

THE MEDICI SEAL by Theresa Breslin

TEACHING NOTES by Bridget Carrington

THE MEDICI SEAL (Corgi 2007 £6.99 ISBN: 978 0 552 55447 3)

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 taught in the primary sector over the last thirty years. She has an MA in Children's Literature and her research for this will form part of the forthcoming Pied Piper Publishing 'Neglected Children's Authors' book *A Victorian Quartet*.

She is currently researching the early history of writing for young adults for a doctorate at Roehampton University. She writes about reviews and

THE MEDICI SEAL 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:

English, history, art, science, geography, philosophy, PSD.

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

Synopsis

Romagna, Italy 1502.

Fleeing from the murderous brigand Sandino, Matteo - a young boy - is saved from drowning by the companions of Leonardo da Vinci. From this moment on, Matteo is at the Maestro's side as he carries out his work, which ranges from the painting of magnificent frescos to intricate dissection of the human body. But at this time Leonardo is employed by Cesare Borgia, head of one of Italy's leading families. Cruel and ruthless, the Borgia punishes without mercy those who oppose him or who threaten him in any way. As da Vinci and Matteo travel across Italy on the Borgia's business, murder, deceit and revenge follow in their trail.

Matteo's journey becomes one to assuage a terrible guilt for past events, to gain self-knowledge, and find the truth about his family.

But the boy carries with him a secret - a secret that both the Borgia and Medici families would kill to obtain...

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:** in the following passage it is almost as though we are looking into a painting: discuss how the author creates this effect, and the impression of silence and tension, of great concentration and secrecy in the following scene:

Extract from *THE MEDICI SEAL*

Chapter 12

It was almost daylight when we returned from the mortuary.

Cold dawn was beating back the winter dark. Thin fog drifted up from the river. This is when the dead who have walked abroad hurry back to their graves before daylight catches them and destroys their soul.

I stayed close to my master, almost running to keep up with his long stride. He was humming a catchy folk tune that country people sing at harvest time. He had worked through the night, cutting, exploring, dissecting; uncovering layer upon layer of once living organs. I held the lamp while he measured and made notes, checking and rechecking dimensions, then sketching what he saw; sometimes swiftly and precisely in one smooth flow, at other times painstakingly, with tiny strokes, delineating the minute threads of blood vessels and veins.

The lamp was not heavy but my arm ached with the effort of keeping it held in one place. Once he reached behind him blindly with one hand while the other held some part of the body unknown to me. I realised that he required scissors and I picked them up and gave them to him. He gave a start, and I saw then, far from appreciating my effort at standing still for so long, and keeping the light steady, he had forgotten that I was there. He did not rest until we heard the chanting of the monks at their morning office and the stirrings of the hospital making ready for a new day.

(from *THE MEDICI SEAL* - Page 68)

- ❖ **Construction:** *The Medici Seal* is an adventure: **journeys** across different parts of Italy, and from childhood to adulthood.
 - What is the purpose of dividing the novel into seven **parts**? How does it help us in our **journey** through Matteo's adolescence?
 - **How** does the journey 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 Matteo is travelling developmentally?

- Another term often used for novels about significant life stages such as adolescence is '**rites of passage**'. This recognizes we must have different experiences at different stages in our lives in order to come through them successfully.

❖ **Characters:**

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

- **Matteo**
 - **Sandino**
 - **Leonardo da Vinci** – the Maestro - a 'Renaissance Man' – who rescues and apprentices Matteo
 - **Rossana** and **Elisabetta dell'Orte**, the sisters of
 - **Paolo**
 - **Eleanora d'Alciato**
 - **Donna Lisa del Giocondo**
 - **Zoroastro**
 - **Cesare** and **Lucrezia Borgia**
 - **Isabella d'Este**
 - **Jacopo d'Medici**
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- Which are **real**, and which are **fictional**? How could you find out if you are not certain?
 - **family loyalty and family conflict** feature in this novel. Is it sympathetically portrayed? **Does the reader empathize** with the characters' conflicted emotions or are any of the characters unbelievable in their actions?
 - Are there any characters who are totally **bad**, any who are mixed, **good and bad, misguided** or **misled**? Do you think this is a function of **time**, of **society**, or of **nationality**?
 - What impression of **Leonardo** do we get? What are Matteo's feelings about him? Why?
 - Breslin gives us a theory about the **mystery** of the **Mona Lisa**. How does she make her argument **convincing**? How plausible do you find it? What **alternatives** could you suggest?
 - Make a list of the experiences which you think helps Matteo to move from **boyhood to manhood**
 - Which character do you **identify** with most? **Why**?
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- ❖ **Plot:** The novel shows life at an important and distinctive historical period
- **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?

- Historical comparisons: create a timeline to compare the events in **Renaissance Italy** with those in **Medieval Britain**
- What features of life and politics show
 - a) **similarities**
 - b) **differences**
 between the way in which Britain and Italy were **ruled**, and life was lived?

Topics for Discussion:

Travelling people are known in many lands. We have a reputation as good farriers, skilled basket weavers and metal workers, and the gift of being able to foretell the future...such skill arouses jealousy in others and this was why we could never rest in one place for long...such is the prejudice against us that, without having been convicted or even accused of any wrong, being gypsy alone can mean death.

(from *THE MEDICI SEAL* pp7-9)

- ❖ Do **ethnic** and **religious** groups still suffer prejudice? How do **ignorance** and **intolerance** fuel this?
- ❖ As we see in *The Medici Seal*, the **Borgia** and the **Medici** families had (and retain) a reputation both for considerable **patronage of the arts** and for great **corruption and cruelty**. **Can we reconcile these opposing aspects?**
- ❖ Are there **twenty-first century individuals or companies** with whom we could **compare** them?
- ❖ How do we find out truth? When **researching** historical topics, it is very important to realize the difference between **primary** and **secondary sources**.
- ❖ **Personal independence:** orphans, servants and women are shown as **tradable commodities**... Has this changed in the 21st century? Was it different in medieval Britain?
 - Reread pages 230-231. Because they are female, to a greater or lesser extent Rosanna, Elisabetta (and also Eleanora) can be treated as though they are **objects not people**.
 - Read again about Lucrezia Borgia. How far is this true of her experience? Why?
 - What is the influence of **religion** in the issues covered in this novel?
- ❖ What is meant by the terms
 - a) **Renaissance** and
 - b) **Renaissance Man**
- ❖ Through Matteo's story, what can we learn **about Leonardo da Vinci's life and work?** In particular, what do we learn about **the techniques of painting and sculpting** at that time?
- ❖ As an adolescent, Matteo must learn to face life on his own. Through him, what can we learn about facing up to the

consequences of our actions, even when those actions have been **unintentional**?

- ❖ What was **medical treatment** like in the time of Leonardo da Vinci? Matteo tells us much about his grandmother's treatments compared with common practice.
- ❖ How did Renaissance knowledge about the **heart and circulation** differ from ours?
- ❖ Do we know if Leonardo advanced the knowledge of **anatomy**?
- ❖ Apart from the medical benefits, **why** was he interested in it?
- ❖ What is the influence on Matteo's life, and on everyday life in general in Renaissance Italy of
 - a) The **wars** with **foreign** countries
 - b) **The warfare** resulting from **rival dynasties** within the **Italian states**?

Taking it Further

Many museums and galleries have small pieces of artwork, designs for inventions, or realizations of those inventions by Leonardo da Vinci and other Renaissance artists. A visit (real or virtual) to a museum or gallery will allow you to see what Matteo was working on.

- ❖ The **V&A Museum** in London (www.vam.ac.uk) has **arts and crafts** from **Renaissance Italy** and, **medieval Britain**, including pieces by Leonardo himself
- ❖ The **National Gallery** in London (www.nationalgallery.org.uk)
- ❖ The **Science Museum** in London (www.sciencemuseum.org.uk) has material about his scientific theories
- ❖ **Art galleries in Scotland** have paintings and sculpture from the Renaissance – the time of Leonardo da Vinci
- ❖ **Look online** to find information and **visit libraries** to find books on these topics
- ❖ **Geography**: Trace the journeys of Matteo and Leonardo through Italy
- ❖ **Science and medicine**:
- ❖ Make a list of all Leonardo's **scientific inventions** and **medical theories and discoveries** mentioned in *The Medici Seal*? Can you find others by researching books and websites?

Bibliography

An excellent general overview of Leonardo's life and work can be found in the book which accompanied the 2006-7 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, written by the acknowledged expert on the Maestro, Martin Kemp (2006) *Leonardo da Vinci: Experience, Experiment and Design*, London: V&A

Another V&A publication accompanied an exhibition earlier in 2006 about home life in Renaissance Italy:

Marta Ajmar-Wollheim (2006) *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, London: V&A

Online Resources

Theresa Breslin's own website is at: www.theresabreslin.com

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

Leonardo da Vinci

There is a vast amount written about Leonardo, and dozens of websites devoted to various aspects his life and his inventions, and the recreation of some of his designs. Many of the sites also include references to further material.

One of the very best, which tells us about **many of the people and events mentioned in *The Medici Seal***, and experiments to try, is at www.universalleonardo.org

The BBC site is good, at:

www.bbc.co.uk/science/leonardo/

It has an **interactive tour of his studio**, and shows us the materials with which Matteo, as Leonardo's assistant, would have been dealing.

A **news report about a 21st century flight** with a da Vinci type parachute is at:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/808246.stm>

Some of the more **authoritative other sites** can be found at:

www.lib.stevens-tech.edu/collections/davinci/inventions

www.mos.org/sln/Leonardo/InventorsWorkshop

www.mos.org/sln/Leonardo/LeosMysteriousMachinery

www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/on-line/invention/leonardo.asp

www.loc.gov/loc/kidslc/live-leonardo

The National Museum of Science and Technology in Milan has

excellent information in English at

www.museoscienza.org/english/leonardo

A very sophisticated website showing a virtual reality tour of the large section of the museum devoted to the work of Leonardo da Vinci. The simulation allows viewers to explore the beautiful architecture of the museum as well as the many machines, constructed from Leonardo's drawings, which have been built. Among the reconstructions both at the museum and online are Leonardo's armoured car, glider and revolving crane. The museum also has sections containing locomotives and air & sea transportation. Images of the exhibits can be viewed via the website, and there are links to a number of Italian libraries and archives.

General Notes –

USING FICTION TO TEACH HISTORY

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| <p>I have often maintained that fiction may be much more instructive than real history. John Foster, preacher, essayist and educationalist (1770 - 1843)</p> |
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The following guide to using fiction in teaching history is reproduced with kind permission from WriteAway at <http://www.writeaway.org>

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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Martin, D. & Brooke, B. (2002) 'Getting personal: making effective use of historical fiction in the history classroom' in *Teaching History*, Issue 108
<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/> (the National Archive teachers' website)
<http://journals.aol.co.uk/kha200/Usinghistoricalfiction> (Ireland in Schools web journal)