



The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly

By Stephanie Oakes

Book Summary:

The Kevinian cult has taken everything from seventeen-year-old Minnow: twelve years of her life, her family and her ability to trust.

And when Minnow rebelled, they took away her hands, too.

Now the Kevinian Prophet has been murdered and the camp set aflame and it's clear Minnow knows something. But she's not giving anything away. As she adjusts to a life behind bars in juvenile detention, Minnow struggles to make sense of all she has been taught to believe, particularly as she dwells on the events that led up to her incarceration. But when an FBI detective approaches her about making a deal, Minnow sees she can have the freedom she always dreamed of – if she is willing to part with the terrible secrets of her past.

Powerful and compelling, this remarkable and brave debut novel reveals the terrible dangers of blind faith. And the importance of having faith in yourself.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

ACELT 1639, ACELT 1812, ACELT 1642,
ACELT 1643, ACELY 1749, ACELY 1752,
ACELY 1754

Appropriate Ages:
14+

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Notes by Rachel Ford

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Introduction

Minnow Bly is found soaked in blood. An act of rebellion has robbed her of her hands. An act of fear threatens to steal away her freedom. Minnow is no longer the girl she was and yet she does not know who she could be, nor who she wants to be.

Sentenced to a juvenile facility, pending parole or possibly serving the remainder of her sentence in an adult facility, Minnow must face the challenges of her childhood amongst the Kevinian cult and the sacred lies she has been told by the Prophet.

About the Author

Stephanie Oakes lives in Spokane, Washington, and spends her days working as a library media teacher in a combined middle and elementary school. She received her MFA in poetry from Eastern Washington University. *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly* is her debut novel. www.stephanieoakesbooks.com

Author Inspiration

I got the idea for *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly* by reading fairy tales. I was taking a poetry class and had been spending the term retelling fairy tales as poems. I most enjoyed setting the fairy tales in modern times, trying to find situations in which those fairy tale characters might exist in our world. I wrote one about Rapunzel growing into an old woman in a nursing home, her long gray hair hanging from her apartment window, and one about Rumpelstiltskin who, after being bested by the queen, moves to a city and makes a living weaving newspapers into apples.

In my research for these poems, I read one fairy tale I'd never heard of before, "The Handless Maiden," which was most famously recorded by the Brothers Grimm but exists in just about every culture across the world. The story is about a girl whose father unintentionally sells her to the devil. For various reasons, the devil needs the girl to have no hands, so her father cuts them off.

I wasn't sure how to retell this story in a poem since I couldn't figure out how that story could ever happen in the real world. Dwarves with magical powers and girls with hair the height of buildings were easier for me to believe than a situation like the one in "The Handless Maiden." The story didn't leave me alone, though. After I graduated from my poetry program, I started reading about extreme religious organizations, and learned that actually, stories like "The Handless Maiden" do sometimes happen, even in modern times. I started writing—the maiden became a

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member of a severe religious commune and the devil character became the group's leader. It took a few months to write the first draft, and a few years to shape it into its final version, with the indispensable help of my fantastic editors.

Study Notes on Themes and Curriculum Areas

This text is useful for senior English students studying identity, belonging and society. It can also be used in conjunction with *All the Truth That's in Me* as a comparative text.

This text can be used to address the Australian Curriculum: English objectives for Year 10.

Learning outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical and social and cultural contexts (ACELT 1639)
- evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT 1812)
- identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices, including analogy and satire, shape different interpretations and responses to a text (ACELT 1642)
- compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts, such as poetry, to evoke particular emotional responses (ACELT 1643)
- analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices (ACELY 1749)
- identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY 1752)
- use comprehension strategies to compare and contrast information within and between texts, identifying and analysing embedded perspectives, and evaluating supporting evidence (ACELY 1754)

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Getting Started

Comparative study

Read the first line of each of the texts:

'I am a blood-soaked girl.' (p 1) *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly*

'We came here by ship, you and I.' (p 3) *All the Truth That's in Me*

In small groups, predict what is going to happen in each of the texts based on the titles and the opening lines. Discuss if there are any commonalities between the two central characters and what they might be.

Individual text study

As a class, brainstorm the following terms:

- Cults
- Religion
- Sect
- Jail
- Murderer
- Murderess
- Investigation
- Secrets
- Truth
- Lies

Read the first chapter as a class. After completing the reading, discuss what has happened and address these questions:

- What you are curious to know more about?
- What do the words 'prophet', 'ordered' and 'ripped' imply?
- What do you think will happen in the rest of the story?

Individually, write a diary entry as the character Minnow. Start your diary entry with the line: '*The girl I used to be could almost be dead.*' (p 1)

Literacy and Language

Young adult fiction

The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly is an example of **young adult fiction**. In young adult fiction, the central protagonists are young people on the verge of adulthood. They can be helped and advised by adult characters, but must ultimately solve any problems they come across on their own. Other characteristics of young adult fiction include:

- expressing the inner thoughts and feelings that young adults often experience
- depicting challenges that young adults face
- involving the unique interests of young adults
- showing young adults venturing for the first time into the adult world
- depicting the choices young adults make on their own to solve problems – and showing the outcomes of those choices
- using precise and concise language to move the story along at a quick pace

Activity:

Working in small groups, choose one of the characteristics of young adult fiction as identified above. In the group, discuss the following:

- Is the characteristic a fair and accurate representation of young adult fiction? What would you add or change to the description (if anything)?
- How is the characteristic expressed in *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly*? Find and discuss two to three examples.
- Write a short paragraph summarising your discussion to share with the rest of the class.

First person narrative (limited)

In first person narrative (limited), the reader learns about the events in a story at the same time as the narrator. In *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly*, Minnow is the protagonist as well as the narrator. The reader learns new information and travels the same narrative path as Minnow. First person narrative (limited) uses internal monologue and stream of consciousness to help tell the story. First person narrators can be seen as unbelievable or unreliable due to their limited knowledge of and personal bias towards people and events in the narrative.

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Activities:

- Choose one section of the narrative that has been written in monologue and change it to stream of consciousness. Using a 'think, pair, share' strategy, identify the ways the narrative has changed and how this affects the interpretation of the narrative.
- In small groups, discuss whether Minnow should be viewed as a reliable narrator of the story. Do you believe everything she says? Should you believe everything she says? Discuss your initial reactions to Minnow's narration in the text and how (if) this changes by the end of the narrative.

Flashback

Flashback is a device where the protagonist or narrator thinks back on a key event that occurred in the past, usually one that has an effect on the present, as well as on a character's developing and changing sense of self.

Activity:

- Choose one of Minnow's flashbacks and identify what the flashback tells the reader about Minnow's past. Discuss how it is linked to her developing sense of self and identity.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing indicates to the reader what is going to happen in the story. It is used as a hook to keep the reader engaged. Readers can feel a sense of satisfaction when an event that they have predicted as a result of foreshadowing comes true. The reader can feel surprised and sometimes disappointed if what they predicted does not occur.

Activity:

- In small groups, discuss one example of foreshadowing in the text. The discussion should focus on what predictions and assumptions you made as you read the passage, how the events resolved themselves, and how you felt in light of the resolution.

Imagery and evocative language

Imagery and evocative language help in painting the picture for the reader. Evocative language creates an emotional connection to the content rather than using factual language. Imagery helps to create a strong visual picture for the reader. Imagery and evocative language are often linked to setting, but can also be connected to a character's thoughts and feelings as well as the themes in the text.

For example:

'The nurses give me morphine and the days start to bleed together.' (p 12)

The use of the word 'bleed' has multiple meanings and conjures a variety of images for the reader. The word is connected to the blood that Minnow has lost (as a result of having her hands severed), and it is surreal in its use, suggesting that time is flowing from one day to the next without clear delineation (marker). The word also suggests, within the context of the narrative, that the Minnow is not experiencing full relief from the morphine as the image of blood is quite horrific.

'The sorrow that pounded out of Jude's eyes made me stagger backward a step. It was hard sorrow, hot sorrow, the kind that's had a long time to ferment.' (p 52)

By repeating the word 'sorrow' and giving each repetition a quality ('pounded', 'hard', 'hot'), Stephanie Oakes makes Jude's emotions palpable, almost physical. They border on personifying his feelings. Because of this, the strength of Jude's emotions, and Minnow's reactions to them ('stagger backwards'), is more readily understood and experienced by the reader.

Activity:

- Working individually, choose three examples of imagery and evocative language in the text. For each example, evaluate, discuss and describe how the language impacts on the reader.

Setting

Setting is not only the time and place of a narrative, but can also be about the mood and the interaction between place and mood. The physical settings of the city and the country, and the moods associated with each, are important parts of the novel.

For example:

'But what's suffocating are the people. This feeling that too many sets of lungs are breathing right next to you. Like it's a finite resource, air. It can run out, and we're all

breathing a little less well because we choose to live side by side with others. Some days I can barely catch my breath at all.' (p 211)

Despite her distaste for the community and the life she lead there, Minnow feels suffocated in the city, like too many people are trying to share her air with her. The lack of space and feeling of suffocation can also been seen as a reflection of Minnow's struggle to keep her identity and sense of self in the city environment, as if she is inextricably linked to the open sky and the forest that surrounds the Community.

Activities:

- In small groups, discuss the importance of the environment, or a particular environment, to a person's sense of identity and self.
- Working individually, choose one character and discuss how the setting influences the character's actions.

Tragedy

Tragedy is a series of unfortunate events. The use of tragedy can create empathy in a reader, and elicit an increased desire for the protagonist to succeed. For example, Minnow has experienced a series of tragic events – as has Jude, many of the girls in the detention centre and a number of the adults in the novel.

Activities:

- Working in pairs or small groups, create a chart that lists the characters in the novel, the tragedy/ies they have experienced, their reaction to the tragedy, the influence that the tragedy has on the character today, and the potential influence of the tragedy on their future.
- After completing the chart, compare and contrast the characters using a Venn diagram or similar graphics organiser.

Themes

Belonging and isolation

A sense of belonging and its opposite, a sense of isolation, are motivating factors for all of the characters in the novel. Belonging to a culture, a family or group is important to most human beings.

The environment and setting also provide a sense of belonging as well as a sense of isolation.

Activities:

- Identify examples of isolation that each of the main characters experience.
- Evaluate the importance of belonging to each of the main characters and describe the way that each character shows this.
- Think of a time when you have felt isolated and lacking a sense of belonging. Use this as inspiration to create a narrative on loss. Write it in the first person, using some of the same literary techniques as the novel. Use the narrative to create a multi-modal text about the power of belonging.

The theme of belonging is explored in many texts written in the first person: novels, speeches and songs.

Activity:

- Choose a text with which you identify that is written in the first person. Analyse the ways the chosen text deals with the theme of belonging through language and literary devices. Compare the chosen text to a section of the novel. Do they use similar techniques to create a sense of belonging or isolation?

Persecution and fear

Persecution and fear are powerful tools for controlling and manipulating people and communities. Minnow fears further persecution from her family and community, and so she keeps her truth to herself.

Activities:

- Brainstorm all the examples of persecution in the novel. Create a chart listing who is doing the persecution and the possible reasons why.
- List all the different examples of fear explored in the novel. Categorise them into fear of rejection, fear of new ideas, fear of being exposed etc.
- Discuss how the Prophet exploits the inherent human need to belong by using fear as a weapon.

Persecution and fear of religious and other ideals still exist today.

Activity:

- Choose an example of modern-day religious or other persecution and conduct research using the internet and other tools. Use your research to create a text, in any genre, and tell the narrative using first person.

Abuse of power

A number of characters abuse the inherent power that they have in order to further their own goals. This includes the Prophet, Minnow's father and Jude's father.

Power in the environment of the detention centre can also be manipulated and abused to gain an advantage. For example, Minnow uses the power inherent in her Velcro shoes to leave the visitors' lounge against regulations and to threaten Krystal.

Activities:

- Discuss the ways power is abused in relation to social and familiar relationships.
- Make a list of all the characters who hold positions of authority, and identify the ways they abuse their power. What are they trying to achieve by abusing their power? Are they successful?
- Track the journey of Angel and Minnow through the text in relation to power. Consider the following questions: Who has the power? Why? How do we know?

- *'Don't let them do to you what they've done to me.'* (p 62) Discuss the quote in relation to the abuse of power that Angel has experienced.

Comparative study

'I shut my eyes and wonder how I will ever beat people like this man, with his pen and his badge and his words.' (p 35)

Activity:

- Discuss how Minnow and Judith survive when both of them have suffered enormous abuses of power, including a lack of fundamental human rights such as equality and access to education. What resources do they have available to them?

Non-traditional societies

The Kevinian Community is an example of a contemporary, non-traditional society. The novel positions it as a fringe or cult society. This is indicated by the use of the Prophet as the leader, the subjugated role of women and the Community's isolation from other societies.

Activities:

- Brainstorm what the word 'cult' means. Discuss all the different kinds of cults: religious, political, sporting etc, and give examples of each.
- Max Webber is credited as being one of the first scholars to study cults and cult leaders. Webber identified that a cult often has a single charismatic leader. How is this reflected in the text?

The word 'cult' has many negative connotations.

Activities:

- Brainstorm all the negative connotations for 'cult' that you can think of. Why do you think they have these associations? Find articles, images, novels and other texts to support each example.
- Discuss these negative connotations with reference to the text. How does the author present each of them? What has she left in or excluded?

The detention centre is also an example of a non-traditional society. Through the development of the narrative, Stephanie Oakes shows the reader that for some members of society this environment might be better than a traditional environment. For example, the detention centre provides the girls with regular

meals and access to education, and in some instances might be less psychologically, physically and emotionally abusive than their lives before incarceration.

Activity:

- Discuss why Stephanie Oakes has set the novel in a non-traditional society and how this assists the narrative.
- In pairs, discuss the reasons why this narrative may not work in a traditional society and a regular school environment rather than in a cult society and a detention centre.

Comparative study

Activities:

- How does the use of a non-traditional society assist the development of the narrative in both *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly* and *All the Truth That's in Me*?
- Compare and contrast the communities in *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly* and *All the Truth That's in Me*.

Sense of self and identity

A defining quality of young adult fiction is the protagonist exploring their sense of self and their identity as they develop from childhood into adulthood. Minnow, along with many of the other characters, explores her sense of self and identity as she undergoes challenges in her life. Stephanie Oakes demonstrates Minnow's exploration of self with a variety of techniques.

'It must be done,' they say. 'How will we identify her without fingers?' Just like that they've said something I've felt for months but never said aloud. (p 5)

In this example, Minnow is examining and questioning not only the physical identification of herself, her fingerprints, but the individuality and personal history that our fingerprints and our hands represent.

'Growing up, I believed in miracles. I guess I don't anymore.' (p 10)

As well as revealing the depressed emotional state that Minnow is feeling at the start of the novel, this quote is an early indicator of Minnow's waning faith in the Prophet and the Community.

Activities:

- In small groups, discuss how the setting of the novel influences Minnow's developing sense of self and identity.
- In small groups, brainstorm all of the changes that Minnow, Jude and Angel go through in the novel. Record and discuss how each of these changes are revealed in the text.

Comparative Study

'... my hands were never the source of my disobedience.' (p 203)

Activity:

- Discuss how Minnow and Judith defy those around them.

Questions for reading and discussion

'A keep pile and a trash pile.' (p 22)

In detention, Minnow has to make a quick decision about what belongings she will throw out and what belongings she will keep.

Working individually, complete the following tasks:

- Imagine you have one suitcase and you have to put your most valuable possessions inside it. What would they be? Why?
- Brainstorm other people who have to make a decision like this; for instance, refugees, people in a war zone, people in witness protection etc.
- Write a short story from the point of view of someone from your brainstormed list focusing on one of the items in their suitcase. Why did they choose that object? What does it remind them of? Is it a sentimental or practical object?

Reread Minnow's first encounter with Angel (pp 23–28).

In small groups, discuss what is revealed about Angel in this passage. How did you first feel about her? What (if anything) changed as the narrative developed?

'It's about what's right for you.' (p 32)

In pairs, discuss what you think is right for Minnow and how this changes as the narrative develops.

'My daddy taught me everything I know, and he's not wrong about nothing.' (p 51)

As a class, discuss the innocence of children, their blind belief in what they are taught by their parents and adults. When does this start to change? Why?

'We don't know Jude is dead.' (p 64)

In small groups, discuss the differences between feelings and facts, and how this can affect our judgement and our perception of events.

'I see skin tarnished ...' (p 86)

Choose one of the following statements and prepare a short speech:

- Our scars make us stronger.
- We all carry our scars.
- We are our scars.

Evaluate and discuss the two quotes below in essay form, with reference to Minnow, Angel, the Prophet and one other character.

- *'Girls stick together and alliances mean something.'* (p 87)
- *'You aren't your crime.'* (p 129)

'In those moments, I wish I could've articulated how unremarkable brutality is.'
(p 304)

Prepare a debate based on the quote above.

'I am deserving because even after everything, I'm still hopeful.' (p 250)

Imagine you are Angel. Write a diary entry explaining why you applied for the Bridge Program on Minnow's behalf.

Comparative study

Imagine Minnow and Judith meet at college (university). Describe the meeting using a third person omniscient narrator.

Everyone's truth is sacred.

Discuss in relation to Minnow, Judith, Jude and Lucas.

Education and equality is power.

Discuss with reference to at least two characters from the novels.

'Because I believe nobody benefits when the truth is buried. Lies have a way of turning poisonous over time.' (p 39)

Write an essay that discusses the quote above with reference to Minnow and Judith. Prepare for the essay by brainstorming the effects that hiding the truth had on both Minnow and Judith, and organise using a Venn diagram or similar.

'Her only purpose is the duty her womb performs in growing the body of God. That is truly the highest calling of womankind. Any of you should be lucky enough to birth God.' (p 80)

Evaluate and discuss the quote above with reference to both *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly* and *All the Truth That's in Me*.

Bibliography

Stephanie Oakes

www.stephanieoakesbooks.com

www.stephanieoakesbooks.com/minnow

About the Author of the Teachers' Notes

Rachel Ford began her professional career as a teacher after completing a double degree in Arts and Teaching. Rachel also has a Master of Education and a Master of Business Administration (Executive). Rachel has worked as a publisher in Melbourne and Sydney. She currently lives in Sydney where she works as a freelance writer and publisher.