

Teachers' Notes

All The Wrong Questions: Who Could That Be at This Hour?
Written by Lemony Snicket
Published by Hardie Grant Egmont
October 2012

Introduction

'The Snicket style of storytelling is exceptionally literary and entirely singular. Characterised by linguistic playfulness and an appreciation for the archaic, Who Could That Be at This Hour? is frequently laugh-out-loud hilarious as Snicket spars with his delightfully inept chaperone, who makes their investigation into the whereabouts of the missing statue far more complicated than it needs to be. Leave it to S. Theodora Markson to suspect the burglar must have broken into the mansion where the statue – 'valued at upward of a great deal of money' – was supposedly stolen by sawing a hole in the ceiling and replastering it. When Snicket suggests a door was the more likely entry point, Theodora inevitably responds with an over-the-top dressing down.

'As in Unfortunate Events, there are page-long digressions detailing Italian pasta recipes and a plethora of highfalutin vocabulary words, which are always defined, often in the bicker-banter of dialogue. The black, gray and blue illustrations by celebrated cartoonist Seth only add to the throwback gumshoe vibe of this outrageous, long-overdue, middle-grade follow-up series from a truly beloved narrator.'

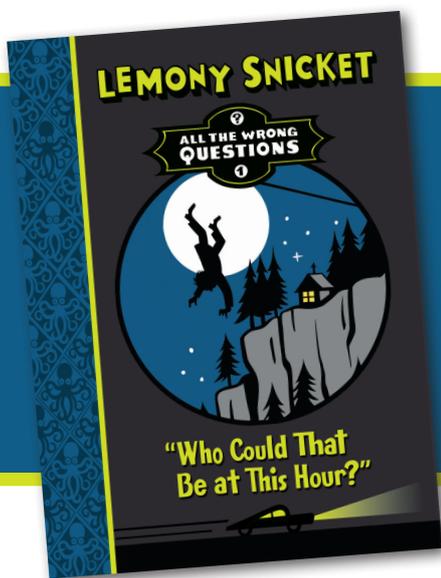
Susan Carpenter, *Los Angeles Times*

The official trailer to the book provides a spirited introduction that sets the flavour of the book. Watch it here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=6hmEoUERitU

The distinctive, physical book itself deserves exploration before reading:

- What does it suggest about the time period in which it is set? Look for clues. These can be added to as the reading progresses.
- What does it suggest about the type of reading experience inside its covers?
- What about the full-page illustration before chapter one begins? Who is the girl looking at the clock? Perhaps it is worth returning to this illustration after the book is read.
- Illustrations of the girl bookend the story. Once read, talk about the final illustration and what it might suggest for the continuation of the story.
- Chapter One illustration: where is it set? What questions do readers have?
- Look at the endpapers in the front and back of the book. Are there any differences? After reading the book, have a think about any clues that might be present.



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Genre Noir: this might be the first time readers have encountered this genre and they might enjoy identifying its characteristics, such as its plot centering on a crime; a bleak setting and an unsentimental writing style. Here it is being parodied, so readers will enjoy examining the ways in which it is being sent up.

Summary

Lemony Snicket has written an 'autobiography' of part of his life when he was twelve and apprenticed to the inept chaperone, S. Theodora Markson. Both characters are members of an organization, VFD, that nobody knows anything about – not even the reader, in this first instalment of four titles. More questions are raised than answers provided, but would we expect anything less from Snicket?

The scene for action is set from the opening when Lemony survives an attempted poisoning and escapes through a bathroom window – which mysteriously he seems to have planned, having hidden a ladder there. His chaperone takes him to Stain'd-by-the-Sea, once a lakeside town, where they endeavour to unravel a crime that becomes more complex and weird as Lemony investigates, as more twists are revealed, and as new, even-odder characters are introduced. The last chapter provides the final twist and whets appetites for the next installment.

Approaching the reading

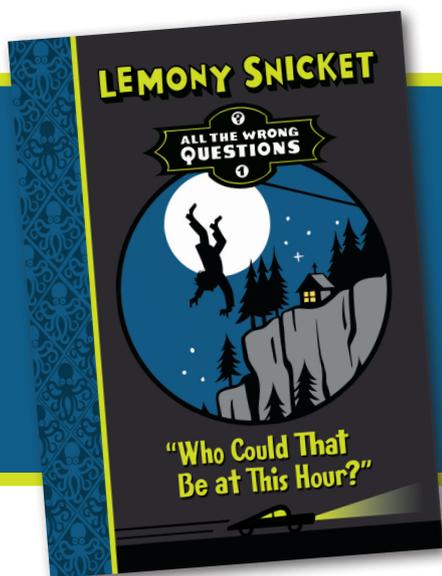
This reading experience is about having fun, about being alert to clues in this particular story and the larger one in which it is contained. We are plunged into the story, and as we read we have to work out what are essential clues, what we (and Snicket) might have missed, and what might be red herrings.

Right from the beginning, we are asking questions as the story unfolds – whom does he want to meet? How and why did he get the ladder into the toilet? Why does he say those people are not his parents? Who are his real parents, and why are these people pretending to be them? Who put laudanum in his tea? Why?

This is also a very literary, bookish story with lots of fun for those who enjoy finding references to familiar books. Adult readers will enjoy the reference to a great noir writer in the name of the sub-librarian, and the one to Saki. Younger readers will enjoy identifying Lemony's favourite book titles.

Title:

- Talk about the series title, *All The Wrong Questions*, and the book title. What anticipations of the story do they suggest?
- The series title can be used as to frame the reading experience. Ask readers to be alert to all the wrong questions – and the right ones – and record them (for example, p142, p205). Record what readers thought Snicket should have asked.



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Book titles:

- p 38 *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes.
- p102 *Danny the Champion of the World* by Roald Dahl.
- p117 *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.
- p158 *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White.
- p159-160 *The Long Secret* by Louise Fitzhugh; the one that came before it, *Harriet the Spy*; and *Nobody's Family is Going to Change*.
- p237 *The Hobbit* and/or *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien.

Do these books have anything in common with the one being read? Work them out, and then play with the idea.

- Have the class replace these books with their own favourite stories. This could be done individually or with a partner, and then the rest of the class could be invited to identify the titles from the descriptions given. The harder the better!
- p200 quotes a boring book title: *An Analysis of Brown, Black and Beige*. Have the class think of other boring titles – and perhaps their appropriately named authors.

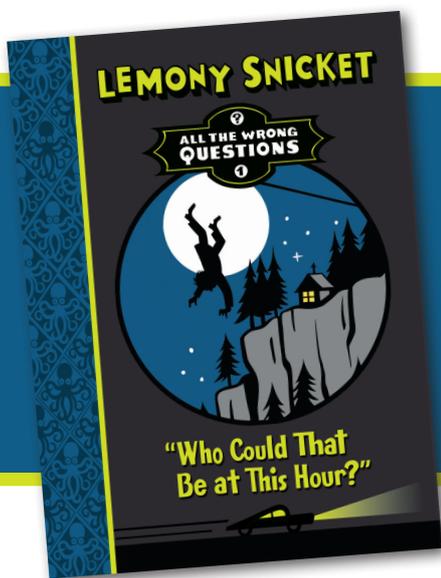
Plot

A mystery story is all about events in the plot. Invite readers to identify significant ones and to act as detectives themselves as they read. It is important to notice what is happening – perhaps beyond what the characters are noticing.

The events could be plotted much like a choose-your-own-adventure with different predictions mapped out and confirmed or changed as the reading progresses.

Here are some as a guide, but readers might prefer others:

- p40 Theft of the statue: there are odd things about this house, and why is Butler feeding birds?
- p43 Why didn't Mrs Sallis call the police?
- p44 Notice Snicket's careful use of words 'rightful owner'.
- p58 Moxie shows him the statue which is clearly not stolen.
- p73 'A mystery is solved with a story. The story starts with a clue, but the trouble is that you usually have no idea what the clue is, even if you think you know.' This is a chance for readers to record what they think they know.
- p76 The myth of the Bombinating Beast.
- p77 shows how myths begin with an exaggeration of reality. Do readers agree? Think of examples. Is he referring to the Loch Ness Monster, perhaps?
- p82 Reference to the statue near the Fourier Branch. Snicket sends messages disguised as book titles. Are there any links here or is this information to be stored for future reference? Message: Sorry but I cannot meet you at the statue.



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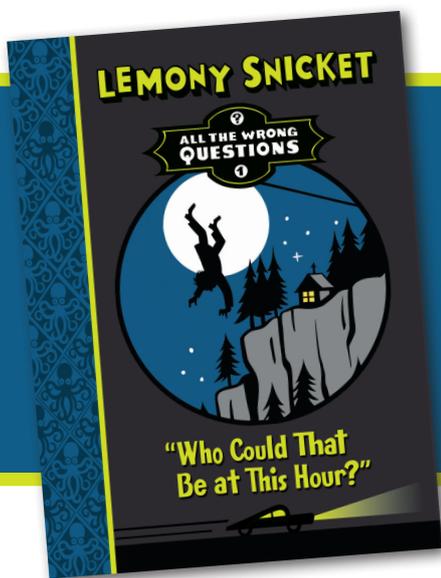
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Plot

- p95 The plan is to break into the lighthouse, steal the figure and use the hawser to get to the mansion.
- p109 Moxie shows Snicket the telegram dated six months earlier.
- p113 Moxie asks the good question – why does someone want a statue everyone else has forgotten and which is not valuable?
- p114 Snicket says he does what he does in order to do something else – what does he mean and will we find out in this book?
- p122 They 'steal' the statue.
- p129 Snicket sees the Mitchums waiting – what does that suggest? So he lets go and falls into the trees.
- p130 Is his reaction to Ellington's appearance foreshadowing for future books?
- p133 Why do you think the detail of the contents of Ellington's case is important?
- p135-6 Black Cat Coffee house.
- p136 There are explicit details about the statue, and it is important to notice them all. Do readers have any questions about, or predictions about any of these features?
- p139 Ellington is looking for her father, who disappeared six months earlier and whom she believes was kidnapped by Hangfire. She only knows him as a deep voice on the phone.
- p140 She heard Hangfire is hiding in Stain'd-by-the-Sea, and has no idea why he kidnapped her father. How can she find him if she has only heard his voice?
- p146 Ellington apparently posts the statue to Theodora at The Lost Arms.
- p153 When Theodora arrives at the Sallis mansion, Mrs Sallis is not there and the Mitchums are waiting.
- p157 Why does Snicket request his friend to be Be Very, Very Careful in the city?
- p159 Ellington didn't post the statue. What is she up to? Do readers trust her?
- p161 Dame Sally Murphy is in the paper in which Ellington wrapped the statue. Do readers think this deliberate or accidental?
- p162 It is apparent that there has been a series of impersonating phone calls.
- p166 Why does Lemony say the Ellington is a liar? What has she lied about? She saw newspapers but said they were hankies. What can be made of this?
- p172 Lemony notices that there is now no carpet on the floor in the mansion, which is empty of furniture.
- p174 There is a mattress on the floor.
- p179 There is an underwater spring with a pump. Might that be important later?
- p180 When Mrs Sallis is untied, she shouts, 'Where is he?' Who does she mean?
- p181 Mrs Sallis is really the actress, Dame Sally Murphy.
- p182 Why does Lemony ask where Ellington and the statue are?
- p183 What organisation does Lemony work for? Record possibilities that can be confirmed or changed as the series progresses.



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- p185 Snicket outlines the plot so far, but what remains unclear are the motives of the various players. Why is an unprepossessing statue so important?
- p197 In the attic of the Black Cat Coffee, there are packages and Snicket finds the statue.
- p208 Why is Prosper Lost always eavesdropping?
- p216 Theodora is tied up, threatened and the room ransacked.
- p230 Snicket reveals his real mission.
- p247 Ellington Feint breaks her promise to Snicket and escapes with the statue.
- p249 Hector arrives. Who is Monty? Who is Haruki? Why does Hector give Snicket a map of the city's waterworks?
- p255 What has Snicket sewn into his jacket?
- Compile a list of 'clues' that readers think might be important in forthcoming books in the series. Perhaps notice all the instances that Snicket says, 'I was wrong.'

Who do readers think Hangfire might be, and why does he want the statue?

Characters

Significance of names:

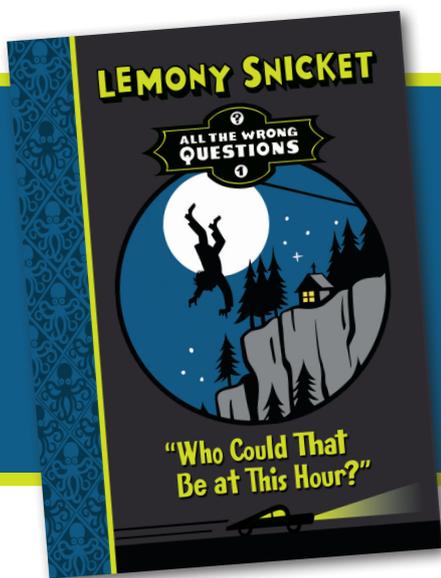
- As one would expect from a writer who enjoys words and their meanings and resonances, Snicket invites readers to chase down associations and meanings with the names of his characters. This can be part of the fun for the reader –working out who to trust and what each character's role might be.

Lemony Snicket

- He is the author of the book, the main character and the narrator. Is this too much control over the interpretation of events? Are we going to trust his views and what he says?
- Read what the letter of reference says about him on p10: 'An excellent, reader, a good cook, a mediocre musician, and an awful quarreler.'
- After reading, write your own description of him.
- We are given no physical description of him, so invite readers to describe the image they have of him in their imaginations. They can draw or collage or create a computer image of him. Compare versions and discuss their differences.

S Theodora Markson

- The 'chaperone'. Talk about what that might mean.
- She has wild black hair, drives a battered green sports car, is not a very good detective, nor is very bright. For example, on p94 there is a funny description of how she comes to wrong conclusion.
- She is regularly asked what the S stands for. Look closely at how she answers each time: eg p13, p39, p65.



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S Theodora Markson

- What do the class think the S stands for?
- She provides some of the humour, e.g. on p121 when she dresses in burglary black but parks her green roadster outside the house they are robbing.
- Significance of name: David Markson was a novelist whose works were 'crammed with literary and artistic anecdotes'.

Moxie Mallahan

- Is the young news reporter with a typewriter who befriends Lemony and gives him the statue.
- Significance of name: 'Moxie' is a word associated with courage and determination.

The Mitchums

- The husband and wife (police officers) and their nasty son, Stewart.
- They argue and contradict each other and see their obnoxious son as perfect.
- Significance of name: Robert Mitchum was a famous actor who starred in many 'noir' movies.

Prosper Lost

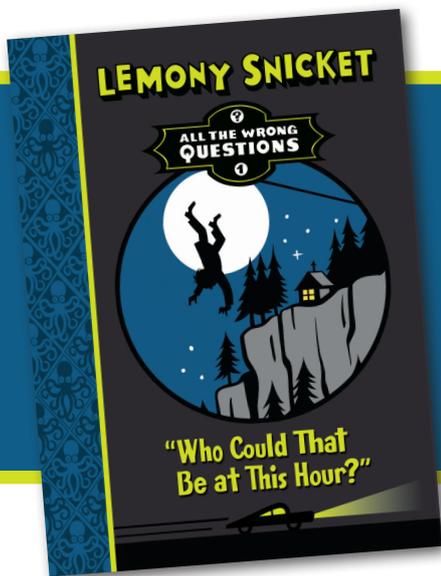
- The guy at the hotel, who always is lurking, listening and dusting.
- Significance of name: Prospero from Shakespeare and L. Jagi Lamplighter's Prospero Lost, about a young woman looking for her father.
- Write Prosper Lost's diary. What does he hear and what does he make of it? Is he reporting to anyone?

Dashiell Qwerty

- The sub-librarian, at Stain'd-by-the-Sea Library.
- Significance of name: Dashiell Hammett was a writer of crime fiction including the famous Maltese Falcon, which was made into an equally famous movie. The summary is given here and readers might notice some resonances: A private detective takes on a case that involves him with three eccentric criminals, a gorgeous liar, and their quest for a priceless statuette.

Pip and Squeak Bellerophon

- Bouvard et Pécuchet is an unfinished book by Flaubert. Bellerophon is a Greek hero, a slayer of the Chimera. Is the choice of these names just homage by Snicket, or are there meant to be connections made to the characters in the book?
- These two brothers drive the town's only taxi while their father is ill, one steering, and the other moving the pedals. The enjoy payment by tips for good books to read.
- This method of driving the car is such fun. Invite the class to think of other adult activities that could be managed by clever inventiveness.



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Ellington Feint

- She remains mysterious and ambivalent. She broke her promise to Lemony, stole the statue and has a case filled with old clothes and a record player.
- She is described physically: p131, 'strange, curved eyebrows, green eyes, black hair and black painted nails.'
- What does her name suggest? Ask readers what 'feint' means.
- p254 Hector calls her a liar and a thief. Is this accurate? Fair?

Humour

- As with all Snicket's writing, there is much absurd humour: Stain'd-by-the-Sea is nowhere near the sea; the Clusterous Forest is seaweed; The Lost Arms hotel has a statue of Venus de Milo in the lobby; the alliteration and nonsense of Handkerchief Heights and Bombinating Beast.

Readers' Theatre

- This is a book to have a lot of active fun with and the conversations between the Mitchums would make excellent Readers' Theatre, e.g. pp87-93.

Lateral thinking

- On p152 is an analysis of scolding that presents an unusual interpretation. Have students choose another practice and write about it in this way, from an original perspective.

Writing ideas:

- It is hard to read this book without wanting to use some of the ideas and playful language. Below are some examples but readers are sure to find ones they connect with.
- p69 'Theodora got the key into a fight with the keyhole.'
- p74 '...he had the hairstyle one gets if one is attacked by a scissors-carrying maniac and lives to tell the tale.'
- p79 'He looked like the child of a man and a log.'

Related Reading

- Any of the books mentioned in this volume.
- All of A Series of Unfortunate Events.
- The London Eye Mystery by Siobhan Dowd.