

THE NOSTRADAMUS PROPHECY

by Theresa Breslin

TEACHING NOTES by Bridget Carrington

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Reading Age 9+

Interest Level 12+

Theresa Breslin is the critically acclaimed author of over 30 books whose work has been filmed for television and dramatised for radio. She has been described as an outstanding writer who combines a powerful sense of drama with memorable characters and superb storytelling. She writes for all age groups covering most fiction genres with some titles especially suitable as EAL readers. She won the Carnegie Medal, the most prestigious award in children's literature, for *Whispers in the Graveyard*, her compelling story of a dyslexic boy.

More information on website: theresabreslin.com

Bridget Carrington has almost thirty years teaching experience. She has an MA in Children's Literature and is currently researching the early history of writing for young adults for a doctorate at Roehampton University. Her work for this forms part of the Pied Piper Publishing book 'Neglected Children's Authors': *A Victorian Quartet*.

The Nostradamus Prophecy is an **historical novel**, but it deals with life themes that are universal and timeless. The main areas of the curriculum its themes cover are:

history, religion, music, science, maths, geography, philosophy, PSICHE and SEAL.

First and foremost the book should be read for enjoyment, and analysis of its material should never be allowed to detract from this, its primary intention.

Synopsis

France 1566. The famous prophet, Nostradamus, comes to the royal court and foretells great danger to the king and the people of France, but not everyone is prepared to take him seriously. Mélisande is the daughter of the king's minstrel and lives among the royal French court. She, like many others, pays little heed to the dire warnings of Nostradamus. Chantelle, Mélisande's older sister is betrothed to the handsome courtier Armand, and there is the excitement of the forthcoming wedding to think about. Mélisande is fascinated by the mysterious and silent Melchior, the boy who looks after the king's leopard. Only Catherine de' Medici, the king's mother, listens to Nostradamus and fears for the life of her son. But when misfortune befalls Mélisande's family she turns to Nostradamus for help. He believes that their fates are entwined and entrusts to Mélisande his last prophecies which hold the secret of the royal line of France. Mélisande realises that she must act to fulfil Nostradamus' final predictions, but will she have the courage to do so?

Analysis of the text:

- ❖ **Style:** the book describes places and people remote from our own time. **How** does Breslin **engage** her readers with her characters, her plot and the events of the time? Does she use the language and style of the time she is writing about? **Why?**
 - How does the author intersperse the narrative with the facts of historical background?
 - What does the novel gain from being told in a **first person narrative**?
 - **Language:** Chapter 1 is printed below in its entirety. Although we don't know it at the time, it both sets the scene, and predicts some of the crucial events of the book.

Discuss why the author begins the book in this way, and how she creates an atmosphere of **tension and mystery**:

Chapter One

'Murder!

Murder and foul betrayal!

The old man with the long white beard trembled as he spoke.

'Listen to me, I beg you! Blood runs red in the streets of Paris!'

In the great hall of Cherboucy Palace nobles and courtiers pressed forward to hear. The soothsayer reached into the folds of his cloak and drew out a crumpled parchment. He held it aloft and declaimed in a loud voice,

'With fire and heartless hangings

The treachery of royal line holds sway

Deeds done by stealth will come to light and all but one destroyed

Safe from the sword, saved only by the word.'

'O most vile iniquity!'

His finger stabbed at the paper and his voice rose in a wail.

'A hundred dead!

'No! More! Two hundred!

White flecks of spume gathered at the corners of his mouth.

A murmur ran through the assembly. Everyone craned their necks upwards. Some gasped, others sniggered behind their hands.

'Sire, you should pay heed to Nostradamus,' Catherine de' Medici hissed at her son. 'He is no ordinary prophet.'

'Enough of this,' King Charles held up his hand for silence. 'We thank you for your time, soothsayer. Now, you are dismissed.'

It was plain to see that the Queen was annoyed, for she frowned and bit her lip. But she did not protest, only took out her purse and gave a servant some money to hand to the old man.

Nostradamus regarded the coins with disdain and then dropped them at his feet. 'I came here to give you warning,' he replied with dignity, 'not for you to give me gold.'

'Minstrel,' King Charles called to my father, 'play me a tune.' He clapped his hands. 'A merry tune. And ask your daughters if they would dance a little.'

My father beckoned to my sister and me.

'Chantelle, Mélisande,' He put his hands on our heads. 'I think the King needs a distraction. A madrigal followed by a lively roundel, would you agree?'

My father plucked the strings of his lute and began to sing in a tranquil voice. My sister Chantelle and I shook our little finger cymbals in time to the music and waited for the right moment to run into the middle of the floor

*Nostradamus, the soothsayer, stared at the King. 'You do not listen today,' his voice boomed out. 'I tell you, one day you **will** listen. But it will be too late!'*

And, leaving the gold coins where they lay, Nostradamus turned and

- ❖ **Construction:** Like *The Medici Seal* (another novel by this author set in the sixteenth century) *The Nostradamus Prophecy* is an **adventure**: it involves a **physical journey**, in this case across different parts of France: and also the **journey from childhood to young adulthood**.
 - What is the purpose of dividing the novel into **four parts**? How does it help us in our **journey** through Mélisande's adolescence?
 - How are we recalled to the original prophecy by descriptions throughout the novel? What **images** keep reappearing?
 - **How** do the journeys help readers to find out about **living and growing up** at a **different time** and in a **different place**?
 - Novels in which young people journey physically, but also travel from child to adulthood are called '**bildungsroman**'. How does the author show that Mélisande is travelling developmentally?
 - Another term often used for novels about significant life stages such as adolescence is '**rights of passage**'. This recognizes we must have different experiences at different stages in our lives in order to reach adulthood successfully. Which **key events** can you identify as rights of passage?

❖ **Characters:**

There are many real and fictional characters in the novel. Some of the most important are:

- **Mélisande**, aged thirteen (at the novel's start), a singer and poet
- **The King's Minstrel**, her father
- **Melchior**, Provençal leopard handler
- **Nostradamus**, a soothsayer
- **Giorgio**, an apothecary, with another role to play
- **Chantelle**, a singer and Mélisande's sister, betrothed to
- **Armand Vescault**, the vassal of
- **The Count de Ferignay**, his liege lord
- **King Charles IX of France**
- **Catherine de' Medici**, his mother
- **Prince Henri of Navarre**, a Huguenot, and a Prince of French royal blood
- **Queen Jeanne of Navarre**, his mother
- **Lord Thierry**, the King's representative in Provence
- **Admiral Gaspard Coligny**, a Huguenot, with an important position in the governing council of France
- **The Duke of Guise**, a Catholic and member of a leading noble house
 - Which are **real**, and which are **fictional**? How could you find out if you are not certain?
 - **Family loyalty and family conflict**, both within **royal hierarchies** and lowly families, feature in this novel. **Does the reader empathize** with the characters' conflicted emotions or are any of the characters unbelievable in their actions?

- Are any characters totally **bad**, or are they mixed **good and bad, misguided** or **misled**? Do you think this is a function of **time**, of **society**, or of **religion**?
 - What impression of **Nostradamus** do we get? What are Mélisande's feelings about him? Why? Does what we learn about him fit in with anything you knew about his work before reading the novel?
 - Both Nostradamus and Mélisande are portrayed as agents through whom **prophecy** is transmitted. Do you believe that prophecy can happen? What **alternative explanations** could you suggest?
 - What life-experiences are specific to the **female characters**, Mélisande and Chantelle?
 - Are these as a result of the historical period in which the book is set, or are they equally true in the twenty-first century?
- ❖ **Plot:** The novel shows life at an important and distinctive historical period in French history, which has repercussions in the French constitution today.
- **How** does Breslin use her careful **research** into life at these times to change her novels from being an adventure of 21st century life into a **historical** novel?
 - **Spies** are a significant feature of the plot. How are we led astray by their apparent roles, so that we do not realize their real intention until the author is ready to reveal it?

Topics for Discussion:

'I had the leopard as a cub when I was only a young boy. My father found it where we lived in the great forest of the Pyrenees...He brought it home and it grew with me and we taught each other to hunt. The fame of it spread and men came to buy the leopard but my father would not sell it. So they killed my father, but they kept me alive as they needed me to control the animal...'

(from THE NOSTRADAMUS PROPHECY Chapter 9 p.57)

PSCHE

Both Melchior and Mélisande belong to **itinerant and alternative lifestyles**. They are highly valued for their skills, but considered to be easily expendable.

- ❖ Do **itinerant, ethnic and religious** groups still suffer prejudice? How do **ignorance and intolerance** fuel this? How does Lord Thierry's attitude to others differ from that of the other nobles e.g. the Duke of Guise, Count de Ferignay, or Admiral Gaspard Coligny?
- ❖ **Relationships, romance and marriage** are vitally important in this novel.
 - Look at how different the **expectations** of men and women were.
 - In particular, look at **age of marriage**
 - How, and by whom a **marriage partner** was chosen
 - **Personal independence**: servants and women are shown as **tradable commodities**... Has this changed in the 21st century? Was it different in the middle ages and during Renaissance / Elizabethan times?
 - How does Mélisande's relationship with **Lord Thierry** differ from that with **Melchior**?
- ❖ **Animal Rights**: look at the hunting episode following page 34. Melisande says that 'animals should die that we might live'. Is this justifiable?
- ❖ **Research** the history of **animal collections**. Paladin was born to a leopard which had been in such a collection. The Tower of London had a Royal Menagerie as late as the eighteenth century.
- ❖ Is keeping **animals in captivity** justifiable?
- ❖ **Human Rights**: how is the experience of animals mirrored in the treatment of girls and women, or those who worship God in a different way? Is there a **correlation** between **cruelty to animals** and **cruelty to humans**?
- ❖ **The Sixth Extinction**: what **recent cataclysmic events** have been regarded as contenders for this description? What widely feared **possible future events** are now being predicted as Nostradamus' final prophecy?

Religion

- ❖ There are extensive descriptions of the conflicts between **Catholic** and **Huguenot** believers, and the events in which the **Inquisition** was involved.
- ❖ The **French Wars of Religion** lasted from 1562 to 1598 and included the **St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre**. Research further on that terrible event, and similar protracted religious wars, e.g. **The Thirty Years' War**
- ❖ What **religious conflicts** exist in the twenty-first century? Do we fuel them or try to resolve them?

- ❖ Another of Breslin's novels, *Divided City*, looks at twenty-first century religious conflict. If you have read it, compare the **similarities** and **differences** of the **underlying conflicts**.
- ❖ Charles' older brother Francis (who has died before the novel begins) was married to Mary Queen of Scots. What can you find out about Elizabeth I's attitude to Mary? What part did **religion** have in this and how much was a desire for power?

History

- ❖ How do we find out truth? When **researching** historical topics, it is very important to realize the difference between **primary** and **secondary sources**.
- ❖ If you have also read *The Medici Seal*, you will remember that the **Medici** family had (and retained) a reputation both for considerable **patronage of the arts** and for great **corruption and cruelty**. How much is this true of Catherine de' Medici and her court? What else can you find out about her? What relation was she to Lorenzo de' Medici who employed Leonardo da Vinci?
- ❖ Are there **twenty-first century individuals or companies** with whom we could **compare** them?
- ❖ Historical comparisons: create a timeline to compare the events in **the France of Charles IX and Henri of Navarre** with those in **Elizabethan England**. Look at page 71 to see what might have become a link between the two countries.
- ❖ What features of life, religion and politics show
 - **similarities**
 - **differences**
 between the way in which England and France were **ruled**, and life was lived?
- ❖ Re-read the passages which describe the **devastation** which the religious **wars** in France caused (pages 384, 389, 456, 464). There are comparisons which could be drawn between these and Shakespeare's descriptions of France in his play *Henry V*, as well as images and descriptions of French battlefields of the First World War.

Science/Medicine/Maths

- ❖ What was **medical treatment** like in the sixteenth century? Giorgio's treatments are largely based on herbal remedies and blood-letting. If you have read *The Medici Seal* compare his remedies with those in use fifty years earlier by Leonardo da Vinci.
- ❖ **The Plague** was a constant fear: what can you find out about it?
- ❖ **Poisoning** was sometimes accidental, but often a subtle means of killing an enemy. Research modern examples of its use to kill in this way.

- ❖ **Nostradamus** bases many of his predictions on **astrology**. How does it differ from **astronomy**? Was that distinction made in the sixteenth century?
- ❖ He also uses **patterns in numbers**. Research the symbolism of numbers which are considered magical or special.

Geography

- ❖ Look at the **map of France** at the beginning of the book. We recognize the different areas marked as modern departments within a single country of 'France'.
- ❖ How has this changed over time? When did these areas all come under **French governance**?
- ❖ How does the physical geography of **southern France** affect the action of the novel?

Music

- ❖ The troubadour tradition flourished in medieval times. What can you discover about the life of **troubadours**? Mélisande and her family are wandering singer/songwriters following on in a much older tradition.
- ❖ **Research** the music and poetry they wrote, played and sang.
- ❖ **Mandolins** are still played today, but not commonly. What instruments do we more often find today that resemble a mandolin in the way they are played?
- ❖ **Lutes, zithers** and **jingles** are also mentioned. What can you find out about them?
- ❖ Mélisande mentions female troubadours. Research the **role of women** in music over the centuries.

Taking it Further

Many museums and galleries have artwork which dates from the later sixteenth century and images of some of the major rulers in Europe at this time. Most museums have a website which includes images from their collection. Without travelling to France, or accessing French websites, it will be easier to find material about Elizabethan England than Valois France!

- ❖ The **V&A Museum** in London (www.vam.ac.uk) has **arts and crafts**
- ❖ The **National Portrait Gallery** in London (www.npg.org.uk) has portraits of Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots
- ❖ The **National Gallery** in London (www.nationalgallery.org.uk) has paintings both from and about this era, including later realizations of religious conflicts. It also has the painting "A Concert" by Lorenzo Costa
- ❖ The **Wallace Collection** (www.wallacecollection.org.uk) in London is one of the few museums to concentrate on French art. Some of its collection dates from the late sixteenth century
- ❖ The **Geffrye Museum** in London (www.geffrye-museum.org.uk) has rooms furnished by era, including an Elizabethan room

- ❖ Many **U.K. art galleries** have paintings and artefacts from the 16th century / Elizabethan era
- ❖ Many historic houses in England will show what the architecture and furnishings of a high status household was like. **Hatfield House, Burton Agnes Hall, Penshurst Place, Audley End, Hardwick Hall** and **Longleat** are only a few of the many grand houses built during the long reign of Elizabeth I.
- ❖ The **Elizabethan House Museum** in Great Yarmouth is located in a merchant's house
- ❖ At **Kentwell Hall** in Suffolk you can live Elizabethan life
- ❖ The **Musée du Louvre** in Paris (www.louvre.fr) will give the best insight into French history. The website is (mostly) in English
- ❖ **Look online** to find information (you should be able to find a painting of nobleman with his hunting leopard and also one of Renaissance minstrels with a female singer)
- ❖ **Visit libraries** to find books on these topics

Bibliography

A good general overview of French history can be found in:

Pierre Goubert (1991) *The Course of French History*, Routledge

Online Resources

Theresa Breslin

Theresa's own website is at:

www.theresabreslin.co.uk

An interview with her in which she talks about her research for *The Medici Seal* and other books, appears at www.writeaway.org.uk

The Internet Modern History Source Book

www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html

French History:

www.historylearningsite.co.uk

www.uncg.edu

The following guide to using fiction in teaching history is reproduced with kind permission from WriteAway at <http://www.writeaway.org>

Using Fiction to Teach History

I have often maintained that fiction may be much more instructive than real history.
John Foster, preacher, essayist and educationalist (1770 - 1843)

Why use fiction?

- ❖ whereas textbooks provide generalities and overviews, fiction offers a particular and personal view of life and events in any given period
- ❖ because it is descriptive, it is equally accessible to all students, whatever their level of prior knowledge
- ❖ it offers a 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' approach: it focuses on the detail of people and everyday life rather than that of the elite, political or chronological
- ❖ readers are immersed within the fictional action and must come to their own conclusions about events, characters and motivations
- ❖ it portrays the complexity of issues, introduces students to characters who have different points of view and offers examples of how people deal differently with problems
- ❖ the use of a variety of fiction focussed on a single historical period demonstrates the concept of different interpretations of history
- ❖ it encourages empathy with the reality of history

What fiction to use?

The choice of texts is crucial. To use fiction to best effect, ensure that the texts

- ❖ combine historical accuracy with an engaging narrative
- ❖ portray characters realistically and sympathetically
- ❖ place the action within authentic settings
- ❖ deliver historical fact well integrated into the narrative
- ❖ if illustrated, include images that are historically accurate
- ❖ are sensitive to difference, and avoid stereotypes and myths

How to use it?

- ❖ **carefully!**
- ❖ as a means of immersing students alongside protagonists in a historical period
- ❖ to introduce **interpretations of history**. As with non-fiction history texts, students should look at fiction in the light of these questions:
 - **purpose**: why was it written – to persuade, entertain, inform, communicate or commemorate?
 - **process**: which parts are factual, points of view, or imagined? Did the author go back to the sources? Did they use these sources rigorously? Have they acknowledged their sources?
 - **perspective**: what influenced the author's viewpoint? Is it balanced? Has it been influenced by their ideology, values, nationality, personality or expectations?

History never looks like history when you are living through it. John Gardner, novelist, 1912-1982

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<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/> (the National Archive teachers' website)
<http://journals.aol.co.uk/kha200/Usinghistoricalfiction> (Ireland in Schools web journal)