

Teacher's Notes



Big Magic

Written by Sarah Armstrong

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

RECOMMENDED FOR

9+ aged readers (grades 5–6)

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
 - ACELT1612
 - ACELY1698
 - ACELA1525
 - ACELT1613

THEMES

- Responsibility
- Family
- Choice
- Courage
- Sacrifice
- Identity

SYNOPSIS

Tulsi's mum, Merry, is a magician. She uses little magic, mostly – meaning she performs small tricks around the home and to impress audiences at the travelling circus that the whole family is a part of. But Merry is also capable of big magic, like transforming a twig into a bunch of flowers, or even travelling between parallel universes.

There are rules to magic, of course – such as *Law # 1: Magic must never be used for greedy purposes* – and huge punishments for those who break them. Tulsi's grandmother, Sylvie, was stripped of her magic for using her magic incorrectly. *Law # 5: No-one can be taught big magic until they are sixteen* is Tulsi's least favourite law, and one she's pretty sure her mum made up. So when Merry uses big magic in an attempt to save the circus from being shut down, and disappears into a parallel universe with no-one to help her home, Tulsi decides to ignore it so that she can learn how to use her own magic to save her mum.

Tulsi must show great courage if she is to save her mother in time. She will uncover secrets about the women in her family and their powers, and will learn hard lessons about who she can trust. *Big Magic* is a complex, captivating adventure about magic and consequences, and about the choices we make that can change our lives.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Armstrong was an award-winning journalist at the ABC before writing three novels for adults, including *Salt Rain*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. *Big Magic* is her first book for children. She lives with her partner, Alan, and their daughter, Amelia, in the NSW town of Mullumbimby, which features (if slightly disguised!) in all her novels, including *Big Magic*.

THEMES

Big Magic explores themes of family – both the family we're born into and the families we find for ourselves – and the responsibilities we have to those we care about. Without being prescriptive, the story invites readers to think about the complex factors that lead us to make certain choices, and how harmful it can be when someone we trust betrays us.

- What is your response to Sylvie and the way she takes power from those around her? Do you think she cares about her family? Why/why not? Discuss the way that Sylvie's motivations and desires change from when she first agrees to train Tulsi to when she makes the decision to sacrifice her own magic to save Merry.
- Discuss the ways that the people in the circus community act as a family to each other. How are found families and biological families different? Why are both important?
- What ideas do Tulsi and Efa have about magic that differ from their parents' ideas? Why is their support important to each other?

WRITING STYLE

Tulsi and the other magicians are deeply connected to nature as the source of their power and energy. This connection is visible in the way that the magicians listen to the natural world, hearing the language of the trees, the insects and the animals that surround them. Sarah Armstrong has captured the different personalities of each through the sophistication of their language. The trees, for example, offer the word *courage*, while the worms are captured in more simple thought – *happy happy happy*.

Language and listening are significant in other ways too. When Tulsi sees her mother disappear, she's unable to squeeze out a single sound to save her or call for help. And it is a symbol of Tulsi's great power that she is able to cast spells in English, rather than the traditional Welsh that other magicians must use.

Sarah Armstrong also captures the non-verbal communication people use – for instance, the 'sizzling' in Tulsi's fingers that warns her of danger.

- What other kinds of non-verbal communication do you see in the book?
- How do you use language and non-verbal communication in your own life?



COMPREHENSION

- What are the rules of magic? What are the consequences for breaking the rules? Do you think this is fair?
- How does Tulsi's mum get stuck in a parallel universe? Why is she unable to return?
- Why did Merry make up rule number 5? Do you agree with her decision to keep Tulsi from using magic? Discuss the consequences this decision has on both Tulsi and Merry in the story.
- What kind of person is Sylvie? Why is her sacrifice at the end of the book so significant?
- Does magic need to have consequences? What do you think would happen if people were able to use their magic without any rules?
- Why doesn't Tulsi face any consequences for destroying the tree?
- What is a halfling?
- Why is Bethan so suspicious of Tulsi?
- Who helps Tulsi and Merry defeat the 'Other' Sylvie (the Sylvie in the parallel universe)?
- What does Pete from the parallel universe say to Peter Potts to stop him from closing the circus?
- Where do magicians get their power from? What happens if they run out of energy?
- Make a list of the similarities and differences between the characters in the main narrative and in the parallel universe.

WRITING EXERCISE

Sylvie explains that parallel universes are created when we make a choice that sends our life in one direction rather than the other – 'we all make lots of new branches, or parallel universes, every single day. We make a new branch when we chat to a stranger and it turns out to be someone who changes our life, or we miss having a car accident because we slowed to look at a sunset. Even small moments can change the course of your life' (p. 56).

- What choice did Merry make that created the parallel universe she ends up in? What are some of the other choices and branches that you see in this universe?
- Write about a choice you've made that might have sent your life branching in a different direction if you'd chosen differently. Imagine what your parallel universe would be like and write a scene describing a day in the life of parallel-you.

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Tulsi and Efa promise to stay in touch in the future, and to travel to visit each other. Write a story where Tulsi or Efa travels to the parallel universe to see the other person. What happens? Do they make it there safely? How do they use their magic to overcome a problem?
- We see slightly different versions of many of the original characters in the parallel universe in the story. Choose one of the characters in the story and write a version of them from a different parallel universe.



- Sometimes a story can change depending on whose point of view we see it through. Whose point of view is *Big Magic* told through? How do you think the story would change if someone else told it? Sylvie? Kit? Discuss the way a story changes based on the experiences, wants, and emotions of the person telling it.
- You'll hear people say that you can't judge a book by its cover, but we all make decisions about what we want to read based on a book's cover and its blurb. Discuss the things you look for in a book – how do you decide which book to take from the shelf next? What are some of the elements of this book's cover that tell you what kind of story it is? Design your own cover for the book and write your own blurb – how would you show what the story is about and entice somebody to read it?

RELATED READING

Nevermoor by Jessica Townsend

The World Between Blinks by Aime Kaufman and Ryan Graudin

The Secret of Platform 13 by Eva Ibbotson

