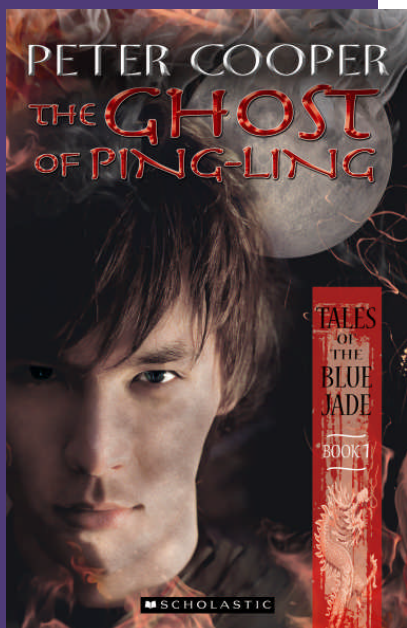


Teachers' Notes

The Ghost of Ping-Ling Tales of the Blue Jade Book 1

Peter Cooper

Teachers' notes by Madeline Holmes



OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Fantasy
Title	The Ghost of Ping-Ling
Author	Peter Cooper
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Introduction

When Dillen is given the task to find the mana-lord, Hallegat, and help him on his quest, he never dreamed of the dangers he would face or that the infamous puk-do would be one step behind his every move.

An exciting tale of a boy finding his place in the world, ***The Ghost of Ping-Ling*** is an excellent text to accompany studies of history and mythology and explore themes of identity, friendship and prejudice.

About the Author

Peter Cooper grew up in Woomera, South Australia. He wrote his first book, a science fiction adventure called 'Children of the Empire', when he was twelve years old and continued to write as a teenager, mainly fantasy stories. After a gap of ten years, during which time he finished a degree in Ancient History and another in Electrical Engineering, he took up writing again. His work has been published in anthologies and magazines such as *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Antipodean SF*, and Fablecroft's *After the Rain* anthology. *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* is his first published novel and the first in the Tales of the Blue Jade series. Peter blogs at <http://cacklingscribe.blogspot.com>.

Reading the text

Part One

Class discussion: first impressions

- 1) Read the initial chapters together as a class and talk about your impressions. *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* is a fantasy novel set in an imagined world incorporating a blend of Asian legend and history. How familiar is this genre? Have you ever read anything else in a similar setting? Consider the common

fantasy conventions – that is, what you expect when you read a fantasy novel. Make a class list that you can check off as you read.

- 2) Fantasy novels with historical-seeming settings have always been popular to fans of the genre. Talk about the current trends in young adult fantasy and why you think particular types of books are so appealing.

Research task: Ancient civilisations

The book is set in an imaginary world based on a blend of Asian legend and history, with China being the strongest contributor to the 'mix'. However, the world of *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* is pure invention and in no way historical, although there is a wealth of detail about this imagined setting. But for this exercise, consider that you are a writer and intend to set your story somewhere in a particular historical past. Choose an era and place to research. Remember that when researching for a book there are many aspects to consider: setting, culture, speech patterns, clothing, special customs, food, religious and spiritual beliefs, the class system, governing bodies, laws, etc. As you begin to compile your information, make sure you present it under headings as you will use this in a later project.

Prepare a brief piece to share with the class that argues the merits of your chosen place and time and the suitability of the setting for a fantasy story.

Literary component: Keeping a response blog

Start a blog to record your impressions of the novel. This will prove useful when it comes to later activities. After each chapter, summarise what happened. Write down your thoughts and predictions. Make comments about character behaviour, climactic moments in the plot and writing techniques. Deliberate on the mythical elements of the story.

During your blogging process, come up with a question or discussion for other students to interact with. Make sure you post at least two responses on other blogs in answer to other questions or ideas.

Part Two

Class discussion: prejudice and defining identities

- 1) The people of Ping-Ling are wary of Dillen because the priest, Kaji, fuelled their fears of foreigners. When describing Dillen, Kaji says to the Easterner: 'We call all his type *wabi* – Rassylonian, Norian, whatever. Wouldn't you say he looks like a ghost, with those strange blue eyes and pale skin?' (p.5)

Humans have a longstanding tradition of fearing the unfamiliar. Think about cultural differences that lead to xenophobia. Consider life in Australia and talk about examples of behaviour caused by fear of the unknown. Go back a hundred years and consider what has changed.

Then consider how our society is run and the policies we have in place. There are laws on land ownership and media ownership, among others, that prevent or limit foreign ownership and our government has the power to step in and prevent the sale of private entities to foreign buyers. Why do we have these 'safeguard' measures in place? What does this say about society and how people think?

Think back to Dillen and Kaji. Do you think Dillen would have been accepted if not for Kaji's influence? Dillen blames the villagers' mistrust on Kaji, believing if the priest had not come to Ping-Ling, Dillen would have been accepted. What do you think? Consider for a moment that Ping-Ling does not have the influx of foreigners that a modern city in Australia would. Do you think that people are conditioned to be wary of the unfamiliar?

- 2) Dillen has lived in Ping-Ling for most of his life but he is still considered an outsider. But neither does he associate with his homeland, a place he barely remembers. Talk about identity and what this means to people. Think about what happens when you visit somewhere and meet new people. Invariably they ask where you are from. The place we live is very important to how we

define who we are. Consider other ways in which people identify themselves, like the language they speak, their culture, their religion or value set, the work they do, etc. There are many more examples. Make a class list of all those you can think of.

How important is defining our identity? What happens to people like Dillen who have no tangible place to tie their identity to? Think of real-world examples of people who share similar experiences to Dillen. An example might be an artist who loses his eyesight.

Research component: mythology

Now that you have researched your setting in depth, consider how to populate it with fantasy elements. There is a wealth of literature on mythology and legends and fantastical creatures that you can access. Look on the Internet and in your school library. Think about what best fits your chosen time and place. Perhaps there are already mythical links you can build upon. Begin your research and compile your own fantasy database with the information you have uncovered.

Once you've gathered your information, write a 200 word article suitable for a newspaper or magazine about the origins of your chosen fantasy elements.

Literacy Component: arguing your case

- 1) Heito and General Magoda are following orders from their superiors. Consider this statement: You must obey orders at all costs. In 300 words argue for or against this assertion. An opposing argument might be that sometimes disobeying an order, or the rules, isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is important to note that the idea is to convince the reader that you are right, so use persuasive words and construct a clear and coherent argument. Make sure the reader knows exactly why you agree or disagree with the above statement. Plan your argument first to ensure your ideas flow logically.

- 2) Make sure you continue with your blog. These observations and summaries will be useful when it comes to group activities and evaluating *The Ghost of Ping-Ling*.

Part Three

Class discussion: Challenging stereotypes

- 1) Literature can challenge ideas and make people rethink widespread views. In *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* the gender stereotypes that are often reinforced in fiction are absent. Dillen's two travelling companions Koto and Tajni challenge traditional ideas, each character dispelling notions of a 'typical' boy or girl. Tajni had a domestic role as a talented cook and Koto worked in the stables and takes after her *Sendokai* (a type of elite warrior) father.

Have a conversation about the role of literature. Did you expect Tajni and Koto's roles to be reversed? Contemporary fantasy books tend to subvert female and male roles. Why do you think this is so? Think about other characters from fantasy novels that fit this trend. Consider other ways in which *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* challenges expectations.

How powerful or influential can books be? Can they change people's ideas? Has anyone read a piece of fiction that changed their way of thinking? Did you know that some books were banned because they were considered 'dangerous'. Even today, schools or communities elect to ban books they deem inappropriate for young people from libraries. Do you think this is fair?

Research task: cartography

Maps have been enormously important to the development of our world. The oldest surviving maps are Babylonian from the 9th century BCE. Over time the features of maps have changed to meet new criteria and if you look at different examples, you'll see these changes.

Most fantasy books have maps in the opening pages; *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* has two. These stories tend to have unfamiliar settings and maps are a way of orientating the reader: they provide a sense of place and show how the land is structured. Consider the world you've previously researched: you already have the setting and the fantasy elements established. Now it's time to create a landscape.

Research different approaches mapmakers take and find one that's appropriate for your story vision. Using the examples you've gathered, take note of the different features, landmarks and structure. Then, create your own map.

Literary component: preparing a synopsis

In previous exercises, you've been gathering building blocks for creating your own fantasy piece. You've chosen a setting, established your fantasy elements and mapped out a landscape. It's time to think about shaping a story. You can use several different approaches. You could make a mind map, jot down notes, talk your ideas through with someone else or just begin to write.

Think about two typical fantasy conventions: quests and conflict. Quests are a great way to give your story purpose, and creating conflict is important as it motivates the characters of your story. For example, Phoebe is an orphan. The orphanage is about to close as the funding has been cut. A quest to save the orphanage, run for government and change the rules, find a new home, change the age of independent adults to twelve, find the land of happily ever after ensues.

Of course, you don't have to write to the 'rules' – that's what makes the fantasy genre so appealing.

Your task is to write a synopsis of a novel that could be presented to a publisher as a proposal. It must be a detailed story outline that clearly defines the beginning, middle and end.

After reading the text

- 1) Have a general discussion about the novel. Here is a list of possible questions to discuss:
 - Did it meet your expectations?
 - Are you satisfied with the ending?
 - What were the novel's themes? That is, what is this novel essentially about and what ideas were explored in the action, the attitudes and the behaviour of characters?
 - Do you enjoy fantasy novels? If so, why? If not, why not?
 - Do you enjoy historical settings? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 2) Remember to update your blog one last time with your final musings on *The Ghost of Ping-Ling*.
- 3) You've done all the hard work and you have all the building blocks to begin writing. Revisit the opening of *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* to familiarise yourself with the techniques of beginning a story. Note the tone, the pace and immediacy of the setting. With this in mind, write the opening chapter to your story. If you like, you can post it on your blog for feedback from your peers.
- 4) Get together in groups of two or three and write a group response to one of the following questions or statements. Make sure to reference the book closely.
 - The title *The Ghost of Ping-Ling* references local beliefs and fears in *Ping-Ling*. Discuss.
 - How do quests change people?
 - How important is setting in a fantasy story?
 - How important are Koto and Tajni to Dillen's quest?

Extension Activities

- 1) Select a scene from the novel and present it as a storyboard or as a graphic novel with words or pictures.

- 2) Write a review of *The Ghost of Ping-Ling*. When composing your review think of it as an argument for or against the book. Avoid saying whether something is good or bad and instead look at what you think works and what you think didn't work. Remember back to the class discussions on the novel's themes. You can talk about these in your review. You might have written something on your blog that will be useful too. Maybe if you didn't enjoy the book as much as someone else in your class, you could suggest who would enjoy it. If you loved the book, remember you are trying to convince someone else to read it.
- 3) Design a new cover for the novel that you think would be relevant to the story and attractive to potential readers.
- 4) Choose a minor character and rewrite a scene from his or her perspective.
- 5) Think about what an equivalent modern-day quest might be. Look at print or online media to find an example of a quest and write a short response discussing quests and the types of people who undertake them.
- 6) Continue your story. You've written the opening already and you have a detailed synopsis to use as a guide. You might even prefer the short-story approach, which isn't as detailed as a book like *The Ghost of Ping-Ling*, but is still a contained story with a beginning, middle and end. If this is the case, try to write a 600-word story based on your synopsis and the opening you've already written. If you'd prefer to write something longer, remember that writers can take years to complete a book, so it's something you can work on all year.