

Teachers Notes (Secondary)
by Susan La Marca
Yoss and Slaughterboy
Two novels by Odo Hirsch
ISBN 9781865084671 (Yoss) and 9781741144864 (Slaughterboy)
Recommended for ages 15 yrs and over

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

Introduction

Odo Hirsch on writing *Yoss* and *Slaughterboy*

Structure/Language 3

Characters 4

 Conrad 4

 Yoss 5

Themes 6

 Innocence 6

 Class/Wealth/Power 7

 Luck/Fate 9

 Loneliness 9

Recurring motifs 10

 Food 10

 The Town 11

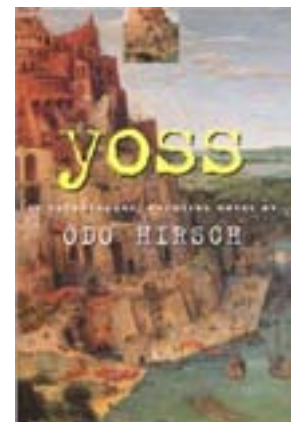
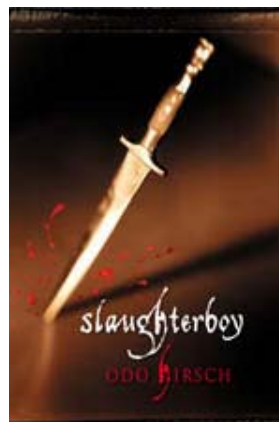
 Money 12

 ‘Hunger Boy’ 13

 Eyes/Seeing 14

Further/Related reading 14

About the writers 15



INTRODUCTION

Go back 500 years. You're alone. What does it take to survive? If you do survive, what kind of person have you become? In Slaughterboy beats a town's dark heart, and destruction comes in many forms.

From the blurb of *Slaughterboy*

'Towns swallow men up, Yoss. They're hungry. People disappear into them and are never heard of again.' From a village high in the mountains, a young man sets out to encounter the world. On the plain below...many are drawn to this innocent newcomer. But all who seek to possess him will pay a price.

From the blurb of *Yoss*

Yoss (2001) and *Slaughterboy* (2005) may surprise some readers who associate their author, Odo Hirsch, with the Hazel Green, Bartlett and Frankel Mouse books for younger readers. But although it is true that these two novels for young adults are darker and more complex, the concern with moral issues and the way they are played out in our everyday behaviour is a constant theme in all of Odo Hirsch's writing. And both books are written with Odo's sure story-telling touch. The medieval world of *Yoss* and *Conrad, the slaughterboy*, can be sensed in all its social layers, twisting streets, fears and opportunities.

Older secondary students will be intrigued to discover these different books by a writer from their childhood. And the themes the novels elaborate are just those that older teenagers are keen to discuss: nature vs. nurture, the individual and society, money and power, fate, loneliness and social isolation (especially of the poor and homeless) and innocence. How far can we be pushed by the struggle to survive? Are we accountable even for our most desperate actions?

After Odo Hirsch's own introduction to these two books, Susan La Marca's teachers notes present some of the opportunities *Yoss* and *Slaughterboy* offer for involving students in exciting discussion and writing.

ON WRITING *YOSS* AND *SLAUGHTERBOY*

by Odo Hirsch

Slaughterboy, like my earlier book *Yoss*, is set in the period around the end of the Middle Ages – about five hundred years ago. Towns were walled, isolated places, dependent for survival on the produce of the farms in the surrounding region. Most people never moved more than a few kilometres from the place they were born. If they did, it was like heading on an adventure into an unknown world.

There were laws in this period, of course, and punishments were often spectacular and cruel. But one of the reasons punishments were spectacular was to make a horrifying example of the offender, because control over people by the authorities was actually very limited. Communications were poor. There were no police forces as we know them in the modern world, no standards, no inspectors. A veneer of order covered up a chaotic reality.

This was especially so in the towns, where the starving lived side by side with the wealthy. Those who were cunning had ample opportunity to enrich themselves. Thieves, conmen and adventurers preyed on the unwary. Others who grew rich 'legally' – merchants, bankers, officials – did so without scruples. Business and trade were in their infancy. Those who could grab a piece of the pie – however they managed to get it – would prosper.

I love writing about this period because it has a natural intensity, with questions of survival so close to the surface. The stakes are high. I can create powerful, colourful characters set in a dark, often threatening world. The shadowy

alleys, the smoky inns, the mansions of the merchants and the hovels of the poor – and the people who inhabit them – come alive. More importantly, for me, this period creates a fascinating background for looking at individuals and the way they behave. The less we are controlled by authorities, the more free we are to choose our own way. Why do some individuals prosper and others fail? Why do some remain good and others become corrupted?

In *Yoss*, I followed the story of a young man from a village who arrives in a town on a personal adventure. His reaction to the villainy of the town is determined by his experience growing up in a more harmonious, more tranquil place. In *Slaughterboy*, on the other hand, a beggar child is thrown on the streets without a cent to his name. He is like a blank sheet upon which the town will write his fate. In one way or another, his destiny is influenced by virtually all of the forms of exploitation, legal and illegal, that surround him. Will his experiences corrupt him, or will he go the opposite way and grow into an honest man?

I suppose the book is really asking a deeper question. The Slaughterboy's experiences drive him in a particular direction. Would this still be true for us, under equivalent circumstances, in our own time?

TEACHERS NOTES

STRUCTURE/ LANGUAGE

In *Slaughterboy* Conrad's life is beset with heartache and despair from its very beginnings. Events often go wrong around him, at first through no fault of his own, but, ultimately, he is also responsible for despair, downfall and the death of others. In *Yoss* we are shown a character who is innocent of the darker world of the town, the world of Conrad. Yoss is the epitome of innocence. His existence appears to have a positive effect on many of those around him, leading them to a deeper, more considered, sense of themselves. Each boy is shaped by their early life, a product of the environment that has nurtured or discarded them.

- Are Yoss and Conrad a mirror image of each other? Or diametrically opposed characters, each representing contrasting characteristics?
- Is Yoss inherently good whilst Conrad represents all that is bad? In what ways is this not the case, that is, how are they similar?

The tool of repetition is used throughout the texts in many ways. Both main characters learn a series of lessons as they encounter many of the same characters. Descriptive pieces are repeated in each text.

- Eg. The description of the soldiers at the gate (*Slaughterboy*, page 111 and *Yoss*, page 39) and the description of Farber (*Slaughterboy*, page 246 and *Yoss*, page 66)

Both Yoss and Conrad run from Farber's Inn at a time of crisis in their lives and both find themselves mentored by dishonest men. – Conrad by Krenk and Yoss by Conrad. The jail cell that houses Conrad and Gaspar in *Yoss* also appears in *Slaughterboy* (page 49), as does Threadneedle Street later on this page. There are many other examples.

- Is the device of repetition utilised by the author to further accentuate the similarities, or differences, to be found in *Yoss* and *Conrad*?

Discuss the following quotation in relation to the texts:

A loving person lives in a loving world. A hostile person lives in a hostile world. Everyone you meet is a mirror.

Ken Keyes Jr *Handbook of Higher Consciousness*.

The structure of *Slaughterboy* is laid out around the five section headings that chart Conrad's progress:

- starveling
- scavenger
- slaughterboy

- servant
- thief

Can similar words be used to chart the progress of Yoss? Eg. village boy, thief, slave etc.

Perhaps other descriptive words better symbolise Yoss's journey? Consider the physical nature of his surroundings or the people he encounters.

Can one word encapsulate the complexity of either boy? Is Conrad only a 'slaughterboy'?

Does Conrad perceive himself to be each of these descriptors at that point in his life?

Do different members of his world interpret each label in different ways? Conrad is proud to be a slaughterboy yet the wider community finds the profession abhorrent.

To what extent do the people and places around them or the labels that we place on each other define anyone?

The strength in the language of both texts is in the descriptive passages. Discuss the imagery at work in the following pieces:

- 'Gaspar was endowed with a set of fingers that could rustle and shake...' (Yoss, page 94)
- 'The town was like a great heaving stomach that churns...' (*Slaughterboy*, page 52)
- 'The dagger bounced, bounced out of the shade and into the sunlight...' (Yoss, page 280)
- '..the town was like a vast, screeching, flapping colony of birds...' (*Slaughterboy*, page 247)

CHARACTERS

CONRAD

(see also section titled 'Hunger Boy' under recurring motifs)

Conrad is a very complex and interesting character. Unlike any other character in either book, the two texts together are concerned with his development more than any other. In fact, Conrad's life is documented from a young age to death and all other characters are really only dealt with in relation to him. Even Yoss's story is dominated, to some extent, by the power and malice of Conrad.

Conrad embodies an unusual strength.

He is able to 'fight' his own hunger. (*Slaughterboy*, page 43)

When the slaughterman and his wife cannot face their desperation and grief it is Conrad who keeps them alive with his scavenging (*Slaughterboy*, page 118-119) despite his youth and the effects of famine all around him.

When Conrad must flee the jail and find Yoss, he is able to suppress his deep need for food. (Yoss, page 270) Is his strength born of hardship? Has he no emotion? Is he beyond feeling?

Conrad thinks his own strengths are: 'his brain, his bulk and the surprising strength in his wrists.' (Yoss, page 271)

He understands that knowing these strengths, and understanding his shortcomings, is also strength.

Does Conrad have other strengths?

What are his weaknesses? (Krenk discusses his view of these in *Slaughterboy*, page 267)

Conrad considers one of the weaknesses of those he deals with to be their attachment to possessions.

(*Slaughterboy*, page 310)

One of Conrad's strengths that helps him out of a number of difficult situations is his ability to talk his way out of a situation. This is a skill, among many, that he learned from Krenk. (*Slaughterboy*, page 250) This 'silver tongue' assists him many times.

- What is the attraction of the slaughter yard for Conrad? (*Slaughterboy*, pages 55, 70 and page 94)
- Why is Conrad devoted to the slaughterer and his wife? (*Slaughterboy*, page 102 –104, page 156, 218)
- What does Conrad learn from the Green Doctor and Krenk? (*Slaughterboy*, pages 150 –159) What does he ultimately decide is of importance in his life?

On page 101 (*Slaughterboy*) Conrad would like to give his whole apple to the Slaughterman's wife and on page 102 (*Slaughterboy*) Conrad leaves the remainder of his apple for the street children. Why, at this point, can Conrad be so unusually generous, in both thought and action?

Conrad mentions, on more than one occasion, that nothing is more important than a full belly (*Slaughterboy*, pages 159 & 180). Is this the only thing of importance to him?

Why does Conrad find the Slaughterer's wife, Hanni, before leaving the town? (*Slaughterboy*, pages 315-7). What does he need from her? This scene is an important final turning point for Conrad.

- What does this scene show about him?

He now vows to care for 'nothing' (317).

- Is he able to do this as his life unfolds?

On page 218 (*Slaughterboy*) Conrad would give up his new life of luxury and idleness with the merchant's wife if he could return to the house of the slaughterer.

- Why?
- Is this impossibility his ultimate undoing?

On page 252 the lesson that Conrad has learnt from Krenk are clearly outlined – 'no attachments'.

- Is Yoss an attachment of a kind that defies this?
- What is the basis of Conrad's obsession with Yoss? Is Yoss really a threat, could Conrad have just walked away? What is the cause of Conrad's downfall? (*Slaughterboy*, pages 273- 4)

Conrad is described as a Wolf, or as wolf-like, on more than one occasion. (*Slaughterboy*, page 99 and 118) and the canine imagery continues with constant reference to his pug face (beginning on page 6, *Slaughterboy*). Is Yoss then a lamb? What is Gaspar?

As Conrad stalks Yoss, obsessed, his previous control dissolves (Yoss, page 273).

- Why?

Krenk had taught him that 'you must hold your nerve' (*Slaughterboy*, page 243) and, until this point, he always has.

- What is different?
- Why is Yoss so important?

YOSS

Yoss is described by Conrad as 'innocent' (Yoss, page 96) and by the Merchant as 'like wax' to be moulded (Yoss, page 121).

- Are these perceptions accurate?
- Is Yoss gullible, or trusting, in not realising Conrad was robbing the merchant?

Yoss appears to have a positive effect on those around him.

- Explore the feelings he ignites in the innkeeper Farber 'a long buried memory of decency and hope' (Yoss, page 66) and 'just for a moment he wondered if it had to be' (Yoss, page 67)

The Merchant's wife (Yoss, 239 – 40) cannot seem to bear the thought that Yoss might leave.

- Why has he had this effect on her?
- What does he mean, or symbolise, for her?

How does Yoss, and his situation, change the relationship between Garner Zeb and the merchant, the relationship between the merchant and his wife, or even that between Conrad and Gaspar?

On page 72 – 73 (Yoss) Yoss pays the boatmen his only coin to take him across the river though he is going nowhere. What does this episode symbolise? What does it tell us of his state of mind? This event calls to mind the River Styx myth. In this tale the dead must pay for the journey across the River Styx with a single coin that is placed under their tongue when they are buried. If not properly buried with a coin the dead are cursed to wander the banks of the river. There are noticeable similarities.

- What do Master Hans and his paintings mean to Yoss?
- What does Yoss mean to Master Hans?

Compare Yoss on pages 70 and 71 (Yoss) – where he begins to comprehend the wants of the town's people and their willingness to take with little feeling – with the passages on pages 265 to 268.

- Has Yoss grown, or changed?
- Is it a different Yoss leaving the Merchant's house for the village?

At the outset of the story the Speaker says that when boys returned to the village 'they brought back something the village needed' (Yoss, page 2). What does Yoss bring back? (Yoss, page 298)

THEMES

INNOCENCE

You cannot do wrong without suffering wrong.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

- Does this quotation hold true in relation to each of the characters?

Throughout the novel those who meet Yoss continually portray him as innocent.

On page 6 (Yoss) when Yoss has decided to go over the hills and explore what lies beyond he mutters 'Whatever's there...we'll be all right'.

- Is this true or is Yoss merely naive, innocent to the possibilities?

Yoss, after running from the Inn, thinks himself safe as he has 'nothing ...worth stealing' (Yoss, page 71). But it is made clear in this passage that Yoss still has many lessons to learn:

'Money isn't the only thing men covet. Just because one has no possessions, it doesn't mean he has nothing that others will want to steal.'

(Yoss, page 71)

- To what might this refer?

When Conrad explains to Gaspar the importance of Yoss he says:

'Innocence is the rarest thing. Rarer than gold. Gold you can buy, you can steal.
Not innocence. The more you use it, the less it remains.
(Yoss, page 96)

This is a key passage in the text and is crucial to the development of both Yoss and Conrad. In the prequel, *Slaughterboy*, Krenk says identical words to Conrad about a young boy, William, who he is using in his thieving (*Slaughterboy*, page 243). This is a lesson Conrad learns well as it becomes important in his dealings with Yoss. Krenk goes on to say – 'When you see it, hold on to it. Don't let it go. One day you'll have a use for it.'

- Does this help explain Conrad's later obsession with Yoss?

In *Yoss* Conrad goes on to say: 'the first one to teach him can teach him anything he wants' (Yoss, page 96). The merchant describes Yoss similarly as 'wax', 'whoever holds him can mould him' (Yoss, page 121)

- Is this true for our own times? Is it possible to have only one influence on our lives?
- Do we blindly accept what we are taught without question, as Conrad and the merchant expect Yoss to do?
- Does Yoss? Does Garner Zeb?
- Did Conrad, during his time with the slaughterer or the green doctor, blindly accept their instruction?

Is Yoss pure innocence? Are we born good, or bad, or taught to be either way? Can anyone be all good or all bad? Even Conrad feels 'somewhat sickened by himself' (Yoss, page 231) after killing Gaspar.

During Conrad's childhood there are moments when even he appears innocent, good and generous. Read the passage that describes his day at the fair with the slaughterer's family, pages 102-3 (*Slaughterboy*). Conrad is deliriously happy, and feels he is living a life of luxury, utterly devoted to the family. Later, he is described as having loved the slaughterer and his wife. 'He had loved them with the frank, innocent love of a child who has never been loved before' (*Slaughterboy*, page 156)

On page 157 it is said that 'inside him something had been extinguished'. Is this innocence, or something else? By page 275 (*Slaughterboy*), after his time with The Green Doctor and Krenk, Conrad cared about nothing but 'survival itself'

Krenk says:

'Innocence goes. It always must. It's in each of us to start with and then it slips away. Someone may as well get some benefit from its passing....But not you, Conrad. You were never innocent, were you?'

(*Slaughterboy*, page 262)

On page 289 Conrad agrees that he was 'born bad'.

- Are these views true?
- Was there not a time when Conrad was innocent? Were we all innocent once despite what we might become?
- Are there parallels here with the bible stories concerned with the end of innocence in the Garden of Eden?

Krenk teaches Conrad a number of lessons and then Conrad plays a part in Krenk's downfall. Conrad learns well. But is Krenk a more troubled character than even Conrad? Reread the passage on page 284 (*Slaughterboy*).

- Is it only fate that changes Conrad's life? Without the famine could Conrad have gone on to be a productive and honest member of society and retain something of his innocence, or would his beginning, beset by hunger and need, always turn him away from this path?
- Does anything else play a part in his downfall?
- Can innocence be recaptured?

CLASS / WEALTH / POWER

(see also section on Money under heading 'Recurring Motifs')

Money equals power in the town. There are many instances of this in both books. As well, in a medieval town, the divide between those who have a great deal and those who have the least is extreme. There are many instances of power, class and wealth impacting upon the lives of both Conrad and Yoss.

In *Yoss*, Yoss finds in the town a world very unlike his own. Conrad and Gaspar appeared to inhabit a 'world without limits' (Yoss, page 29), and 'People took from each other and gave to no one' (Yoss, page 29).

- This is the world of the street, yet how does it compare to the world of commerce and trade inhabited by Merchant Siebert? (Yoss, page 255)
- Is the trading house any more civilised?

On page 77 (Yoss) the beggar Legs gives Yoss a blanket for shelter and on page 82, a crust of bread when he has little himself. These acts of kindness are rare in both books.

- Is this due to the harshness of the world of the town? If so, why is it that those who have the least appear the most ready to give?

The nature of commerce within the town is displayed in the trade that occurs in Threadneedle Street:

It was a paradox of Threadneedle Street that those least in need of the street's services were its greatest customers, while those most in need weren't welcome at all.

(Yoss, page 90)

- Is this an apt description of all kinds of commerce? Does it hold true in any way in today's world?
- Consider, in relation to this passage on page 90 (Yoss) the difference between need and want.

What is the place of lies, or misinformation, in any commercial transaction? (Yoss, page 94)

The balance between trade, making money, and giving money is delicate.

- What is the role of the beggars in this interaction? Refer to page 84 (Yoss) for an interpretation of their place.

On page 33 in *Slaughterboy* Conrad begins his alliance with the street urchins living in Ferici's tomb.

- What type of society ignores such need in young children?
- Do the children have any other options?

From page 123 (*Slaughterboy*) onwards, the incident that ends the famine begins with the storming of one of the merchant's houses. This event and earlier episodes make it clear that the merchants have withheld food to increase prices, despite the knowledge that this was causing widespread famine and many deaths within the town.

- What does this period in the life of Conrad show us about the nature of man?

Consider the actions and responses of the various characters including the merchants, the slaughterer, Conrad and the Green Doctor.

- Are the merchants more immoral than Conrad or Krenk?

When Conrad (*Slaughterboy*, pages 117-8) scavenges food during the famine he is breaking the law.

- Is what he does wrong?

How can yellow both represent charity and gold? (Yoss, page 112)

The merchant explains to his wife how Yoss has been bought for 10 pieces of gold. (Yoss, page 121). To the merchant, at the outset of this transaction, Yoss is simply an item of goods.

- How does Garner Zeb feel about this situation? (page 142) The event comes between him and his master like no other.
- What does Eleanor, the merchant's wife, feel about what her husband has done? (page 198)

Despite the success of Merchant Siebert's efforts to increase his trading empire he does not appear content? Why? His guilt over Yoss is consuming him – 'He was a slave to the slave!' (Yoss, page 260) What does this say about his previous view of Yoss as goods for trade?

Class plays a very important role in both texts, particularly in *Slaughterboy*. What does Conrad make of the Riesel household? (*Slaughterboy*, page 190 onwards) 'they did nothing even when they were well, while others scurried ceaselessly around them' (190)

- Does our own society have similar class structures and differences?
- What sets the Riesel or Siebert families apart from others in the streets?
- Have they earned it? Do they deserve it?
- What do you think the texts are saying in answer to these questions?

Conrad sees the wealth of the Riesel household but also recognises in its members a complacent stupidity and a chance to manipulate them (page 224).

Within the texts beggars appear to be a class of their own with their own code (Yoss, page 80 onwards). The beggars may be destitute but two groups of tradespeople also appear to be a variation on the idea of underclass – gravediggers and the slaughterers.

Read the townspeople's reactions to the gravedigger in the street (*Slaughterboy*, page 3) and the community's view of the slaughterers (*Slaughterboy*, page 87).

- Are these views justified?
- Why are they held?

LUCK / FATE

Like Conrad, we can consider the 'vagaries of fortune' (Yoss, page 9 –10).

- Did luck play a part in forming the person that Conrad becomes?
- Is Yoss the boy he is because he was 'lucky' to be born in the village?
- How would Conrad's life have been if the gravedigger had been able to take the boy (*Slaughterboy*, page 15) after the death of his guardian, or if the famine had not taken away the Slaughterers family?

- Are the beggars on the streets not merchants in the counting house due to luck, or fate?
- Is it just that Yoss is luckier than Conrad?
- To what extent do we make our own lives what they are?

At the end of Yoss when some lie dead, Yoss questions himself

'Perhaps he was to blame...'

'What had he done to make it happen? And yet he must have done something, because it happened over him.'

(Yoss, page 283)

Discuss these quotations in relation to the texts:

How a person masters his fate is more important than what his fate is.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767 – 1835)

Men are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of their own minds.

F. D. Roosevelt (Pan America Day Address, 1939)

A man's character is his fate.

Heraclitus (540BC – 480 BC)

LONELINESS

At a point in each text the main protagonist is crushingly, despairingly alone.

Conrad suffers an 'unbearable pain' (*Slaughterboy*, page 139) on being turned away by the Slaughterer's wife and becoming fully aware that the man he idolised is dead. He feels: 'So alone that he could barely bring himself to put one foot in front of the other' (page 139).

Yoss, upon running from Faber's Inn, is lost (Yoss, page 69). He is also alone 'not knowing where he was going, because there was nothing left that he was going towards' (page 69).

Both boys are lost and both are questioning their lives - on the cusp of discovering truths about themselves and the world around them. Conrad questions the behaviour of his idol, the slaughterman, who he feels gave up his will to live as the famine worsened (*Slaughterman*, pages 139-140) and Yoss questions himself and his gullibility in becoming involved with Conrad and Gaspar and their thievery (Yoss, page 160).

- What do they both ultimately learn from this period of reflection?
- Does the state of being alone lead to an important milestone for either character?

Are other characters in either book 'alone'? Consider Eleanor the merchant's wife.

Conrad and Yoss are alone at low times in their lives when they have nothing.

- Can we be alone when surrounded by plenty?

RECURRING MOTIFS

FOOD

The absence, or presence, of food is a constant motif throughout both *Slaughterboy* and *Yoss*. All of the characters are integrally linked to the ebb and flow of the town, and the collection of food, in varying degrees.

To Conrad 'food was the only thing worth coveting' as 'Once eaten, food could never be taken away' (Yoss, page 15). See also (*Slaughterboy*, page 293).

- How does this statement relate to Conrad's earlier life?
- What was taken from him during his early life? Does food fill an empty place?

Consider the scene in *Slaughterboy* (page 26 –28) where the young Conrad relishes the meagre food he has found and the possibilities of more. Later, at the beginning of his time with the street boys the seven-year-old Conrad felt that 'he had been hungry for so long, it seemed as if he had been hungry forever,' (*Slaughterboy*, page 38) and then he discovers his ability to feed himself (*Slaughterboy*, pages 42 – 44).

- Do these details from his early life help explain the later Conrad?
- Would anyone act as he does in these circumstances?

The passage from page 42 to 44 in *Slaughterboy* is pivotal. Conrad sees that:

'He would never need to depend on some other person who might leave him hungry and sick. He would fight his own hunger.... To Conrad it was like a miracle'

(*Slaughterboy*, page 43)

'He would tolerate almost anything as long as he knew that at the end of it his hunger would be quelled.'

(*Slaughterboy*, page 44)

- What does the life of Conrad tell us about the human will to survive?

The analogy with a battle that needs to be fought is used to describe Conrad's feelings.

- Is life within the town a constant battle for many of the residents? What do they battle?

On page 73 and at the bottom of pages 249-250 (*Slaughterboy*) Conrad feels 'a wonderful sense of strength and satisfaction' and a feeling of 'security' when full.

- Can only food give these feelings to Conrad or does he feel this way due to something else?

Later in his story, when he has a full belly, a roof over his head and the promise of honest work with the slaughterer (*Slaughterboy*, page 104), Conrad sees a future for himself as 'a good man' (page 104).

- Is it only when our basic needs are satisfied that we can indulge noble thoughts and positive feelings about the future?

On page 53 (*Yoss*) the eating habits of Conrad and Gaspar are compared.

- What do these descriptions show us of their personalities, their interests and needs?

When other matters are uppermost Conrad is able to ignore his hunger *Yoss* (pages 229 and 270). Compare this to the description of him in *Slaughterboy* where he continues to eat even when full (*Slaughterboy*, page 99).

- What do these contradictions show the reader about Conrad?

THE TOWN

'a palace of delights' or a 'cave of wants'

(*Slaughterboy*, page 17).

The town in *Slaughterboy* and *Yoss* is a powerful entity with a life and a purpose that is its own. The town has an overarching impact on the characters, their lives and actions. Even towards the end of *Yoss*, as he makes his escape, *Yoss* feels the power of the town – 'he feared that at any moment the town might reach out, as with a giant hand, and haul him back' (*Yoss*, page 294)

- What is the town to Conrad?
- To *Yoss*?
- To the Merchant Siebert or the soldiers at the gate?

'For some it was a palace of delights, for others a cave of want. For some it was a place to grow fat, and for others a place to starve. It was one town, but many different places, depending on who you were and where fate had placed you.'

(*Slaughterboy*, page 17)

This imagery is repeated later in the text and we find the town was 'different things to different people. And at different times, it was different things to the same person.' (*Slaughterboy*, page 41)

For Conrad 'the town had been a locked cupboard to which he lacked the key' (*Slaughterboy*, page 41) but now, with the knowledge of the boys it was 'a vast table spread with foods' and the boys were 'ants' (*Slaughterboy*, page 41). Here the town is a place of plenty, if only you have the knowledge that enables you to take what is on offer.

Further along in the text the town is described in terms of its ability to consume:

The town was like a great heaving stomach that churns and mixes and digests all manner of food with the sharp acid of its juices. It produced nothing, yet consumed all. Its appetite was insatiable.'

(*Slaughterboy*, page 52)

On page 105 the town is described as a 'huge nest' drawing its nourishment from the fertile land that surrounded it.

'Down the river and along the roads came the things that would nourish the nest, all drawn by its insatiable need for food'

Slaughterboy, page 105

After the famine, the town returns to its 'normal, greedy, guzzling self' (*Slaughterboy*, page 147), terms that are also used on occasion to describe Conrad as he eats. Is Conrad as complex or as powerful as the town?

To the Green Doctor the town is a 'vast hive of many cells' and 'from its cells of sickness they took their nourishment' (*Slaughterboy*, page 155)

To Krenk the town was 'like a vast, screeching, flapping colony of birds, and he was like a fox that lives off it' (*Slaughterboy*, page 245). Krenk says to Conrad:

'Give me a town. Any town, anywhere. Put people together and the chances are there...Put people in a town and see the money spill out!'

Slaughterboy, page 278

In *Yoss* the imagery is similarly evocative. The speaker tells Yoss: 'Towns swallow men up Yoss. They're hungry' (*Yoss*, page 3)

By comparison, though, Yoss's village is described as an isolated, comforting place of evident plenty, a Shangri-la set high in the mountains (*Yoss*, page 3)

Words such as 'enfolding', 'blanket', 'warmth' and 'abundant' are used to describe the village's location. What images do these words evoke?

Compare this description of the village to any of the various views of the town detailed earlier in this section.

When Yoss first experiences the town (*Yoss*, page 41), what is it that affects him the most?

How do his feelings and responses sit with the descriptions of the town in *Slaughterboy*? (pages 17, 41, 52, 105, 155, 278)

Which of Yoss's senses are utilised in the description?

Explore by writing a short piece that describes a physical event or place through a consideration of each sense.

- Towards the end of *Yoss* it says:

'When the town swallowed a man up, it changed him, and turned him into something he should never become.'

Yoss, page 289

Consider this statement in light of Conrad and Yoss and also the minor characters in each novel: Merchant Siebert, Garner Zeb, the Merchant's wife Eleanor, Hans the painter (*Yoss*, page 184), Gaspar, the jailer, the magistrate and the beggars and boys of the street.

- How is each affected by the town?

MONEY

Money, the lack of it, or the quest for it, is crucial to both texts and though it is essential it is not the only object of value in either story.

In *Yoss* there is a wonderful description of the gambler who continues to bet despite constantly losing. (*Yoss*, page 69) Yoss realises that if he could the gambler would have 'wagered the air from his lungs.'

- Is this about money or something else?

The faces at the gambler's table are described as 'stoked with greed and passion' (*Yoss*, page 69)

Does Yoss value money? He uses his only coin to cross a river he does not need to cross (*Yoss*, page 74).

The Green Doctor's ideas influence Conrad as Conrad is particularly good at learning from those around him. Yet Conrad questions his words (*Slaughterboy*, page 151) about money.

- Does the Merchant value money? Or is it the power and the prestige that money can give him that drive him to succeed?
- What of Conrad and Gaspar, Farber or the beggars on the street? What does money mean to them?

Krenk's greed plays a part in his downfall (*Slaughterboy*, page 299).

Discuss the following quotations in relation to the texts:

Money was never a big motivation for me, except as a way to keep score. The real excitement is playing the game.

Donald Trump

Money never made a man happy yet, nor will it. There is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more a man has, the more he wants.

Benjamin Franklin

'HUNGER BOY'

'a devil in a child's skin' (*Slaughterboy*, page 221)

The first mention of the term 'Hunger Boy' is on page 7 of *Slaughterboy* when the Bailiff asks Conrad 'Are you a Hunger Boy? Did you do this to her?' Though Conrad does not reply or even react, this is a term that haunts him for all of his young life. In fact, one of the titles considered for this novel was *The Hunger Boy*.

- The bailiff's wife is frightened Conrad is a Hunger Boy (*Slaughterboy*, page 18)
- The slaughterer's wife calls him a 'Hunger Boy' she is deeply afraid of him (*Slaughterboy*, pages 86 and 99).

A myth is hinted at:

'Someone brings the Hunger Boy into the house, thinking they're doing a kindness, and no one realises who he is until death has followed him in.'

Slaughterboy, page 99

and the mythical Hunger Boy is further explained by the cook as 'a devil', 'an evil one' (page 200) and:

'he's never satisfied, and the more he has, the more he wants. He eats and eats until there's nothing left in the house and everyone is fighting with everyone else and the babies starve to death.'

The wife's fears are further fed by the way in which Conrad eats:

'He ate jealously, urgently, impatiently, not stopping for an instant from the moment he began until the moment he had finished, and all the time keeping his eyes on anything that he hadn't yet eaten, like a wolf, as if he couldn't relax or rest for even a second until all was safely inside him.'

Slaughterboy, page 99

The Slaughterer's wife, in the midst of her grief, calls Conrad 'Hunger Boy' and throws him out (page 138).

- Were her fears justified?

The maid calls Conrad 'Hunger Boy' and 'with those two words had opened a scar in Conrad that had never properly healed' (*Slaughterboy*, page 217)

- Is Conrad a 'Hunger Boy'?
- Is his manner a response to his own early life?
- Who tried to feed the slaughterman and his family during the famine?

The 'Hunger Boy' is a superstition or myth. In Conrad's world much goes unexplained and superstition rules the minds of many. It is the basis for the operation of the medical profession during this period.

- Is there power in superstitions in our society?

When Conrad approaches Hanni, the slaughterer's wife, before he leaves the town he wants her to know that he was never a 'Hunger Boy'. (*Slaughterboy*, page 316-7)

- Why is telling her this important to him?
- What does this need show about Conrad?

EYES / SEEING

All action is of the mind and the mirror of the mind is the face, its index the eyes.
Cicero 106BC – 43 BC

When Yoss takes part in the robbery the merchant concentrates on Yoss- 'The intensity of his stare, the threat in the grey-blue eyes transfixed the boy' (Yoss, page 36).

Later it is these eyes 'cold like the waters of the mountain lake' (Yoss, page 55) that haunt Yoss's dreams.

- Write a short description of the eyes of one of the central characters at a particular time in their life. Attempt to evoke their personality through your description.

Master Hans, the painter, tells the merchant's wife that 'the eyes are the windows on the soul' (Yoss, page 114). She understands this and does not want her eyes to betray the sadness she knows is in her soul. (Yoss, pages 115 and 180)

Zeb and the merchant know that the merchant 'could always foretell a man's answer from the look in his eyes' (Yoss, page 129)

At the outset of *Slaughterboy* the gravedigger had been unable to close the eyes of Conrad's dead guardian. She stared 'glassily at the clouds' (*Slaughterboy*, page 14).

- What does this signify?
- Why are the eyes windows to our deeper feelings?
- What else gives away the beliefs or attitudes of the characters?

Consider the descriptions of Conrad and Gaspar (Yoss, page 8 and 91), Farber (Yoss, page 66), the merchant's wife (Yoss, page 112) and Garner Zeb (Yoss, page 128 very top of page).

- Are their thoughts, values or beliefs to be found in these descriptions?

FURTHER / RELATED READING

Crispin: the cross of lead by Avi

Set in medieval England, it explores of the plight a young boy who does not know the significance of his parentage to those around him. He sets out to discover his identity and forge a life for himself. Winner of the Newbery Medal.

Pagan series by Catherine Jinks

Four books that explore the life of Pagan, a squire in the Crusades during the 12th century.

Arthur series by Kevin Crossley-Holland

Moves between the story of Arthur in 12th century Feudal England and the mythological world of King Arthur. Beautiful historical recreation.

Lady Dance by Jackie French

Set during the Plague in Europe, it explores the power of belief amidst suffering.

A company of fools by Deborah Ellis

Takes place in the Abbey of St Luc during the time of the Plague. A story of death and survival told through the eyes of Henri, a choirboy.

Karen Cushman has written a number of historical medieval re-creations all of which bring the hard, interesting lives of everyday people to life. Amongst them are the titles:
Catherine, called Birdy, The midwife's apprentice and *Matilda Bone*.

Mimus by Lilli Thal

Brings a medieval fantasy world to life, as a hostage prince is forced into the role of the Jester's apprentice.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

ODO HIRSCH

Odo Hirsch was born in Australia where he studied medicine and worked as a doctor. He is now a business strategy consultant based in London. His books for children are favourites with young and old and have been translated into several languages.

SUSAN LA MARCA

Susan La Marca was a secondary school teacher-librarian. She completed her PhD at the University of Melbourne on *An enabling adult: the teacher-librarian and the creation of a reading environment*. Susan investigated the attitudinal and contextual factors that influence the role of the teacher-librarian as an enabling adult in creating a reading environment in secondary school libraries.

Susan is works for the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) and edits their research journal *Synergy*. She is an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* produced at the University of Melbourne and the editor of the books: *Back to books: creating a focus on fiction (2 volumes)* (1999), *Books up front: investing in the value of reading* (2001) and *Effective learning spaces: inspiration for school library design* (2003). She is also involved in freelance teaching and research on similar topics at tertiary institutions in Victoria.