

Hamlet, A Novel

John Marsden

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Recommended for Secondary

Resource Kit Contains

- Synopsis
- Author information
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- questions for discussion/essay topics
- research questions



Synopsis

In Elsinore, Denmark, the Crown Prince sits pushed into the furthest corner of the room. There is no escape from his situation. His father, the King, is dead. His mother has remarried his uncle. 'I don't believe in anything,' he tells his loyal friend, Horatio.

'But do you believe in ghosts?' Horatio asks. Hamlet does not answer. He decides to play footy instead.

Here is the beauty of John Marsden's retelling of *Hamlet*. He is faithful to the plot and themes of Shakespeare's version while sinking the reader into the inner world of his characters. The issues that haunt them are real and relevant.

On a cold night, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears and commands the boy to revenge his 'foul and unnatural murder'. Hamlet is trapped in a dark world, haunted by his father's expectations and his own questions of right and wrong. Should he kill Claudius? Is the ghost telling the truth? Is it man's place to play God? Is it right to seek justice through revenge? Why live when a great deal of life is about suffering? What happens to us after we die?

Such deliberations may have driven Hamlet to madness. He may be pretending to protect himself. Perhaps he simply cannot face a real discussion about the events.

Marsden explores the wider implications of the text whilst focusing on the painful isolation of being a teenager. Hamlet is confused by his desires and angered by the hypocrisy of his mother and step father. Horatio feels a deep love for his friend but cannot fully show this, constrained by the mores of the time. Ophelia is constrained, too. Desperate for intimacy with Hamlet she must act chastely.

Hamlet, A Novel will make an excellent class study on its own, or taught alongside Shakespeare. Marsden's text

will engage students in important political, social and personal debates, bringing new excitement to an old story.

About the Author:

John Marsden's books have sold more than four million copies around the world. He is the author of thirty novels including the highly acclaimed series *Tomorrow*, *When the War Began* and *The Ellie Chronicles*. In recent years John has also been the principal of his own school, Candlebark, on the Tye Estate, an hour from Melbourne.

Author's note:

Hamlet is a young man who never leaves us alone. He finds himself in agonising situations and struggles to navigate through them. He gets little advice and little help. Essentially, Hamlet has no models to follow, no guiding stars, except his own instincts and sense of reason. Sometimes these desert him.

He never leaves us alone because he himself is essentially alone. In his solitude we find a reflection of our own state-of-being. Our feelings, our pain, even our deaths, are ours alone. We can talk about them and if we are lucky we get support for them, but they are always ours. We cannot give them away; we must bear them.

It is the solitude and alienation of Hamlet that have always intrigued me. I love the play, but always wanted to understand this young man better. In exploring him in my novel I have still not succeeded in understanding him, but I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know him a little better.

ACTIVITIES

Reading Journal

The characters in *Hamlet, A Novel*, are plagued by questions that are particularly relevant to teenagers. As you read the novel, keep a journal. Note your thoughts on the text and your reactions to the subjects discussed. Note contemporary issues that mirror those in *Hamlet*.

Pre Reading Activities

Hamlet is a teenager. He faces issues that may also concern you.

Before reading the text, make a list of the issues that most concern you. These issues might be personal, political, social, economic or environmental. Number your issues in order of importance. Discuss your ordering and the reasons for your choices.

Make a list of issues that you believe are most important to your parents or teachers. How do you account for any differences between the two lists? Do they affect how you relate to these people? How do you think your list will change over time?

Note the skull on the cover of the text. Make some predications about issues that might preoccupy Hamlet in the novel.

'I don't believe in walls or ceilings. Or stone. I don't believe in people. I don't believe in strawberries...I don't believe in anything you can see or touch or taste.' (p. 2)

In the novel, Hamlet questions his beliefs. As a class, discuss the questions below.

- Do you believe in ghosts?
- Do you believe in God?
- Do you believe in the death penalty?
- Do you believe revenge is sometimes justified?
- Do you believe that teenage boys and girls should be treated exactly the same at school, in the family and in the workplace?
- Do you believe that they are treated in the same way?
- Do you believe that humans have control over their fates?
- Do you believe that everyone has a dark side?
- Are you scared of dying?
- Are you sometimes scared of living?
- What do you believe is the difference between humans and animals?
- What qualities are essential in a leader or a hero?
- Do you believe that actions speak louder than words?

After the discussion, make a list of three beliefs that you hold without doubt. What things influence your views? (You might consider the impact of religion, culture, parents, the media and friends.) Do you ever find it difficult to decide what you believe?

Love (or lust) can make a person do strange and desperate things. Have you ever done anything strange or desperate in the pursuit of lust or love?

Write a journal entry about a time when you have been disappointed in someone. What did you do to address the situation?

After you have finished reading the text, compare and contrast yourself with the teenage characters in *Hamlet*. Are your thoughts, experiences and beliefs similar in any way? Why was hard for Hamlet to decide whether or not to kill Claudius?

This novel is based on a very old story yet the issues are still relevant to people today. What are some constants in human nature?

Reading Activities

Re-read chapters one and two of *Hamlet, A novel*.

John Marsden uses powerful descriptions of setting to highlight Hamlet's emotions. Draw or describe the atmosphere in this chapter. How is Hamlet contrasted with the corrupt world he occupies? In what way does nature mirror Hamlet's melancholy? There are many portents or signs in this chapter that hint at future events. Find some examples of these.

Read Hamlet's first soliloquy in the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. (Act 1, Scene 2) Can you draw any comparisons between the beginning of Marsden's novel and this soliloquy? What themes has John Marsden highlighted by choosing to start his novel in the way that he has?

Re-read chapter six of the text. Many things are not as they seem in the court. Write a journal entry as Hamlet, commenting on the hypocrisy of the scene.

What is the significance of Hamlet's comment to Claudius: 'What do I say? Why sir, I say that nothing is good or bad, unless thinking makes it so.' (p.37) Write a journal entry about an event, recent or historical, where thinking has made an unreasonable act seem reasonable to some people.

Re-read chapters eight and nine of *Hamlet, A Novel*. What is the mood of these chapters? Choose two songs that represent the feelings of Hamlet and Ophelia. Explain your choice in a journal entry.

'Why would anyone put up with it all? The cruelty, the injustice, the frustration, the pangs and the pain. The love that's not returned... Surely we'd all fly to it at once if we thought we could have perfect peace there, protected forever.' (pp.55-56)

What is your opinion of Hamlet's logic here? What is the point of suffering? Does it make life less worthwhile?

Compare John Marsden's interpretation of Hamlet and Ophelia's interaction with Shakespeare's scene between the two characters in Act 3, Scene 1, ll. 57-163. What has Marsden emphasised in his version of the play? Which scene has greater impact for you? Why?

Draw one symbol used by Marsden in these chapters to highlight the teenager's lack of freedom. Choose one line in the chapters that feels the most real, or the truest. Write a journal entry outlining your thoughts on this line.

Reread chapter ten. Create a mask that illustrates the light and dark aspects of Hamlet's personality. Explain your mask to the class. In what ways are his emotions and actions a natural part of growing older? Do you think any of his actions seem unnatural? Why might Marsden have chosen to include this chapter in his version of the text? What does it reveal about Hamlet's character?

Re-read chapter nineteen. Why has Marsden included this chapter about the badger? What does it reveal about Hamlet? What parallels can you draw between the badger and Claudius? (Note Claudius' comments about beasts on p. 161. Note also his thoughts before death in the final chapter.) Is a man or woman who has committed murder no better than a beast? If so, do we have the right to exact revenge? Are people always deserving of mercy?

'The creature struggled about ten metres and collapsed again. It lay there waiting in fear for the end. Until then death had meant nothing more than the avoidance of pain; now the creature understood oblivion.' (p.112)

Discuss the significance of this quote for humans. Write a journal entry as Hamlet about his views on death.

Re-read chapters twenty-nine and thirty. What conclusions does Hamlet come to about himself and the world in these chapters? How are his thoughts relevant for people today?

Read Hamlet's fourth soliloquy in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. (Act 4, Scene 4) What parts of this soliloquy has Marsden chosen to highlight? Do you agree with Shakespeare's Hamlet that it is right to fight over small things when honour is at stake?

Debate topics:

Revenge is not the same thing as justice. Taking an eye for an eye will never even the score.

'Those boys, with their hormones going crazy, wanting to press their bodies into girls, it's all they think of...They can't control themselves.' (p.48) Boys are stereotyped unfairly by the media. Young people in general, are not given the respect that they deserve.

Art is a dangerous thing. It must be closely monitored by the government and if necessary, censored.

'Action is courage and reflection is cowardly.' (p.55)

It is the negative aspects of human nature that can be relied on, never the positive.

Life is worth living because in the end we die.

Humans decide their own fates. We are each in control of our destinies.

When men act like beasts they should be treated like beasts.

Discussion/Essay Topics

'I've had two fathers in four months, my uncle's suddenly my step-father, my mother's my aunt-by-marriage, my cousins are my step-sisters, you think I should be normal after that?' (p.8)

Do you think Hamlet's reaction to the situation of his mother's remarriage is fair? If you were in Hamlet's situation, how would you explain your feelings to your mother?

Refer to your research on Oedipus. Re-read chapter twenty-one. Discuss the idea that Hamlet's real problem is not that his uncle killed his father. It is that his uncle married his mother. Does Hamlet strike out at Ophelia because he cannot strike out at his mother?

Hamlet is haunted by the ghost of his father in more than a literal sense. He is overwhelmed by his failure to live up to old Hamlet's expectations. Ophelia, too, is trapped by the expectations and rules of Polonius. Make a list of ways in which Hamlet and Ophelia are trapped or restricted in the novel. Are you, at times, trapped in similar ways?

'...we are not gods, indeed all our human errors come from the vain belief that we are.' (p.68)

Does Hamlet's inaction arise from an unwillingness to decide the fate of another human? What characters in Hamlet attempt to manipulate human fates? What are the consequences of their manipulations? If Hamlet were alive to comment on the world today, in what ways do you think he would see humans as acting like gods?

'He wanted to stroke Hamlet into gentle awareness but thought it would look too much like love.' (p.13)

Horatio is a loyal friend to Hamlet. In what ways is their friendship limited? Are teenage boys today bound by spoken and unspoken rules in their friendships? Are girls bound by fewer rules?

Re-read Polonius's comments about his son and about boys in general (p.48). As a class, discuss whether or not you think these comments are fair.

'Your task is to hold up a mirror to nature.' (p.81) What do you believe to be the purpose of art and theatre? Is it merely to entertain? Does the artist have a responsibility to challenge the public artistically and morally?

Discuss the actions of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras. What are the true qualities of a hero? What does it mean to be a courageous person in the twenty-first century?

Stage a discussion where members of the class adopt the roles of male and female characters in the novel. Are the women in Hamlet weak? Are the men strong? Are men and women still bound by cultural stereotypes today?

Claudius may have murdered his brother, but in many ways he is less dangerous for Denmark than Hamlet. Do you agree? Does the ability to protect the people from attack outweigh a strong moral conscience in a leader? Discuss with reference to the text and contemporary leaders.

'I have no conscience about them. They stepped between two opposing forces, like flies that buzz between the right hand of a man and his left. Now the hands have slapped together.' (p.195)

Hamlet feels no guilt over the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. To what extent are they to blame for their fates? Can you hear echoes of Hamlet's comments in the way world leaders refer to the 'collateral damage' of war today?

'I caused the deaths, in the same way that a Danish archer kills a Norwegian foot-soldier, and at that moment neither man thinks of the kings who started the war.' (p. 196)

Hamlet makes this comment about his role in the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia. Does Hamlet have anything in common with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? To what extent is Hamlet relieved of guilt because there were circumstances beyond his control? In war, who bears responsibility for death: soldiers or politicians? Or are acts committed during war blameless?

Discuss contemporary political figures that have done damage because of a failure to act. Can you think of any who have caused damage because they have acted irrationally as Hamlet does at times?

Ophelia compares Hamlet to Christ. Commentators on the play have made the same comparison. Is Hamlet like Christ in any way? Consider how he questions the values of his day.

Discuss the reasons for Hamlet's procrastination. Consider the information you have gathered in the research section of your notes as well as the text. In pairs, create a list of songs that show Hamlet's state of mind. Compare your track lists.

Drama Activity

Acting it out

Choose one character from *Hamlet, A Novel*. Write a soliloquy where the character explains what they fear, desire and regret. Perform this for the class. Use one prop to symbolise for the audience what you see as the most important thing about this character.

Alternative Drama Activities:

Re-read the final chapter of the novel. Hold a forum where members of the class adopt different personas to debate the major questions and issues raised in the text. Personas could include the characters from the novel, but also John Marsden, Shakespeare, philosophers, political and church figures from the past and present.

Is Hamlet mad? Is he faking madness? Is his mental state more complicated than this division allows? Stage an interview where you bring in expert and character witnesses to decide Hamlet's state of mind.

Imagery and symbolism

John Marsden has used imagery to highlight key themes in his text. Look for images that symbolise decay and poison. Search for religious imagery. Record some of these in your journal.

What parallels can you draw between Elsinore and the Garden of Eden?

Design your own cover for *Hamlet, A Novel*. Cover it with some of Marsden's symbols. Design a cover for your journal. What will you draw to show people what it's really like to be a teenager? How would you symbolise what's going on in your head?

Research Questions

Draw and label a map of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia in the 1600s. Make sure to mark in Elsinore. (You might see it marked as Helsingør.)

Research Denmark during the time when *Hamlet* was set. Discuss reasons why weak leadership would make it vulnerable to attack. Why didn't Hamlet automatically inherit the crown when his father died?

Research the crime of treason. Find out the penalties of this crime. What were some interesting ways that Kings protected themselves against treason in Hamlet's time?

Divide into groups and research the Catholic Church's position on the topics below.

- Heaven and hell
- Revenge
- Ghosts
- Suicide
- Sex

Hamlet was a student. He would have been studying the major philosophers of his day. Research some of the prominent philosophical views on the above topics.

Research the Elizabethan definition of the term 'melancholy'. Does Hamlet fit this description?

Research the definition of a 'Renaissance Man'. Does Hamlet fit this description? What do you consider to be the qualities of an ideal man or woman today?

On page 36 of the text Hamlet stares at an oil painting of Joseph of Arimathea. Research this man. Why has the author included a reference to him?

Research the story of Oedipus. Why do some critics argue that Hamlet has an Oedipus complex?

Writing Activities

In chapter two of the text we read about Hamlet's changing mental map. Write about the ways your mental map has changed over time.

John Marsden describes how Hamlet and Ophelia 'dance' around each other. Write a contemporary scene where two teenagers 'dance' around each other, hinting of their feelings but not overtly stating them.

Polonius gives Ophelia some life advice in chapter eight. Imagine you are a parent. Write the advice you would give your son or daughter.

Write a soliloquy where you outline the central things that you believe in. And if you don't believe in anything, explain why this is the case.

Write a story where you foreshadow what is to come through the description of the landscape or weather.

Horatio makes many observations about human nature in his description of the people at court. Write a scene where you describe a group of people in a similar way. Show things about them by describing their actions.

Ophelia feels that there are rules for everything. She dreams of flying. What are your dreams of freedom?

Hamlet plays many words games in the text. He deliberately misunderstands people's true meaning. (Re-read page 100 for one example of Hamlet's wordplay.) Write a script between a student and a teacher. Have one character or both deliberately misunderstand the other.