

THE SECRET SERIES

BY
PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH



curriculum connections

- ❖ Literature
- ❖ Philosophy
- ❖ Science
- ❖ Psychology
- ❖ Social Science
- ❖ Art

genre connections

- ❖ Humor
- ❖ Suspense

Ages: 8 – 12

The Name of This Book is Secret

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Pseudonymous Bosch, the author and narrator, is one of the most important characters in the book, and one of the slipperiest. What roles does he play in the story? How reliable is he? How intrusive? Does your opinion of him change as the book progresses?
2. “Generally speaking, books don’t cause much harm. Except when you read them, that is. Then they cause all sorts of problems.” [from prologue] Do you agree? What problems have books caused for you, or people you know?
3. Cass is growing up without knowing her father. Max-Ernest lives with both parents but neither speaks to the other. How have those circumstances shaped their personalities? Would Max-Ernest be so chatty if his parents communicated directly? Would Cass be as cautious?
4. “As I’m sure you know from experience,” Pseudonymous Bosch claims, “lying is an important skill to have.” [page 50] Do you agree? What makes Cass and Max-Ernest such bad liars? Who are the expert liars in the story?
5. Footnotes are seldom in novels, but this one is full of them. Identify and discuss the many roles they play here. Do you read the footnotes as carefully as you read the main text?
6. Ms. Mauvais and her followers will do anything—even kill—in their quest for eternal youth. What do you think of their goal? Would you like to live forever? Talk to older adults. Would they want immortality?
7. “Only bad books have good endings,” claims Pseudonymous Bosch. [page 314] Is he just making a joke, or a good point? Do good books always have you aching for more?

ACTIVITIES

1. Cass is a survivalist who stows everything from bubble gum to a map of Micronesia in her backpack. [see p. 12] What do your students keep in theirs? Ask them to take an inventory and write a paragraph about what their backpacks reveal about themselves.
2. The Bergamo brothers “were born in a small town in Italy, in the time between the Wars.” A footnote [page 125] gives some explanation, but encourage your students to learn more. What were those two wars? What was Italy’s involvement in each? How did Mussolini gain power? How did he lose it?
3. The magical Symphony of Smells will be impossible to recreate, alas, but your class can certainly gather everyday (and safe) materials with distinctive aromas. Place samples of each in small vials with stoppers, then place them all in specially decorated boxes. Invite visitors to try to identify the odors.
4. The name Pseudonymous Bosch is clearly a play on Hieronymous Bosch, a celebrated Dutch artist. If possible, post reproductions of his paintings in your classroom or bring in an art book that features his work. Do your students find any similarities between Bosch the painter and Bosch the writer?
5. The Bergamo brothers had synesthesia, a fascinating condition in which the senses seem jumbled: colors can be heard or smells can be seen. Experiment a little bit with your class. Turn off the lights and turn on unfamiliar music. Ask your students to describe what they see.
6. As any reader of popular magazines or websites knows, the sinister Ms. Mauvais and her minions at the Midnight Sun aren’t the only seekers of eternal youth. Working in small groups, have your students gather examples of articles, ads, flyers, and other printed matter that promises the appearance of youth.
7. In the appendix, the author presents several projects for individuals, including a card trick sure to appeal to fledgling prestidigitators.



If You're Reading This, It's Too Late

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel opens with Cass's bad dream, which her friend Max-Ernest explains by quoting the great psychiatrist Sigmund Freud: "A dream is the fulfillment of a wish." [p. 21] What does that mean? What do you think is the significance of Cass's dream? What role do her dreams play throughout this novel?
2. Television stars, fashion icons, and dim-bulbs, the Skelton Sisters are fictional characters but they appear to be very loosely based on some real-life twin stars. Whom do they remind you of, and why?
3. What is the Sound Prism? Why can't it help Ms. Mauvais? How does it help Cass?
4. The Homunculus has been around for hundreds of years. Why is he still so important to the evil leaders of the Midnight Sun? How was he created? How was he treated by his creator? Why does he pretend to be mute? Why does he open up to the Jester?
5. What's in a name? Why does the dangerous German doctor like to be called Lord Pharaoh? Why does the Homunculus prefer the name Cabbage Face? Do you believe, as Cass asks Max-Ernest "that your name makes you who you are?" [p. 205]
6. The Homunculus dismisses the virtuous Terces Society, which includes Cass and Max-Ernest, as just a bunch of record keepers. "How does that help anybody," he asks. [p. 274] Is he right? What good can old documents do? How do they help Cass?
7. What secret has Yo-Yoji been keeping from his friends Cass and Max-Ernest? Do you think it was necessary?
8. The Homunculus is a cannibal and a thief—and a hero. Discuss his complicated personality. What makes him so repulsive? What makes him so appealing? Would you want to meet him?
9. What happens when the Bergamo brothers finally reunite?

ACTIVITIES

1. First imagined in a dream, the sock-monster that Cass makes turns out to be an eerily accurate representation of the Homunculus, one of history's oddest creatures. Have your students make their own versions as an art project. The basic components that Cass used are described on page 21.
2. The author's introductory "Binding Contract" may not be legal, but it's a fun way to look at formal agreements, and the hard job of wording them properly. Working in small groups, your students can draft their own light-hearted contracts for goods (like tasty lunches) or services (like homework help) with siblings, parents, teachers, or other significant people in their lives.
3. How does the Lord Pharaoh's creation compare to Dr. Frankenstein's? For supplementary reading, encourage your students to seek out Mary Shelley's creepy classic, which can be found in its original version and in abridgements. Several filmed versions are also easy to find.
4. Engraved inside the ancient Sound Prism is a perplexing poem written as a spiral. Ask your students to compose their own circular-shaped message to a classmate. It can be written in either poetry or prose, and it doesn't need to be a riddle, but it should be intriguing.
5. What's a polite way to say weird? The circus folk who visit the Magic Museum are an oddball bunch, as the author explains in both polite and rude terms. [p. 291] Ask your students to keep a running log of all the euphemisms they encounter in one week.

This Book is Not Good for You

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This book begins with Chapter 15. What reason does Pseudonymous Bosch give for jumping ahead? What do you think is the real reason?
2. “Max-Ernest wasn’t very good at feelings,” writes Pseudonymous Bosch “whether his own or anybody else’s.” [p.22] Do you agree? How sensitive is Max-Ernest to the feelings of others? As the novel progresses, does he gain a better understanding of himself?
3. Cass has two grandfathers, Larry and Wayne. Discuss her relationship with the pair. What role do they play in her life? What secrets have they kept from her? What has she kept from them?
4. Why does Cass start calling her mother by her first name, Melanie? [p. 41] What is her mother’s reaction? When does she go back to calling her Mom?
5. Kindly magician Pietro Bergamo is the twin brother of evil Dr. L, and the hatred between the two “was now as strong as their love once was.” [p. 56] What do love and hate have in common? How can one sometimes lead to the other?
6. What are the special powers of the Tuning Fork? What makes it so dangerous?
7. After years of estrangement, Max-Ernest’s parents are getting along better. Why isn’t he happy about it?
8. “To go forward,” Yo-Yoji was told by his master, “you must first go back.” [p. 356] What does this mean? How does it explain the operations of the Terces Society? How does it explain the choice Cass makes at the end of the book?

ACTIVITIES

1. *Amuse Bouche*, as a footnote explains [p. 5], are small and unusual dishes that chefs at fancy restaurants sometimes whip up for their customers. What would young cooks in your class prepare? Brainstorm ideas, then challenge your students to try them in their own kitchens.
2. The humanitarian efforts of the Skelton Sisters are totally bogus but many real-life celebrities have done great things for others. As a whole class project, keep a running record of actors, singers, sports stars, and other notables who’ve successfully contributed their time and talents to important charities. Challenge your students to volunteer for local causes.
3. Two great filmmakers, the English Alfred Hitchcock and the Japanese Akira Kurosawa, get rave reviews in this novel. Both are likely too sophisticated for classroom viewing, but encourage your students to seek them out on their own, especially if they have older movie buffs in their lives.
4. The myths and symbols of the Aztec figure prominently in this adventure. Dig deeper into this ancient culture. Break your class into small work groups, and assign each a broad research topic—history, religion cuisine, etc. Groups will present their findings in brief oral reports. If a local museum has a collection of Aztec artifacts, arrange a class visit.
5. There is no better way to celebrate a book about chocolate than with an all-chocolate get-together. If school rules allow, host a bring-your-own-chocolate party for your students and their families. Encourage families to bring chocolate delicacies from all over the world (and to try the recipe included in the book’s appendix, too).



This Isn't What It Looks Like

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Most novels start with the first chapter, but *This Isn't What It Looks Like* begins with Chapter -10. Why begin with a negative number? "I cannot tell you why without giving away too much," claims Pseudonymous Bosch [page 7]. What do you think he is afraid of revealing?
2. Max Ernst has a very talkative nature but when Cass falls into her coma, aside from the occasional word or two, Max-Ernst silences himself. Why? How does Pietro get the boy to speak again?
3. The Jester lives during the Renaissance, hundreds of years before the 21st century, but he looks very familiar to Cass. Why? Does he remind you of any other character in this series? If so, whom?
4. "There is no cheating in magic," says Pietro [page 53], "only in poker." What does he mean by that? Do you agree?
5. Max-Ernst spent a lot of time in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit as a young boy. Why? What did doctors fear was wrong with him? What do you think was Max-Ernst's real problem?
6. What are the special qualities of a lodestone? What does the Jester do with his lodestone? How does Mrs. Johnson acquire hers?
7. What does the homunculus say is the Lord Pharaoh's great weakness? How does Cassie take advantage of his weakness to save herself?
8. Max-Ernst's parents are professional psychologists. How good are they at understanding their own children? Would you recommend either of them to someone in need? Why or why not?
9. "I could say," writes Pseudonymous Bosch [page 291], "that it's my duty to report the truth, whatever it is, wherever I find it. But you know better than that. You know me better than that." What is an author's duty to the reader? How well does Pseudonymous Bosch perform those duties?

ACTIVITIES

1. Cass gets to experience Renaissance life firsthand, but it's unlikely that your students will have the same opportunity. Introduce them instead to some of the period's great works of art and music. Do Max-Ernst a favor, and help your class understand the important differences between the medieval and Renaissance periods.
2. Encourage your students to read the fine print. *This Isn't What It Looks Like* opens with a page of intentionally funny warnings, but many package labels are unintentionally funny, like pure sugar packages that list sugar as an ingredient. Look around your classroom for silly labels. Ask your students to find more at home.
3. A room-sized camera obscura, an early sort of photographic device, is constructed for the Renaissance fair at the Xxxx school. Using the step-by-step instructions found at the back of the book, have your students create their own smaller sized versions.
4. Inspired by the success of the Glob Blog, transform your students into food critics. Ask them to write a brief article about a recent (and healthy) meal. What was served? How was it cooked? What could have made it better? Would they recommend it to others?
5. What would your students do with the Double Monocle? Its second lense provides second sight—into the past, future, or almost anything else its user needs or wants. Brainstorm about ways your class could use a Double Monocle to improve your school.
6. A manifesto, explains Pseudonymous Bosch [page 2], "is a statement of principles. Usually political or artistic principles. But you could write a manifesto about anything." What do the students in your class feel most strongly about? As a group project, write a manifesto and post it prominently in your room.



You Have to Stop This

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is *You Have to Stop This* such a fitting title for this book? What is being stopped? By whom? Why?
2. What ancient event is recreated in this novel's eerie prologue? How does the prologue set the stage for the rest of the story?
3. *The Oath of Terces* appears at the beginning of this novel. Did you understand its meaning when you read it initially? Now that you've finished the series, how has your understanding of the oath changed?
4. In Chapter 10, Daniel-not-Danielle eavesdrops on a negotiation that his father is having with Max-Ernst, Cass, and Yo-Yoji, and he takes note of the distinctive personalities of his three classmates. What does he think of each of them? Do you agree with his assessments? How does he see himself?
5. After an epic quest for the truth that takes her over continents and across time, Cass finally learns the Secret from the Mummy. Or does she? What does the Mummy say to Cass? How does she respond? How would you?
6. What happens to Pietro, beloved leader of the Terces Society, at the end of the novel? What is *l'altro lato*? Is it a place? Is it an idea? Why does Cass believe that the old magician has gone to *l'altro lato*? Why doesn't she tell Max-Ernst?
7. Take a long look back at each of the main characters. How have Cass, Max-Ernst, and Yo-Yoji remained the same throughout the series? In what ways have they changed?
8. The identity of Pseudonymous Bosch remains mysterious until the very last pages of this book. Who is Pseudonymous Bosch? Were you surprised by the narrator's revelation? Why or why not?
9. Is it more fun to know a secret or to tell a secret? What does Pseudonymous Bosch think? What does Cass? What do you?

ACTIVITIES

1. Throughout the novel, Max-Ernst is working on his middle school graduation speech. As an individual or small group project, ask your students to compose their own farewell addresses. Inspired by Max-Ernst's effort, the speeches should be short, funny, and wise. If possible, each speech could be read aloud in class or presented to a larger school group.
2. Mummies get around, as our heroes discover when they follow one to Las Vegas. Take your class to a permanent Egyptian exhibit nearby or be on the lookout for traveling displays coming to your area. If a field trip is impossible, go online for a virtual mummy tour.
3. It's not easy to tell a good joke, just ask Max-Ernst. Encourage your students to unleash their inner class clown by performing favorite (and school appropriate) one-liners in front of the class. You could also ask each student to write down his or her favorite joke, then gather them in a class joke book.
4. What makes the ibis so special? Research the sacred bird of ancient Egypt with your students. Why were they worshiped? How were they worshiped? Where can they be found today?
5. Chocolate and cards are among the items that Max-Ernst would bring with him into the afterlife. What about your students? Give them the same assignment that Mrs. Johnson gave hers. Ask them to make a list of the 10 items they would want tucked into their sarcophagi.
6. What does the future hold for Cass, Max-Ernst, and Yo-Yoji? Brainstorm with your class about the grown-ups lives of the trio. What degrees will they earn? What careers will they pursue? Draft a future resume for each character.



about the books

If it were up to the author, the mysterious and possibly paranoid Pseudonymous Bosch, your students wouldn't even be allowed to see these books, never mind read them. It's very dangerous for outsiders to know too much about 11-year-old survivalist Cass, or her talkative buddy Max-Ernest, or their hair-raising battles with the evil Midnight Sun. For centuries the skeletal Ms. Mauvais and her vile minions have wreaked havoc with their relentless quest for eternal youth. Now the Secret is almost within their grasp...if only they can wrestle it from Cass!



The Name of This Book is Secret

978-0-316-11366-3
A.R. 5.6 • F&P U

Cass and her school-mate Max-Ernest are drawn into a shadowy mystery when they find a dead magician's diary.



If You're Reading This, It's Too Late

978-0-316-11367-0
A.R. 5.2 • F&P U

Now full-fledged members of the valiant Terces Society, our heroes thwart evil with the help of a snappish little cannibal.



This Book is Not Good for You

978-0-316-04086-0

The deepest, darkest chocolate of all time—the chocolate of time—nearly consumes Cass and her co-conspirators.



This Isn't What It Looks Like

978-0-316-07625-8
A.R. 5.3

Appearances keep deceiving Cass and Max-Ernest as they race against time to unlock an ancient secret.

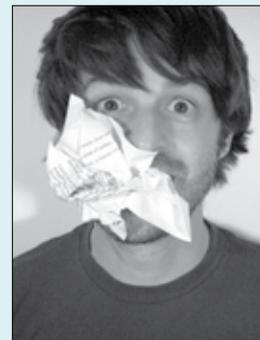


You Have to Stop This

978-0-316-07626-5

All good things must come to end—or do they? The Secret Series wraps up with a mind-boggling adventure that reveals the ultimate mystery. Maybe.

about the author



Mysterious stranger? Anonymous author? Who is Pseudonymous Bosch and how does he know so much about our heroes and heroines? The truth will all be revealed—with time.

about the illustrator

Gilbert Ford has braved numerous attempts on his life to illustrate these hazardous tales. Despite the inherent danger, and being kidnapped a few times, he has done work for the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other much safer publications. He lives in Brooklyn, NY, and you can visit him on his website at www.gilbertford.com.

An Edgar Award Nominee

An NYPL Book for the Teen Age

An E.B. White Award Nominee



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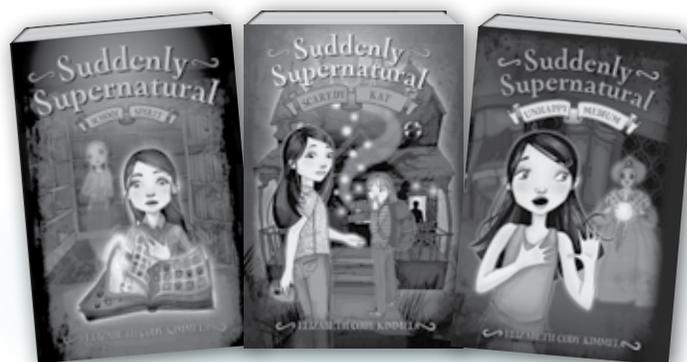
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