

TEACHERS NOTES

AUTHOR: FRANCES WATTS ILLUSTRATOR: DAVID FRANCIS

TITLE: THE SONG OF THE WINNS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

THEMES

WRITING STYLE

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

ILLUSTRATOR MOTIVATION

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND

EDITORIAL COMMENT

MARKETING & PROMOTION

STUDY NOTES

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

'The Winns is a river, and more than that. It is the spine that knits our head to our feet. Its veins run through our country and its water through our veins ... Above the trees, below the ground, the Winns is with you, all around.' (pp 138-9)

The Song of the Winns is the first book in *The Gerander Trilogy*. It's a fantasy adventure in which the orphaned triplet mice Alex, Alice and Alistair, and another orphan named Tibby Rose discover that their lives have always been full of secrets, and that there are hidden currents which connect them to people they've never even heard of. They then find themselves embarking on perilous journeys they'd never have imagined. For the secrets about their family pasts are all to do with the country of Gerander. And these 'brave, resourceful and capable' mice must do everything they can to save both the country and themselves.

Frances Watts has created a rollicking tale which is also an astute commentary on the issues faced by countries which are invaded or forced to submit to foreign rule. It's about the machinations of governments which try to enforce their power over foreign subjects. It's about the yearning for home which those who have been exiled inevitably feel, even if they've never been allowed to see their home country.

It's an exciting, often funny, and heart-stopping adventure in which these charming young heroes, who are depicted engagingly by illustrator David Francis, overcome incredible obstacles and face untold danger, before finding their way safely home again.

SYNOPSIS

'Alistair has been kidnapped!' (p 12)

Triplets Alex, Alice and Alistair have lived with Uncle Ebenezer and Aunt Beezer in the town of Smiggins in the country of Shetlock since their parents disappeared whilst on what was said to have been a short business trip four years earlier. Rebus and Emmeline have not been heard of since, and their home in nearby Stubbins is now but a distant memory. Then, one night, Alistair too mysteriously vanishes. And when they discover that he's gone, Uncle Ebenezer responds 'more with dismay than surprise' (p 11) prompting the remaining children to suspect that there's more to their parents' disappearance than they've been told. Against the adults' wishes Alex and Alice set off for Souris to search for their brother.

Meanwhile, Tibby Rose lives far, far away with her grandpa Dr Nelson, and great-aunt Harriet, a retired school principal, in an old white house on a hill at the edge of Templeton, in the country of Souris. They have looked after Tibby for twelve years since her mother Lucia had returned in a sorry state after her father died, and promptly died herself. Tibby has never been allowed into the town of Templeton though, and has led a very secluded life, but longs to go on an adventure.

Tibby is shocked one morning when she steps out her front door, and Alistair lands on top of her! He has no idea how he has gotten there, and when the adults set off into town, he and Tibby follow them. To their amazement they discover that there's something odd about the way people greet them and soon realise that it's the fact that they are both ginger coloured which is causing such a stir. After a narrow escape from would-be attackers they decide to act on Alistair's desire to return to his family, and so the pair escape (leaving a note for Tibby's relatives) and embark on a journey home to Shetlock.

Thus, two pairs of adventurous mice are journeying in opposite directions, and find themselves in various perilous situations. They also discover the real history of the neighbouring country of Gerander, and that their lives are intimately bound up with its future. They become fugitives allied to FIG (Free and Independent Gerander) the resistance group fighting to restore sovereignty to the country of their ancestors.

They embark on an epic adventure during which they encounter spies, survive inhospitable terrain, receive assistance from unexpected sources, experience treachery and deceit, and discover the many strengths which they are each capable of. But by the end of the novel, they realise that more adventures lie ahead...

THEMES

The themes and topics in this book include: **Fantasy and Fantasy Worlds, Power, Conflicts and Invasion, Injustice, Refugees and Community Responsibility, Home, Heritage, Courage, Individuality, Friendship.** [See also Related Activities and Discussion Points in Study Notes Below]

WRITING STYLE

Interpretation and Reading Comprehension is also encouraged by this text which is enhanced by **drawings** which will stimulate both **Visual Literacy Skills** and **Creative Arts Activities.** [See also Related Activities and Discussion Points in Study Notes Below]

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Frances Watts says: "When I first started writing *The Song of the Winns*, I set out to write the kind of book that I loved as a child: something fast paced and full of adventure, with characters that I would get to know and love. A book which was funny but could also move me. I wanted it to be a BIG story, too, a story to make the reader think-about power and its exercise, about responsibility, about injustice (the book was fast becoming a trilogy!). As Uncle Ebenezer says, "All that is necessary for evil to prosper is for good mice to do nothing."

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Frances Watts was born in Lausanne, Switzerland, and moved to Sydney when she was three. After graduating from uni with a PhD she became an editor of children's books under her real name Ali Lavau. She spent nearly ten years working with some of Australia's most talented children's authors and illustrators before writing a book of her own *Kisses for Daddy* illustrated by David Legge. Their second collaboration *Parsley Rabbit's Book about Books* won the CBCA Eve Pownall Award and their third book *Captain Crabclaw's Crew* was published in 2009. She has also written a series of junior novels about Extraordinary Ernie and Marvellous Maud with illustrator Judy Watson.

For more information see her website <<http://www.franceswatts.com/>>

STUDY NOTES

The following activities and discussion points relate to the **themes, writing style** and to other curriculum areas such as **Interpretation and Reading Comprehension, Visual Literacy** and **Creative Arts.**

A. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Fantasy and Fantasy Worlds**

Activity: A **Fantasy must be based on creating a credible 'world'**. In this world there are three neighbouring countries: Souris (within which lies the town of Templeton, where Tibby Rose lives); it is situated north of Shetlock (within which lies Smiggins, the town where the triplets live); and somewhere in between is Gerander (controlled by Souris). At the head of chapter 4 (p 41) there's a small map of the Sourian terrain but it's left largely to the reader to imagine, which is always much more exciting! The Sourian Sea is the setting for several adventures, as is the coast in the vicinity with the sea-ports Shambles, the larger port of Shooster (which is the site of a naval base), and Sadiz. **Imagine the rest of this world, from the hints offered in this text and then draw your own map of all these neighbouring countries, and mark on it the journeys which the four children have undertaken, and the sites where they faced most danger.**

Activity: Fantasy worlds also need to be based on a clear historical timeline, and to place the characters in that timeline. Queen Cornolia ruled over the kingdom of Greater Gerander but on her deathbed she wanted to leave it equally to her triplets (pp 178-9) so she divided the country into three separate lands – Souris, Shetlock and Gerander. This arrangement worked for awhile, but her grandson King Erandus of Souris invaded Gerander and forced its King Martain into submission (p 27). Queen Cornolia’s great-great-granddaughter Queen Eugenia is now the powerful ruler of Souris and of the oppressed Gerander, and seems to have her sights set on Shetlock, as well. The main characters in this novel are all descended from the Gerander line. **Draw a timeline of this history, and of the family tree of the triplets and Tibby Rose and how the events and people in the novel fit into both.** [You may need to wait for the sequels to be able to complete this exercise.]

Fantasies also often relate strongly to real issues in our own real world. For example:

- **Power, Conflicts, and Invasion**

Discussion Point: Ever since Gerander was invaded by Souris, the underground resistance members of FIG (Free and Independent Gerander) have been attempting to free their country (p 28). This invasion was done by stealth since in response to the earthquake in Gerander, Souris sent in health forces and then refused to leave (p 180). Ebenezer tells the triplets that Raskus who was grandfather to the triplets was a Gerander who ‘begged your father and me to continue trying to free our homeland.’(p 28) Their mother was born there too, and fled as a child. The story of small countries being invaded by larger ones is one which occurs all over the world. (East Timor, for example, has fought to free itself from Indonesia.) Many of them are invaded by ‘friendly forces’ and then find that they are no longer in control. (The US led invasion of Iraq, for example, remains controversial). Discuss the morals attached to one country exercising its power over another by invading it.

Discussion Point: Your home is meant to be the place where you feel safe.’ (p 187) Discuss in relation to people who are driven from their homes by wars or national conflicts.

Discussion Point: Discuss the meaning of certain words in times of conflict. In this novel there are spies, rebels, resistance fighters, rulers, slaves, enemies, aliens, refugees, victims and invaders (although not all these words are used to describe them). The Geranders include people forced to flee their homeland (refugees, aliens), and those forced to remain in their homeland under enemy rule (slaves, victims, oppressed). What’s the difference between a rebel and a nationalist, for example? Would the Sourians use both words to describe Geranders?

- **Injustice**

Discussion Point: In matters of power, nations often attempt to turn their citizens against their ‘enemies’, which often leads to people of different colour or ethnicity being ostracised. Alistair and Tibby have ginger hair which is a distinctively Gerander characteristic. (Alex and Alice don’t have it due to it being a ‘recessive gene’ likely to be dominated by brown (p 300).) The issue of colour becomes important as Alistair and Tibby discover how many people hate ginger mice. Watson the newspaper seller hides Tibby and Alistair from the Queen’s Guards and delivers the note to Dr Nelson, but he’s taking a risk in doing so. ‘And I just don’t buy that rubbish about every ginger mouse being our enemy.’ (p 56) In Ch 10 they dye their fur with blackberries and then meet Timmy the Winn and his travelling troop of ‘multi-coloured’ performing mice. Tibby discovers that her grandpa and great-aunt had had a good reason to hide her, for her ginger colour was an instant sign that she was a Gerander. Alistair says to Tibby ‘I never understood how one mouse could make another a slave just because of the colour of his fur.’(p 85) This sort of prejudice and subterfuge has been obvious in many conflicts (eg in WWII when the Jews were hidden ways from the Germans). Is such prejudice confined to war time? Is there prejudice in Australian society, for example?

Discussion Point: Sometimes prejudice is covert rather than overt: ‘the other mice were always looking intently at a space just over his shoulder, or at the ground – anywhere but at him and Tibby.’(p 49) No one in Templeton seems to want to acknowledge that they have not one but two ‘strangers’ in their midst – two Geranders. Have you ever noticed people treating people of another colour in this way?

Discussion Point: Discussion Point: ‘There is really no such thing as “the truth” when it comes to history. There are always other versions.’ (p 178) Discuss.

Discussion Point: Uncle Silas says: ‘history is written by the victors.’(p 178) Discuss.

Discussion Point: Which characters in this novel have had to give up something for what they believe in?

- **Refugees and Community Responsibility**

Discussion Point: ‘Shetlockers don’t have much to be proud of when it comes to Gerander,’ his wife agreed. ‘We may not have invaded Gerander ourselves, but we didn’t do anything to stop Souris. And after the first wave of refugees fled Gerander for Shetlock, our government did close the border at the request of the Sourians.’ (p 31) How responsible should we be for our neighbours? This story could also be related to the issue of ‘boat people’ which has become a political football in Australia. Discuss.

Discussion Point: ‘All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good mice to do nothing.’ (p 31) Discuss.

- **Home**

Discussion Point: A home can be a physical place or a spiritual connection to a place you’ve lived in, or have some connection to via your ancestry. ‘He felt as if he was homesick for a place he’d never been. And maybe would never see.’(p 139) Alistair thinks he and Tibby are travelling back to Smiggins, but in his heart he knows there’s something else he’s looking for. Do you feel a connection to your home or to a home you have left? Discuss.

- **Heritage**

Discussion Point: The ties that bind us to each other are expressed in the words of ‘The Song of the Winns’ (p 138-9) which reminds us that just as our spine is our centre, our blood connects us to our families, and the river which flows through a country has the same connecting role. Explore this concept by discussing with students first, the interconnection in the **body** between spine, head, heart, and mind; in **families** between genetic features, shared history, and memory; in **countries’** topographies, rivers can be a lifeblood (eg The Mekong River which flows from the Tibetan Plateau, and runs through China’s Yunnan province, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam; the Murray River which flows through NSW, Victoria and South Australia; the Amazon River in South America; the Yangtze River in China; the Nile River in Africa and Egypt).

- **Courage**

Discussion Point: Alex and Alice believe themselves to be braver than Alistair (p 38) but when they meet him again they are amazed at how much he and Tibby have survived. ‘Brave? Alistair had to laugh. ‘I’ve been scared stiff and desperate to get home the whole time. And getting home was worth taking some risks for.’(p 263) Earlier in the novel, Tibby had to encourage him to take risks (p 155) but now Alistair’s cautiousness has been overcome by a desire to support the FIG cause. Is self-belief what fuels courage?

Discussion Point: Tibby had lived a very sheltered life: ‘She began to fear her life was just going to go on and on in this way. Every day the same, never changing. Until one day – a day that started out just like any other – it *did* change.’(p 17) She is happy to go on an adventure, but discovers that this is serious: ‘Alex, this isn’t an adventure – this is real, and dangerous.’ (p 38) What’s the difference between adventure and danger? What adventures have you had and how brave were you when you experienced them?

- **Individuality**

Discussion Point: ‘You three are like chalk and cheese and a ping-pong ball.’(p 6) Despite being triplets, the three mice are very different. **Draw up a character chart** and discuss the differences and similarities between each of them.

- **Friendship**

Activity: The power of friendship in overcoming hurdles is central to the adventures. Each mouse has individual strengths but they help each other. How? Give examples of the times when one needs another?

B. WRITING STYLE ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Alternate Narratives and Suspense**

Discussion Point: **The story is told in alternate chapters** about Alice and Alex’s journey, and Tibby and Alistair’s journey. This has the effect of creating **suspense** as the reader switches between these two stories. You might like to write stories in pairs in the classroom and see how you maintain that sort of suspense. You might also identify and read other stories which employ this technique.

- **Literary Reference**

Activity: Alistair is a total bookworm so every time they embark on another adventure he mentions a relevant book to Tibby Rose. When they make a raft and travel down the river he says it’s like Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (p 85) where the hero travels with Jim a black slave. Later he decides they must join a pirate ship just like the one in RL Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (p 238). When they are reunited with Alex and Alice he says they’ll be like Alexandra Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers*, Aramis, Porthos and Athos who are joined by D’Artagnan (p 262). **Make up a list of other literary adventures which might relate to this novel and series.** Share some of them in class too. eg *The Hobbit* by JR Tolkien; *Coral Island* by RM Ballantyne.

Activity: **Write an adventure story** modelled on the sorts of adventures experienced by the characters in such classic and contemporary adventures.

- **Mystery/Adventure Genre**

Activity: The **Mystery Genre** relies on **devices** such as **hints, clues, false identities, secrets, disguises, red herrings, and coincidences**. Choose **key quotes** such as the ones below which represent these devices in the novel:

MYSTERY DEVICES	
Hints	‘Has there been any news of <i>that place</i> lately? Unrest around the border perhaps?’ (p 23)
Clues	‘Alistair couldn’t explain why, but it seemed to him that his mother’s words as she had given him the scarf that last night had carried a special weight.’(p 5) He’s worn the scarf every day since. Alistair is later warned about the secret paths through Gerander (p 215) and must find the answer before the journey’s end. He discovers that the scarf may hold the key by the end of the novel (pp 286-7).
False Identities	Horace and Sophie pretend to be real friends, but when they are overheard plotting (p 151), Alex and Alice realise they are in danger.
Secrets	‘She had some valuable knowledge about Gerander that had been passed down through her family...a closely guarded secret’ (p 32).
Disguises	Alistair and Tinny dye their ginger fur purple to evade suspicion (p 122-5).
Red Herrings	When Alice and Alice set off, they tell their nosy neighbour Mrs Zetland that they are going to Stubbins to visit friends (p 59), as they don’t want Dr Nelson and Harriet to know where they’ve gone. But Mrs Zetland proves to be a spy (p 274) and passes the information on to Horace and Sophie, thus confusing their purpose.
Coincidences	The two pairs of mice meet aboard the <i>Marmaduke</i> (p 254) when the pirate ship the <i>Sickert</i> attacks it.

Discussion Point: What **other literary device** might a mystery include?

Discussion Point: Uncle Ebenezer says of Tibby when he meets her: ‘I don’t suppose they knew where she was. No one did, after all.’ (p 280) What do you think he means here? Is this a clue to something to be revealed in Book 2?

- **Journey or Quest**

Discussion Point: The **Journey or Quest** is a motif often used in narratives. While Alistair and Tibby raft down a river, and Alex and Alice climb a mountain, they travel towards each other and meet on board two ships in the Sourian Sea. Use the table to identify the stages of the journey as outlined below. (You may add rows to allow you to include all the obstacles, foes, etc.)

STAGES OF JOURNEY	
Catalyst for Journey	
Embark on Journey	
Meet Adviser(s)/Helper(s)	
Encounter Foe (s)	
Encounter Obstacle(s)	
Final Conflict	
Journey Home	
Resolution	

Activity: Journeys always have **heroes** as protagonists. The four mice are the **heroes** in this journey. What qualities make a hero? The triplets are said to be ‘Brave, resourceful and capable’. What other qualities do they demonstrate? Choose one of these four characters and choose a scene in the novel where they evince any one of these qualities.

Discussion Point: Other tropes of such fantasy journeys are characters who are **orphans**, not really sure of their parentage, such as Tibby. (The triplets think they are orphans until the end of this book as well.) Discuss the function of these characters being orphans in this narrative.

Discussion Point: Another trope is to include **siblings who are twins or triplets** who therefore fulfil various functions. These three are said to have three qualities (brave, resourceful and capable). These qualities seem to oscillate as they proceed in their adventures. Is any one of them representative of any one quality in particular?

- **Newspaper Headlines**

Activity: Tibby and Alistair enter a kiosk (p 52) and see a range of magazines and newspapers (eg *Mousewife Weekly* or *Grouch Gardner*). Have fun making up your own names for newspapers likely to be printed in Souris or Shetlock. Then design a front page headline and story relevant to the story in this novel.

- **Names**

Activity: Frances Watts has had lots of fun coming up with names for people and places in the series. eg Captain Grizzard and his ship the *Sickert*, with his crew including Old Goosegob, Scurvy Smottle, and Kipper; the Hoary Hornpipe is the name of the tavern in the harbour town of Sadiz; Alex and Alice meet Feast Thompson and Slippers Pink who help them escape with the assistance of the owl Oswald; the legendary freedom fighter Zanzibar has escaped from prison in the Cranken Alps. Have some fun naming places and people for the story you write above.

- **Piratical Language**

Activity: The author also has lots of fun coming up with language befitting the pirate Captain Grizzard. eg ROCKPOOL-REEKING SARDINE-STINKING CABIN BOYS' (p 244). Have your students make up their own piratical descriptions like this one. (You might also read Frances Watts picture book *Captain Crabclaw's Crew* illustrated by David Legge to get them 'in the mood' for this activity.) [See also **E. Creative Arts Activities and Discussion Points** below.]

- **Coded Messages**

Activity: The words of 'The Song of the Winns' remind Alistair of the words his mother sang (p 270) which prove to contain a message. Try to make up your own coded message like this one, and see if your classmates can decipher it.

- **Series Writing**

Activity: How do you think the series will develop? What clues have been left to hint at what might come next? Write a brief story outline or synopsis for the sequel to this book.

- **Author Study**

Activity: Study Frances Watts' other works and discuss and compare her writing style.

C. INTERPRETATION AND READING COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Anthropomorphism**

Activity: Anthropomorphism is the narrative practice of giving human characteristics to animal characters, and dates back to archetypal forms such as the fable (eg *The Hare and the Tortoise*). Why do you think the author Frances Watts chose to tell this story using mice as the characters? Why not people? Think of other titles or series where the characters are animals. eg *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. What challenges might an author face in giving human characteristics to animals in a narrative?

- **Comprehension Quiz**

1. What are the triplets doing when we first meet them?
2. Who is Mr Grudge?
3. What sort of creature is Oswald?
4. What's the name of the newspaper seller who hides Alex and Alice under his counter?
5. Who is the ruler of Souris?
6. What are the names of the Winn performing troop?
7. What is Captain Grizzard's favourite food?
8. When they all get home to Uncle Ebenezer's apartment they have 'a feast of eggs' for breakfast. What types do they have?
9. When they discover their parents are alive, where are they said to be imprisoned?
10. Who was Queen Eugenia's father?

Answer: 1. Alex and Alice are playing somersaults with uncle Ebenezer, and Alistair is reading. 2. He is their often cross neighbour who has a vegetable garden. 3. An owl. 4. Watson. 5. Queen Eugenia. 6. Tim the Winn, Griff, Lilith, Fergus, Pip (p 130). 7. Onions (raw). 8. Poached, scrambled, coddled, hard boiled, soft boiled and sunny side-up) (p 277). 9. Atticus Island, in Gerander. 10. King Erandus.

D. VISUAL LITERACY AND ILLUSTRATION ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

- **Drawing**

Activity: Draw a sketch to go at the head of one of the chapters in this book, based on the style of David Francis's illustrations.

- **Covers**

Activity: Covers need to convey a lot about a book's contents. Examine David Francis's cover image carefully, and then design a new cover for this book.

- **Draw a Mouse**

Activity: Learn how to draw a mouse. [How To Draw a Mouse in Four Steps' <<http://tlc.howstuffworks.com/family/how-to-draw-a-mouse.htm>>] Compare your mouse to the ones David Francis has drawn. What are the differences? How has he made his mice so lifelike?

- **Comic Strip**

Activity: Create a one page comic strip (or graphic novel) version of any incident in this novel. Use varied formats in the design of each strip, speech balloons, think bubbles, captions and sound effect, to create effects. [See Chinn, Mike *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel* London: New Burlington Books, 2006.]

- **Illustrator Study**

Discussion Point: How does David Francis's style enrich the text? Study David Francis's other works and discuss and compare his illustration style.

E. CREATIVE ARTS ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

Activity: Tibby has always loved the idea of adventure and has studied the explorations of her namesake the adventuress Charlotte Tibby. So, in every situation she is able to think of a solution eg Making the raft; surviving the waterfall; sailing them away from the pirate ship. Read Con and Hal Iggulden's *The Dangerous Book for Boys* and *The Dangerous Book for Girls*. **Then have fun in the classroom creating 'adventurous' survival activities.** eg Learn about tying knots; or creating a temporary shelter; or finding emergency food or water.

Activity: Have a **Piratical Party**. Dress up, play pirate games, and eat pirate food.

Activity: Create a **Classroom Display** with some of the stories and pictures you've created, inspired by *The Gerander Trilogy*.

Activity: **Design a poster advertising the objectives of FIG.** (Look at other images of such freedom movements to give students some idea of the slogans used, and the messages to be conveyed.)

Activity: Mice simply love eating cheese! What cheese based meals do they eat in the book? (eg Alex dreams of 'an ice-cold blue cheese and strawberry smoothie with plenty of pepper'(p 265).) Find as many references to cheese in the book as you can. Then find some **cheesy recipes** and have a cheese banquet in your classroom.

Activity: Heroes in conflicts are often depicted in a portrait. **Create a Heroic Portrait of the four friends.** The images might be a static portrait of them together in a formal pose, or a picture of them together engaged in an heroic deed eg On the raft after they escape from the pirate ship. (See images of returned soldiers or heroes in war to get an idea of how they would be depicted in such a painting.) [See also Lesson Plan 'Portrait of Your Hero' <http://www.artjunction.org/as_portraithero.php> which offers advice for students about painting a hero.]

CONCLUSION

The Song of the Winns is a book which will leave the reader wanting more.

It's clear that Alistair has discovered an important clue when he recognises the significance of the scarf his mother left him.

His siblings Alex and Alice, and friend Tibby Rose are totally committed to continuing on this journey.

And now that Uncle Ebenezer and Aunt Beezer have decided to re-join FIG and to go in search of the imprisoned Rebus and Emmeline, it looks as if they could all be about to face many more challenges and adventures.

Will the triplets find their parents?

Who was Tibby Rose's father?

Will they meet Zanzibar?

Will Timmy the Winn cross their paths again?

And will Gerander ever be freed?

All will be revealed in the next exciting instalment of *The Gerander Trilogy!*