



The Death

The horror of the Plague

By Ananda Braxton-Smith

About the book:

The book title is apt — this is a horror story. The plague devastated Europe and China during the Middle Ages. It is estimated that over a third of the population of Europe died. Others — the scapegoats — were burnt at the stake. The Death challenges students to; make sense of it all and to not only find points of difference but to also draw parallels between the past and present .

The history of Europe during the Plague is compelling, confronting and tragic. The book traces the impact of the entire fabric of society being ripped apart, and the very real sense people had of being doomed as the cosmic order that dominated their lives and informed their beliefs disintegrated.

After the maelstrom new ideas began to emerge. The book highlights some of these ideas and focuses on some of the individuals who forged them, such as Galileo whose discoveries redrew the cosmos — heresy according to the church. The book also details experiments that led to the discovery of the cause of the plague. In this Renaissance period, reason rather than faith became the guiding light for many.

What makes this book such a valuable resource are the children's narratives. Under the heading ***Imagine you are there***, there is one narrative per chapter (chapters 1-9). Students will find the narratives, about children close in age to themselves, insightful and powerfully evocative.

Written expressly for teenagers, *The Death* reveals how very different the lives of children were in the Middle Ages compared with today. England even had a 14-year-old king in the 1300s. As the author points out, there was no such thing as a teenager. Why adolescence and parental dependence extends for such a long period to-day should invite lively discussion.

Genre: History

Class study, independent reading and research

Readership: Upper primary to mid-secondary

Themes include: children's lives; herbal medicinal treatments; peasants; dealing with death; signs, omens and astrology; the cosmos; the power and authority of the church in people's lives; scapegoats



Book Contents

Introduction: Darts of Death

Plague types and symptoms. Traces the path of the Plague from China to Europe.

Chapter One: Late-Medieval Life: Not So Nasty

Life in pre-Plague in Europe.

Imagine you are there: Account by 12 year old besieged merchant's apprentice.

Chapter Two: The Beginning of the End

Impact of the Plague as it swept through Europe

Imagine you are there: Account of death by a 14 year old Cornish girl.

Chapter Three: What They Did Next

How people reacted to the Plague. Scapegoats

Imagine you are there: Account of scapegoating by a 13-year-old Jewish girl.

Chapter Four: Puppet-Popes and Rogue-Priests

Schisms in the church.

Imagine you are there: Letter from a 14-year-old French pilgrim to her father

Chapter Five: You're Not the Boss of Me

Peasant rebellions.

Imagine you are there: Account of two brothers joining a peasant revolt in Florence

Chapter Six : The End of the Beginning

The Renaissance

Imagine you are there: Confession of a 15-year-old slave girl in Venice

Chapter Seven: A Corruptible Crown

Regicide; the Puritans; the Reformation (of the church); the Restoration (of the monarchy).

Imagine you are there: Diary a 16-year-old Puritan militiaman.



Chapter Eight: 1665

The Plague returns.

Imagine you are there: Account of death by a 12-year-old English boy.

Chapter Nine: Tiny Lives

Old and new ways of looking at illness. Plague microbe identified.

Imagine you are there: Account by 14-year-old Chinese Plague survivor

Chapter Ten: Slightly Larger Lives

Discovery of the Plague's rat/flea connection. Author draws parallels between how people responded to the Plague with how people react to-day to signs of impending doom.

Learning Activities:

The learning activities below are for Science, Sose/Hise, Media Studies, English, and Creative Arts and also Personal Development. Activities suggested for one Key Learning Area may be applicable to another KLA

Additional activities:

- Email the author at dog@bdb.com.au and arrange for students to talk with her on-line asking pre-prepared questions.
- For students in Melbourne — invite the author to conduct a writing workshop (refer to About the Author at the end of these notes).



INTRODUCING THE BOOK

Brainstorm: what does class know about the Plague?

Visual Art exercise: What information does the artwork on the book's cover convey?

Read blurb on the back cover

Book format: locate contents page, imagine you are there children's narratives, bibliography, glossary, index

SCIENCE

The Plague

(Introduction, chapter 9 to p. 200, chapter 10, the Internet)

- Describe the symptoms of pneumonic plague
- Describe the symptoms of bubonic plague
- What is *Yersinia pestis*?
- Explain Paul-Louis Simond's discovery of the rat/flea connection
- On the Internet, research the Plague's arrival in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century: how the Plague arrived in the country; who were the carriers of the disease, how many people became ill, how many died, how were people buried? Include any other interesting information.
- Is the Plague a bacterial infection or a virus?
- What drugs are used to treat the Plague to-day?



SOSE/HISE

Themes:

Divide class into eight groups with each group allocated one theme to investigate. Numbers 4 & 5 could each be divided between 2 groups if class size permits. Following the reading, and using the questions as a guide, each group is to prepare a coherent summary (not just a string of answers to the questions) of the theme and report back to the class for comment.

The reading is NOT to include the ***Imagine you are there*** children's narratives at the end of chapters 1-9. There are separate learning activities for these stories further in the notes. In some cases an Internet search is also necessary.

1. The lives of children: (chapter 1 to p. 8, Internet)

- At what age did peasant children usually begin their working life?
- When did children reach the age of reason and what did it mean?
- Who were the youths?
- Why were youths often a problem in the community?
- What percentage of peasant boys were literate.
- What about literacy in girls?
- Read what St Teresa of Avila wrote in her autobiography (p. 54) Are you shocked by what she and her brothers wanted to do? How old do you think she was at the time? (teacher: an Internet search reveals she was seven).
- Who were the Moors?
- Before the Plague, and based on Irish church records, roughly what percentage of children made it past their 14th birthday?
- What do you think some of the factors were that contributed to early death?
- Comparison: What do historians think was the average life span in the Middle Ages?
- Do an Internet search: What is the average lifespan in Australia to-day?



2. Marriage and sex taboos: (chapter 1 pp. 8-10)

- At what age could people marry?
- What was regarded as an incestuous marriage in the Middle Ages?
- Why did this create difficulties in finding a wife/husband?
- What was the punishment if a couple's marriage was found to be incestuous?
- What was the church's attitude to sex in marriage?
- What days of the week were married couples forbidden by the church to have sex?
- On what occasions were couples also forbidden from having sex on the other days as well?
- Read p. 59, para 2: Did these restrictions have a negative effect on rates of pregnancy, especially after the Plague? Why?

3. Attitudes to illness and healing in the Middle Ages:

(chapter 1 pp. 16-19 & chapter 8 pp. 165-171, Internet)

- What was the church's belief about the cause of disease?
- When people looked to nature to find the causes of the Plague, what explanations did they come up with?
- What was the role of astrology in European medicine?
- Where might you find astrological information about your health and other personal matters to-day?
- What was miasma and what role was it thought to play in the spread of sickness?
- See sketches pp 32 & 168. Why did people burn herbs such as sage or carry strong smelling posies of herbs up against their nose when in the company of someone who was sick?
- Why was a student at Eton College flogged for refusing to smoke? (p. 171)
- Do an Internet search: Why might treacle of opium and viper's flesh (p.171) have been used to treat the plague symptoms?



- Consider this: The late Reverend Jerry Falwell (died 2007), pastor, televangelist and founder of the Moral Majority in the US said that AIDS was the wrath of a just God against homosexuality. Is this viewpoint any different to the views of the church in the Middle Ages about the cause of disease?

4. The impact of the Plague on people's lives (chapter 2 & chapter 3 to p. 59)

Chapter 2:

- Why did burying the dead become a problem?
- How did the Plague impact on farming, farm animals and food. What was the result?
- What happened to families?
- What happened to local communities?
- How was the provision of medical assistance affected? Why?
- How was the provision of religious services such as the Last Rights affected? Why?
- How many people in Europe are thought to have died from the plague
- How many years did it take London to return to its pre-plague population?

Chapter 3:

- How did bandits take advantage of corpses?
- What desperate measures did some people adopt in an effort to stay healthy?
- Did these measures work?
- What desperate measures did people adopt to appease God?
- Did they work?
- Why did some peasants become better off following the Plague?
- Who were the traditional scapegoats that people blamed for the Plague?
- After the Plague, what did people do to try and rebuild their families and the community?



5. Upheaval in the church (Chapter 1 pp. 11 & 15, chapter 4 to p. 90)

- Why did the church have so much authority over people's lives during the Middle Ages?
- In terms of human resources, what were the problems the church faced after the Plague?
- What things happened during the Plague that caused people to become disillusioned with the Catholic church and its priests?
- Who broke away from the Catholic church and started the Protestant church?
- Why did King Henry VIII establish the Church of England in defiance of the Pope?
- Why was John Wycliffe's idea to have the bible translated from Latin into the vernacular (English, for example) such a radical proposal?
- Explain why the church strongly opposed such a move?
- Who invented the printing press and in what year?
- What was so significant about this invention?
- What happened to rogue priest William Tyndale as a consequence of his publishing the New Testament of the Bible in English?
- Consider this: First read the Bishop's reaction to the English bible (p. 86). Have you ever heard similar sentiments expressed in recent times about activities other than reading?

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6. The burdens of peasant life (chapter 5 to p. 111)

- Explain the tax that landlords sometimes demanded on the first night of a couple's marriage.
- What did peasants have to forfeit in payment of a death tax?
- What tax did 14-year-old King Henry II abolish following the peasant protests in England? Explain what the tax was for.
- Was the king otherwise sympathetic about the peasants' plight? Why?
- Make a list of all other taxes peasants were required to pay.
- What were the poor, particularly in urban areas, called in England?



- Who were the Jacquerie?
- Aside from their tax burdens, what are some other reasons why peasants rose up in revolt?

7. The Renaissance (chapter 6 to p. 132)

- What does renaissance mean?
- What was the key difference in the thinking of a renaissance man compared with a medieval scholar?
- What was the church's bible-based model of the cosmos?
- With the aid of a diagram explain Copernicus and Galileo's discovery.
- What instrument did Galileo invent that enabled him to confirm his discovery?
- Explain why the church labelled Galileo's claims a heresy?
- How did the church punish Galileo?
- What is the main reason for the author's claim that the Renaissance was not solely a period of enlightenment?
- Why does the author dispute the claim that the preceding period, the Middle Ages, were also the Dark Ages?

8. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans (chapter 7, pp. 141-153)

- What is regicide?
- Why did Oliver Cromwell and the parliamentarians execute King Charles?
- What impact did the death of the king have on the people?
- Cromwell was a Puritan. What did that mean?
- How did life in England change during the fourteen years of Cromwell's rule?
- Cromwell's death led to The Restoration. What did that mean?
- What do you think John Evelyn meant when he wrote in his diary that only dogs cried at Cromwell's funeral?
- What impact did The Restoration have on people's spirits?



Finding meaning in a nursery rhyme:

Ring-a-ring-a-rosy

A pocket full of posy

A-tishoo, a-tishoo

We all fall down

Many believe the children's nursery rhyme and game *Ring a Ring a Rosy* had its origins in England during the time of the Plague.

- In terms of the Plague, give your interpretation of the meaning line by line (there is no right or wrong answer).
- What does the very existence of such a nursery rhyme tell us about children's lives and attitudes at the time.

Imagine you are there — the children's narratives:

Where role plays are suggested (chapters 5 & 6) they should be no more than 10 minutes long and involve three students. One, as MC, is to set the context by introducing the characters, the location and the year. The characters should write a short script and rehearse it beforehand. Characters are to wear one item of clothing or an accessory to identify themselves or use a prop of some sort to aid the performance.

Chapter One: 16 year old Matteo's narrative, 1347 (pp. 21-26)

Internet search and discussion:

- Where is Caffa to-day?
- Who were the Tartars?
- What was the underlying cause of Matteo's obsession with rats.
- How might the Tartars have contributed to the spread of the Plague?



- Was Matteo being over confident in believing he would kill the Tartars with his sword if they breached the wall? Why?
- Sketch what you think a trebuchet might have looked like.

Chapter Two: 14-year-old Margaret's narrative, 1348 (pp. 42-50)

Discussion

- Is there anything that strikes you as unusual about the sub-heading?
- Why had it become difficult to find a priest?
- What had happened to the church graveyard?
- What impact did the Plague have on animals and birds?
- What do Margaret's prayers reveal about what she believed to be the cause of the Plague?

Internet research on herbal medicine:

- Why might valerian, mandrake and sage have been used as medicine?
- Why might Margaret and her mother have bathed the father in vinegar and rosewater?

Chapter Three: 13 year old Esther's narrative, 1349 (pp. 64-72)

Discussion

- Why were Esther and her family treated as scapegoats?
- Why do you think they had to wear a red badge?
- Why did her father convert to Christianity?
- Why didn't the family want to eat pork?
- Why was the father's trial a sham?
- How was he executed?
- Did Moses believe in an eye for an eye or in turning the other cheek? Why?
- How did the encounter with Lisbetta and her mother change little Ruthie?



Chapter Four: 14-year-old Marguerite's letter to her father, 1350 (pp. 91-99)

Letter writing:

Imagine you are Marguerite writing a letter to her father. Write a letter in language and tone you would use to-day when writing to your parent.

- Refer to the underlying reason the father has sent Marguerite on the pilgrimage
- Comment on her sister Celeste's behaviour
- Point out the two reasons she believes the family have been spared from the Plague.

Comparative exercise:

In small groups, read letters to each other.

- What do the letters reveal about the nature of the relationship between parents and children and between siblings to-day?
- What's changed?
- What's stayed the same?

Chapter Five: 12 year old Niccolo's account of a peasant rebellion, 1378 (pp. 112-120), Role play:

Scene: Florence. The wool combers have gathered to air their grievances

Characters: MC, brothers Niccolo and Pietro with the rest of the class acting as fellow protesters.

Performance: Niccolo and Pietro to give a rousing speech expressing their grievances as wool combers and urging fellow wool combers to form a guild (forerunner to unions) and to take other action.

Encourage class to get into the spirit of the performance by responding as fellow wool combers. Some rousing background music would help set the mood (for example, the song Do you hear the people sing? from the manning-the-barricades scene in Les Miserables.)



Chapter Six: The confession of Madalena, a 15-year-old slave, 1542 (pp.133-140)

Role play:

Scene: the court of the Spanish Inquisition

Characters: MC, a priest/judge and Madalena

Performance: The priest is to question Madalena why she murdered the Padrone.

Madalena to respond (look for clues in the narrative as to why you think she might have killed him and confess that reason to the judge)

Judge/Priest to pass sentence

Repeat the scene with one or two more students acting as Madalena and presenting their own interpretation of the reason for the murder.

Have class discuss these interpretations. Do they agree/disagree?

Chapter Seven: A 16-year-old puritan militiaman diary, 1658 (pp. 154-162)

Girls writing journal entries:

The girls in the class are to imagine they are Elizabeth Hartley. Write journal entries for Saturday Sept 5, 1658 and Sunday, Sept 5 1658 . Read to each other.

Boys to:

- Discuss why Bellows exhibited a complete lack of insight into Elizabeth's true feelings for him?
- Make a sketch of Highbury dressed in the Royalist fashion of the day, as described scathingly by Bellows.



Chapter Eight: 12 year old Harry's account of death, 1665 (pp. 179-187)

Discussion: dealing with grief and trauma

- How did Harry handle the situation he found himself in?
- Imagine how would you cope in the same situation.
- Consider how times have changed with the use of counsellors to provide therapy as soon as there is a traumatic event of some kind. Why have we become so dependent on others to help us deal with our grief?
- Read p. 59, para 2: What do these observations tell us about how people felt about the future? (they had not lost hope)

Chapter Nine: 14 year old Ting Bo's account of surviving the Plague 1894. (pp. 201-208)

Discussion: Chinese and British responses to the plague in Hong Kong.

- The Plague has gone full circle. How many years is it since the Plague first began in China?
- Why did Ting Bo address her baby brother as Little Stink when secretly she thought of him as Happy Bundle
- What other superstitions did she have?
- What do you think the British colonialists isolated people who were ill?
- Why do you think they put ice on the sick people's head and feet?
- What do you think was the reasoning behind putting patients in front of open windows
- Why were the Chinese protesting and rioting?
- What was the underlying cause of any illness as far as Ting Bo's mother was concerned?
- When Ting Bo packed up the family's ancestors, what do you think she was packing?



MEDIA STUDIES

Some things never change...

1. Read p. 8 Rampaging Youth .

Find a newspaper article with a similar theme.

2. Read pp 27-28

In the newspaper, find a picture or headline as an example of impending doom.

3 Read p 57

Find a newspaper article that reveals evidence of scapegoating

ENGLISH

Essay:

According to Thomas Hobbes, life for peasants was nasty brutish and short.

Do you agree? Discuss with reference to peasants in the Middle Ages.

Poetry:

Write a poem called Darts of Death

Debate:

The past is another country, they do things differently there (L.P. Hartley)

Debate with reference to the Middle Ages



CREATIVE ART

Fashion Parade: Clothing in the Middle Ages

- Select students to dress for a fashion parade. Also select a helper for each of the models to assist with choosing and sourcing/putting together an appropriate outfit. For inspiration outside of the book, go to the library or Google images.
- Select a compere to introduce the models and note any points of interest about their clothing.
- Arrange to hold the parade in a suitable school location and invite other students to watch the parade.
- Select students to be in charge of advertising the event and setting up the venue.

Models:

- A Plague doctor,
- King Henry II
- Pope Clement VI
- Marguerite, a French noble woman,
- Madalena, a Venetian slave;
- Matteo, a merchant's apprentice,
- Oliver Cromwell, puritan.
- George Highbury, Royalist ,
- Wool comber Niccolo.
- Harry or Margaret, English peasants

Doom Art Project

1. Individual activity:

For inspiration, refer to drawings on pp. 60, 80,151

- Create your own piece of Doom artwork — art medium to be student's choice
- Artist must be able to explain what the artwork represents



- To provide typed one-paragraph blurb about the meaning, to be displayed next to exhibited artwork

2 Group activity –set up an exhibition of artworks. Invite other classes to attend.

Dramatic Art

See role plays under Imagine you are there — The Children's Narratives

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Discuss:

- Why is adolescence and parental dependency such a draw out affair to-day?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of this situation?
- Suggest ways to strike a balance between dependency and independence while a minor and still living at home with your parents.



About the author

Born in the UK and now living on the outskirts of Melbourne in Victoria, Ananda Braxton-Smith's literary/creative accomplishments are as diverse as they are impressive: She has a degree in professional writing and literature; has won a National Short Story competition; worked as a writer for children's programmes on the ABC; had her poetry published in various anthologies; worked in theatre; was a founding member of Writers Aloft, a performing writers' group based in Sydney, and has recorded a CD with her husband singing "close harmony in the appalachian and bluegrass style". She currently writes for a newspaper.

The Death is the her first book.