



Merrow

by Ananda Braxton-Smith

ABOUT THE BOOK

Neen is on the verge of adulthood and has a few questions. It is the early middle ages on the Isle of Man. The 'Little Brothers' have brought Christianity to the island residents but the old ways and beliefs linger. Neen's mother may have been a merrow, or mermaid. In any case, she has disappeared, leaving Neen with her aunt Ushag, the one person who seems to have all the answers but remains tight lipped. Into their world comes Ulf, who only speaks the language of the Norsemen. When Neen goes in search of her mother, she learns something about herself and the very nature of belief.

Teaching the book

Merrow is a beautifully crafted and thoughtful novel that will appeal to strong readers at the secondary level. Ananda Braxton-Smith has researched this period thoroughly and there are all kinds of possibilities here for a cross curricular unit with SOSE. She has picked a period sometimes described as the Celtic twilight when the folk religions of Europe began to give way to Christianity. The contrast between the rich, imaginative spiritual world that has been so much a part of life on this remote island and the starkly modern Christianity would make for interesting discussions and writing. But this is more than a history lesson. Neen's search for her own identity through the questions she asks about the past will appeal to young readers in the midst of their own such journeys. A lesser writer might have buried the characters in the detailed research that clearly went into this book but Braxton-Smith has created believable and well rounded people. Ushag, Neen's aunt, is not simply the grumpy spinster anymore than the blind boy Scully is simply a loveable eccentric. The humanity that she has invested in these characters means that students will be able to write about *Merrow* in a meaningful manner.



BEFORE READING

Class discussion

- What are myths? What is religion?
- What does the cover tell us about the book?

Activity

In small groups choose one of the following to research. Present your findings to the class.

- What is a merrow? What is a selkie?
- What is a kraken?
- Has Ananda Braxton-Smith written any other books? What else can you find out about her?
- Where is the Isle of Man? What is Manx?
- Who were the Celts of the British Isles? What was their religion?
- Who were the Norsemen?

WHILE READING

Comprehension Questions and Topics

1. Describe Neen's relationship with Ushag.
2. How does the author introduce the setting? (Use quotes)
3. How are Neen and Ushag regarded by the other islanders? Why?
4. What does Ushag say about Scully?
5. What happened to Ma's children?
6. What happened to Neen's father?
7. What do the islanders say about Neen's mother?
8. Summarise the story that Scully tells Neen about her family.
9. What does Neen find in the sea cave while trying to catch the eel?
10. Why does Ma tell Neen to go fishing?



11. How do Neen and Ushag find Ulf?
12. Describe the Prior.
13. What do Neen and Ushag find out about Ulf?
14. What does Ushag tell Neen about her mother in Chapter 10?
15. What does Neen believe?
16. What do Nan and Ushag find in the cave?
17. Why is Ushag so pleased to find evidence of the merrows?
18. What does Ushag say about the Others and Neen's mother in Chapter 14?
19. What does Neen find in the cave in Chapter 16 and 17?
20. Why doesn't she tell Ushag?
21. What is Ma's vision of heaven? What does the Prior say?
22. How does the book end?

AFTER READING

Make a character chart like the following:

Character	Description	Quote
Neen Marrey		
Ushag		
Ma		
Scully		
Ulf		
The Prior		
Colm Breda		
Ven		



Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel about Ushag at the beginning of the book? How do you feel at the end?
2. Neen discovers the truth about her mother. What else does she learn?
3. What does the novel tell us about myths, superstitions, and religious beliefs?
4. What is Ulf's role in the story?

THE STORY

Discussion

All stories are built on problems or conflicts. What are the problems or conflicts in this story? How are they resolved?

Activity

In small groups decide on five important turning points in the story. Find a key quote to support each of your examples. Share them with the rest of the class.

Ideas

The following ideas or issues are raised in the story. Find a quote to go along with each:

Identity

Family

Change

Belief

Perception

Gender



Discussion Questions

Identity

1. How does Neen's view of herself change during the course of the story?
2. Why is it important for Neen to know the truth about her mother?
3. What does Ushag learn in the story?

Family

1. How does the history of the Marrey family affect Neen?
2. How does the relationship between Neen and Ushag change in the novel?
3. What do you think happened to Ma's first two children?

Change

1. How does the author show us that life on the island is changing?
2. Why does the Prior discourage the old stories?
3. How does Ushag view the world at the beginning of the story?
4. What does Ulf's arrival signify?
5. Why did the belief system of these people collapse so quickly when Christianity arrived? (Hint: What does Ushag say about the Little Brother's religion early in the novel?)

Perceptions

1. What might the scales on Neen's arms actually be? How are they viewed in the novel?
2. What is the basis of the rumours about Neen's family?
3. Ushag says that she saw Ven walk into the water. How does Neen view this story?
4. Why does Neen tell Ushag about the bones in the cave?



Gender

1. Describe the male characters in the story.
2. What does the word 'matriarchal' mean? Does it describe the society on the island?
3. To what extent is this a book about the personal journeys of women?
4. The word 'Ushag' means 'bird' in Old Irish. Why is this an appropriate name for Neen's aunt?

Activities

1. Superstitions

All cultures have superstitions. In small groups research the following superstitions. What culture are they associated with? How did they begin? Do they have any scientific basis?

Black cats

Broken mirrors

Ladders

Owls

Salt

Number 13

Horseshoes

Four leaf clover

Rabbit's foot

Wishbones

Bird in the house

Hats on beds

Knocking on wood

2. Survey on Superstitions

Now, create a survey to determine how superstitious your classmates are and which of the above superstitions are followed.



TEXT RESPONSES

Creative

1. Write the end of the story from Ulf's point of view.
2. Write a letter from Ushag to Neen ten years later.
3. Write an alternative ending. Think of other ways that the story might have been resolved.
4. Write about your own family. What would you like to know? Why?
5. Read the sections where Scully appears carefully and write a story about him.

Analytical

1. For Neen, learning about her mother is the key to understanding herself. Is she is on the right track?
2. *Merrow* is a story about change. Do you agree?
3. How is the idea of belief challenged in *Merrow*?
4. At the beginning of the novel, Neen believes in merrows and at the end of the story, Ushag believes in merrows. What has changed? Why?
5. Belief in myths and superstitions can prevent people from moving forward. With reference to *Merrow*, outline your opinion on this statement.



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Teacher Notes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ananda Braxton-Smith

Ananda is a journalist and children's writer who is passionate about communicating history to young people in new and innovative ways. *Merrow* is her first novel. She has also written a non-fiction book, *The Death: the horror of the plague*. As well as singing and reading and writing, she like fossils and funghi. And she thinks cemeteries are cool.