

Educators' Guide

NIGHTBIRD

A bewitching tale from the bestselling author

Includes
Common Core
Standards
Correlations



Alice
Hoffman

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ABOUT THE BOOK

An enchanting story in which family secrets are uncovered and the best friendships are forbidden.

Twelve-year-old Teresa Jane Fowler, known as Twig around the town of Sidwell, Massachusetts, has a secret, and he lives in the attic of the family farm. Her seventeen-year-old brother, James, was born with wings because of a curse that has haunted the family for two hundred years. He can only go out at night. Now the locals are talking about hunting for a monster, and Twig is afraid they mean her brother. Agnes Early, the historic Sidwell Witch, who is responsible for the curse, lived in Mourning Dove Cottage, adjacent the Fowler property. The cottage is off-limits to Twig, but a girl named Julia moves in with her family and the two become friends. Together they make a discovery that could reverse the curse. There is also something strange about town newcomers Ian Rose, Dr. Shelton, and an unknown graffiti artist. Once Twig learns to ask the right questions, she uncovers truths that make her summer truly enchanted.



Grades 5 & up

HC: 978-0-385-38958-7 • GLB: 978-0-385-38959-4

EL: 978-0-385-38960-0 • CD: 978-0-553-55225-6

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Remind students that a legend is a story handed down through the ages that may or may not be supported by fact. (For example: Did Davy Crockett really kill a bear at age three?) Then have them interview the oldest member of their family and ask them to relate a character or event that has become a legend within their family. Have students describe the event and character in one sentence (For example: “Legend has it that my great-aunt Lucy could rope a cow quicker than any man at the state fair.”)

 Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5–7.4, SL. 5–7.6.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Twig is aware of the Fowler family curse and that the family left Brooklyn because of James. Discuss why Twig’s mother thought things would be better for them in Sidwell, where the curse began. Debate the pros and cons of living in Sidwell from James’s point of view.

Why did Twig’s mother change the family’s name to Fowler, her maiden name? Discuss what Sophie Fowler means when she says, “The only way for us to stay in Sidwell was to live in the corners of everyday life” (p. 19). Why is living in the “corners” easier for Sophie and James than for Twig? Discuss why the people of the town refer to Twig’s mother as “poor Sophie Fowler.”

Twig says that her mother was brave and independent in high school. In what ways is she still brave and independent? Does Twig inherit her mother’s traits? Cite scenes in the novel where Twig’s independent nature shines.

Twig says, “The only thing I’m good at is running. And keeping secrets” (p. 4). In what way does this reveal how lonely she is? How does she deal with loneliness? Contrast her loneliness to the lonely life that James lives in the attic. Discuss what Twig means when she says, “Sometimes I wondered if protecting someone might also ruin his life” (p. 32). To which other characters in the novel might this statement apply?

Describe Twig’s relationship with her mother at the beginning and the end of the novel. Why does Sophie Fowler decide to tell her daughter the secret of the Pink apple pie recipe? How does this make Twig feel closer to her mother? What event causes Sophie Fowler to admit that her rules about visiting Mourning Dove Cottage are unfair?

Sophie Fowler wouldn’t allow Twig to play the role of the Sidwell Witch in the Town Hall drama. Explain what Sophie means when she tells Twig that she must never “ridicule the Witch of Sidwell” (p. 15).

Discuss why the Hall family left Brooklyn. How are their reasons similar to Fowlers? Explain why Sophie Fowler is spooked when she sees Agate Hall. What makes Twig so curious about the Halls? Discuss what pulls Twig back to the cottage.

Twig wants and needs a friend. Discuss why she is reluctant to respond when Julia Hall reaches out to her. Trace the development of their friendship. At what point does Twig begin to doubt Julia’s friendship? Julia suggests that she and Twig become “soul sisters.” What is the difference between a friend and a “soul sister”? Cite the exact moment that the friends make the transition to “soul sisters.”

Describe the relationship that develops between James and Agate. What do they have in common? Explain why Twig is so relieved that Julia knows about James. How do James and Agate need Twig and Julia if their relationship is to thrive?

How does observing the Halls as they move into Mourning Dove Cottage cause Twig to long for a real family? Twig thinks that Miss Larch may know more about her family than anyone in Sidwell. Explain what Miss Larch means when she says, “Don’t judge your father too harshly. Not everything is what it appears to be” (p. 68). What could be Sophie Fowler’s reasons for not telling Twig about her father? Cite specific clues that Ian Rose might be Twig’s father.

The General Store is the gathering place for the Gossip Group, and Twig hears them talk about the Sidwell Monster. Why does Twig worry that James may be the monster? What else concerns the Gossip Group? How does their talk influence others in town?

Twig says Miss Larch made her realize “I had to look more closely at everything I saw, and not jump to conclusions” (p. 69). How does looking closely at the graffiti lead Twig to the identity of the Sidwell Monster? Why doesn’t Twig tell Julia about Colin when she discovers that he’s the graffiti artist?

Discuss the meaning of the inscription “Now I can fly free” on Lowell Fowler’s grave. Explain how Twig, Julia, Agate, and Colin Montgomery set James free. How does James free them and the entire town of Sidwell?

How might Twig Fowler and Colin Montgomery define family by the end of the novel? What is symbolic about Twig wanting to be called Teresa Rose?

Discussion questions correlate to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 5–7.1, RL. 5–7.2, RL. 5–7.3; Craft & Structure RL. 5–7.4, RL. 5–7.5, RL. 5–7.6; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 5–7.1, SL. 5–7.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5–7.1; Knowledge of Language L. 5–7.3.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Hoffman makes use of different types of figurative language to create certain images. Review the definitions of *simile*, *metaphor*, and *personification*. Then have students explain the following examples:

Simile: “Shadows had begun to sift through the trees like pools of ink.” (p. 59)

Metaphor: “I thought of myself as a rose cut down before I could bloom.” (p. 14)

Personification: “The cottage did seem sad, as if it had a broken heart.” (p. 54)

Find other examples of these types of figurative language in the novel. Then have students write a simile, a metaphor, and an example of personification from Twig’s, Julia’s, or Colin’s point of view at the end of the novel when everyone has been set free.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Craft & Structure RL. 5–7.4; Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5–7.5.

Ian Rose becomes the editor of the *Sidwell Herald* and adds a horoscope column. Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find out the characteristics of each sign of the Zodiac (Zodiac-signs-astrology.com). Then have them select at least three characters from the novel, jot down pertinent personality traits, and use the information to determine their likely Zodiac sign. Have students share their thoughts in class. How many different characters and Zodiac signs are named?

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 5–7.3; Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 5–7.7, W. 5–7.8, W. 5–7.9; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5–7.4.

Ian Rose also adds a book review section to the newspaper. Read aloud several book reviews and ask students to discuss the information presented: setting, plot, character development, themes, and point of view. Instruct them to write a review of *Nightbird* for the *Sidwell Herald*. Their opinion of the novel should be the concluding statement. Encourage them to compare *Nightbird* to another novel. For example, readers who like this work may also enjoy *Gabriel Finley and the Raven’s Riddle* by George Hagen.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. RL. 5–7.1, RL. 5–7.2, RL. 5–7.3; Craft & Structure RL. 5–7.5, RL. 5–7.6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5–7.9; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5–7.1.

Tourists stop at the Sidwell library to inquire about sights to see. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to develop a brochure that describes Montgomery Woods, Last Lake, the Starline Diner, and the bell tower at Town Hall. Instruct them to draw or paste pictures of these landmarks into the written work. Ask them to consider the symbol

that best represents the town and put it on the cover of the brochure.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5–7.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5–7.4, W. 5–7.6.

There are several references to the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the novel, and Miss Larch gives Twig her personal copy of Emily Dickinson’s poems. Ask students to read “I’m Nobody! Who are You?” by Emily Dickinson (Poets.org/poetsorg/poem/im-nobody-who-are-you-260). Then have them assume the character of Twig, James, Colin, Julia, or Agate and write an essay that compares their feeling of loneliness to that expressed by Emily Dickinson in the poem.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5–7.9; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5–7.3; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5–7.4.

There is a debate in the town about the Montgomery Woods. Some want the woods sold and developed because the project would mean more jobs. Others want to protect the woods and the owls. Conduct a town hall meeting at which the citizens of Sidwell voice their opinions. Each student should take on the role of a character and speak from his/her perspective. Include speeches from the men in the Gossip Group, Miss Larch, Hugh Montgomery, Dr. Shelton, Twig, Julia, and finally Colin Montgomery. Some students may wish to use graphics (like pictures of a housing development) or sounds (like the sound of owls) to make their point.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5–7.4, SL. 5–7.5, SL. 5–7.6; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5–7.1; Knowledge of Language L. 5–7.3.

Ian Rose runs a front-page newspaper story titled “Monster Comes Forward to Speak.” Use the same headline and stage an on-the-scene story for the nightly news. Include interviews with Colin and Hugh Montgomery, Dr. Shelton, Twig, and other Sidwell citizens.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5–7.4, SL. 5–7.5, SL. 5–7.6; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5–7.1; Knowledge of Language L. 5–7.3.

Ask readers to return to the Pre-Reading Activity and write the legend that belongs to their family, beginning or ending with the one sentence they previously shared. Allow time in class for students to share their legends.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5–7.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5–7.1m L. 5–7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 5–7.3.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Twig’s class is researching the founding of Sidwell in 1683, and Twig is gathering information about the first library. She learns from Miss Larch that the most important part of research is asking the right questions. Have readers develop appropriate questions that lead them to important facts about local history. Such questions may include:

Who were the first settlers?

Why did they settle the area?

What is the meaning of the town or city name?

What is the oldest building? How has it been used from the time it was built to the present?

What is the oldest cemetery and grave? Is the inscription on the grave significant?

Is there a legend or ghost story connected to the town or to a specific family?

As students learn about local history, have them pick one topic that interests them and explore further details. Then have them write a two-page entry for a book about local history.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5–7.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 5–7.7, W. 5–7.8, W. 5–7.9; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 5–7.1, L. 5–7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 5–7.3.

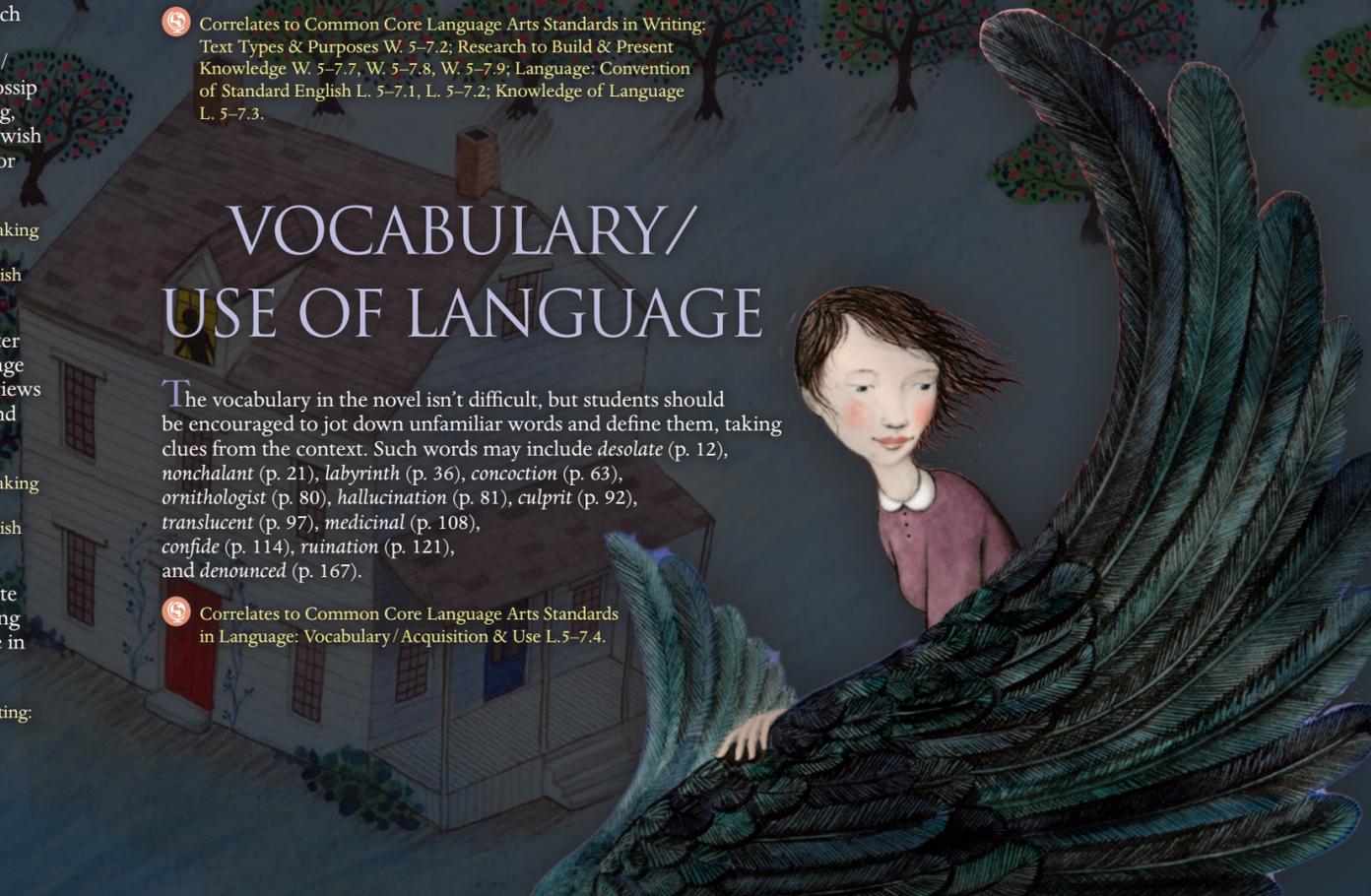
VOCABULARY/ USE OF LANGUAGE

The vocabulary in the novel isn’t difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and define them, taking clues from the context. Such words may include *desolate* (p. 12), *nonchalant* (p. 21), *labyrinth* (p. 36), *concoction* (p. 63), *ornithologist* (p. 80), *hallucination* (p. 81), *culprit* (p. 92), *translucent* (p. 97), *medicinal* (p. 108), *confide* (p. 114), *ruination* (p. 121), and *denounced* (p. 167).

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary / Acquisition & Use L.5–7.4.

Every August, Sidwell residents gather at Town Hall for “The Witch of Sidwell,” a play about the town’s mysterious past—and perhaps its present, too. Readers’ theater is an excellent way to present local legends and ghost stories. The emphasis is not on acting but on using the voice to present a story. Costumes and props are rarely used in readers’ theater, but hats or significant props are acceptable. Divide readers into small groups and ask them to develop a script and perform a chapter from *Nightbird* or a local legend or ghost story. Two chapters that you might suggest are Chapter Five: “The Message and the Messenger” and Chapter Seven: “How to Reverse a Curse.” There should be a narrator and someone to represent each character.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5–7.3; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5–7.4, SL. 5–7.6; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 5–7.1; Knowledge of Language L. 5–7.3.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Hoffman is the author of more than thirty bestselling works of fiction, including *Practical Magic*, a major motion picture; *Here on Earth*, an Oprah's Book Club selection; the highly praised historical novel *The Dovekeepers*; and, most recently, *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*. Her books for teens include *Green Angel*, *Green Witch*, *Incantation*, *The Foretelling*, and *Aquamarine*, also a major motion picture, starring Emma Roberts. Visit her online at AliceHoffman.com.



Photo by Deborah Feingold

INTERNET RESOURCES

Biography.com/people/johnny-appleseed-38103#synopsis

This website provides a biography of John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed.

AmericanFolklore.net/folklore/myths-legends/

This website relates well-known and some lesser-known American legends.

SalemWitchMuseum.com

This is the website of the most visited museum in Salem, Massachusetts, where the famous witch trials occurred in 1692.

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