost piece of knowledge? What if, once, people had been able to fly, but the secret was buried in old science and forgotten magic? Livy heads into her new school with only the vaguest hints of what's hidden amongst its soaring towers and secret rooms. And what's at stake is more than forbidden knowledge: it's solving an unhappy mystery from the past, and finding peace in the present. The White Tower is thrilling, fascinating and so, so magical!'

BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE



AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Cathryn Constable read Theology at Cambridge University before working for *Vogue*, *W*, *Elle Decoration*, *Elle* and *The Independent*. She also wrote for a number of publications including *Tatler* and *The Sunday Times* before turning her hand to writing for children. *The Wolf Princess*, Cathryn's first novel for Chicken House, has sold over 100,000 copies worldwide and was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2012. Cathryn is married with three children and lives in Islington, London.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'The original impetus for *The White Tower* came from having supper around the kitchen table of friends. Most of the adults had been to the same school (where my eldest son was also a pupil). The school is centuries old and has a lot of famous ex-pupils. There is a central courtyard and whenever I walked through it, my attention was always drawn to the roof. I am always intrigued by spaces that seem to mark the edge of one realm and the beginning of another. The roofline of London is intoxicating. The rules which apply to someone on the pavement, I thought, might be very different on the roof.

'When I started writing, I felt that Livy Burgess drew me on. I would be terrified of climbing onto the roof, but it seemed as if she really wanted to be up there and as if that was where the mystery would be solved. I think it helps if you like your main character. And I felt even more sympathy for Ralph. I can't even imagine the loneliness of someone who has had centuries to watch other people live their lives and who is destined, through no fault of his own, to exist without end. However much we may fear death and what may be beyond, living eternally may be more frightening.

'When I started thinking about Temple College, I found myself reading a lot about Sir Isaac Newton. Whilst sorting out gravity, he was also a master alchemist, and considered the search for the Philosopher's Stone his most important and serious work. It is amusing to think of the man who gave us the modern scientific method was doing so because he was trying to turn lead into gold.



'I really wanted to write a book that would make readers think about "the other"; what might lie behind the material world. Are there "other realms" and how might we experience them in our everyday lives? I hope that *The White Tower* might allow – whatever the religious or non-religious background of the reader – a way to start to think about how we feel about this one unique, extraordinary life we are given. And that mortality (the gift of time and gravity) may well be a blessing rather than a curse.' **CATHRYN CONSTABLE**

THEMES

- Grief and death
- Alchemy and science
- Flight
- Family and friendship
- Authority and control
- Magical realism
- Hope and healing

WRITING STYLE

The White Tower is a tightly structured, lyrical and haunting novel with grief at its heart. Largely set in an austere and historic boarding school, the story is told in a close third person from Livy's perspective. As Livy struggles with the death of her best friend, she stumbles upon a mystery involving the study of alchemy, a tragedy in the history of the school, and evil-doing in the present day. The style of the writing is such that we slip seamlessly from real life to near-fantasy as Livy begins to feel that she is flying. This literary technique is known as magical realism.

31 chapters, 251 pages, age 10+



PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. *Under the Surface*

“Just a normal day,” she told herself. “And tomorrow will be another normal day. And nothing much will happen. It will just be normal. Because normal is good. We like normal.” (Page 5)

At the beginning of the novel, Livy rides the bus home from school and tries to convince herself that life is normal. But life isn't normal, and under the surface she's struggling with a terrible loss.

Using Livy's bus journey as an example, write a list of the 'normal' things she is doing – getting on the bus, presenting her travelcard, and so on. Next to it, write a corresponding list of what is not normal about this scene, of what she is really feeling inside. Once you feel you have got to grips with the scene on the bus, invent your own 'normal' scene and think about what these ordinary objects or activities might really mean to a character who is struggling inside. You can represent the two layers as a piece of artwork, mixing words and images. For instance, a sheet of tracing paper on top might show what's apparently 'normal', while the real emotional turmoil is represented on the sheet beneath.

2. *Alchemy*

‘On the bench was another book, slim and bound in red leather. “On Alchemie” was stamped in faded gold letters on the cover.’ (Page 155)

Alchemy is an ancient tradition once practised throughout Europe, Egypt and Asia. Although modern scientists like Dr Smythe debunk its claims, lots of great scientists of the past – including Isaac Newton – studied alchemy, the transformation of base metal into gold. What can you find out about alchemy? What were its main principles, who were its proponents and what were its grand claims? Was it all about creating gold? Did the study of alchemy contribute to 'real' scientific disciplines, e.g. chemistry? What was its relationship to religion?

Groups in the class should research some of these different aspects of the discipline, gathering together



visuals, key quotations and other paraphernalia. Together, discuss your findings and create an alchemical display for your classroom. How does your new understanding of alchemy contribute to your feelings about the novel?

3. Other realms

'I really wanted to write a book that would make readers think about "the other"; what might lie behind the material world. Are there "other realms" and how might we experience them in our everyday lives?' (Cathryn Constable)

The 'other realms' in *The White Tower* might include both the world beyond death and the world of the rooftops – or perhaps the realm of night, which overlaps with the strange alchemical realm within the White Tower itself. What other realms exist beyond your world – and how might you explore them?

Working in a group under teacher supervision, explore the school grounds and find other worlds within your everyday surroundings – for instance, is there a world in rooftops, the treetops, or a tiny, dark world in the cracks between the paving stones? What about the realm of the clouds, those fantastical structures in the sky? Try to look at the everyday with fresh eyes. Might any of these ordinary spaces be gateways into the beyond? What creatures might live there – are there people, angels, or ghosts? What are the sights, sounds and smells? Note down your impressions and return to the classroom. In a piece of creative writing (a poem or a short scene) imagine yourself entering your favourite other realm ...

4. Flight

'I think that flying might be a lot more frightening: no one would be there to catch you.' (Page 19)

What do you think it would feel like to fly? Would it be frightening, as Livy imagines? Or would it be exhilarating? Try to imagine yourself stepping off the rooftops and taking flight. What would you be feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling and touching? Write down a list of your impressions.

As a class, create a long roofscape to display along a wall of your classroom, imitating the cover of *The White Tower*. This could be created out of black card cut into the shapes of rooftops and stuck onto a blue



background, or perhaps as a collage. On the background of the sky, place your key words and sensations to do with flight – you might write them against a darker background with silver or gold pen, or cut out clouds from white paper and write your words inside. How do the impressions of your classmates compare with your own?

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Notions of mortality and immortality are at the heart of *The White Tower*. Do you agree with the author that eternal life is more frightening than death? Why? Or why not? How might you explore these questions drawing from the experiences of Livy and Ralph?
2. Livy is the new girl at Temple College, and the experience for her is incredibly isolating. Why do you think she feels particularly alone at Temple College? Do you agree that what Livy experiences at the hands of Martha and Amy might be classed as bullying? Do you, like Livy, think that Celia's pity is worse than Martha's unkindness? Why might that be?
3. Does the author's use of the metaphor of alchemy, or transformation, shed fresh light on *The White Tower*? Some might say the novel is about alchemy of all sorts – from base metal to gold, human to angel – and finally grief and loneliness to acceptance and friendship ... do you agree? What different kinds of transformation feature throughout the novel? How successfully do you think the author uses the metaphor of alchemy?
4. The novel ends on a hopeful note, with Livy thinking back to the beginning of her journey, certain that the terrible sadness is behind her for ever. However, some might argue that the 'empty sky' of the last line has a sad, wistful feel. What was your feeling at the end of the novel? Did you experience a sense of resolution, or did you feel there were loose ends? If so, did these loose ends affect your enjoyment of the book? Do you think the author left some things unresolved on purpose?

