

## **The Medici Curse by Matt Chamings**

Three years after the publication of his first novel “Time Switch”, Matt Chamings’ second book, “The Medici Curse”, provides us with a very cleverly crafted work that seamlessly blends history, art and modern-day realism with mystery, romance and a touch of the supernatural.

Chapters alternating between 15th Century Florence and the 20th Century village of San Arnaldo (in fiction, just over an hour west of Florence) are filled with tantalizing clues that link the two scenarios. By the time all is revealed, the reader is challenged to sort fact from fiction and even the final offering of information in the ‘Historical notes’ leaves one wondering if there might be lots more fact tucked away in the story and its setting. In particular, the inclusion of Leonardo da Vinci as an important (albeit secondary) character in the story lends considerable interest and a large degree of credence to historical aspects of the plot. Books such as this flesh out the dry bones of history and offer a very entertaining insight into the past, all the while maintaining such a gripping storyline that elements of the supernatural can be merged to form a satisfying climax.

Although Renaissance Italy is probably outside of most Australian junior secondary curriculums, there is much in this novel to recommend it for wide reading at least. The basis for a fascinating web quest is immediately suggested in the real people and places that inhabit the book:

- Lorenzo de Medici; The Pazzi Conspiracy; Girolamo Savonarola.
- Leonardo da Vinci; Andrea del Verocchio.
- Florence; the Uffizi Art Gallery; the Piazza del Duomo.

The art of the Renaissance, the portraits and frescoes, the art schools and styles, similarly entice further study; as might the social and religious aspects of modern-day village traditions or life in Renaissance times.

However, while there is much in this novel worth pursuing, it could simply be offered as a really good and very satisfying read - probably of most appeal to girls, starting with the avid Year 5/6 readers through to those of Years 7-9, given that the modern-day heroine, Maria, is a 13 year-old. This book invites re-reading and offers a discerning reader much to think about. Its cast of interesting characters, its intriguing twists and parallels provide all the enjoyment that the blurb and the publisher’s reviews suggest.

### **Jenny Medd, NSW**

The past joins the present in this terrific historical read. Set in Renaissance Florence a young painter, Arnaldo, is commissioned to paint Lorenzo de Medici’s beautiful daughter, Allessandra, as a wedding gift for her arranged marriage to a decrepit old man. Arnaldo falls in love with her, but can it ever be? Running parallel with this story, Maria uncovers the original painting hundreds of years later. Her father becomes obsessed with the painting but it seems this is all part of a curse along with many disasters which befall its owners. Can Maria unlock the curse and save her family?

Although we flip between the two time periods, the story flows well and the characters are strongly developed. The mystery deepens with each turn of the page and although you think you know what is going to happen next there are still enough twists and turns to keep your interest. Not only do we get a glimpse of an interesting historical period but we also learn about such things as restoring paintings. I was put in mind of “The girl with the pearl earring” by Tracey Chevalier. In both novels, the author has given us a skillfully drawn picture of a portrait with words; it is so evocative we can see it in our mind’s eye.

Ideas for the classroom:

Research Lorenzo de Medici

Read pp 168-172. Describe some of Leonardo da Vinci's experiments. Who was Savonarola?

Read pp 84-86. How do people go about paint restoration?

**Lynne Moller, Eumemmerring College, VIC**

The Medici Curse by Matt Chamings is an interesting text linking the past to the present. We are taken to Renaissance Florence at the time when Leonardo da Vinci was inventing the first parachute and the Medici family was one of the most powerful and wealthiest families in Italy. We are introduced to Alessandra, Lorenzo de Medici's beautiful daughter and the man she will fall in love with, Arnaldo the artist.

Running parallel to this 'love story' and set in present-day Italy, is the story about an English girl, Maria, who discovers an ordinary painting with extraordinary powers. How is this painting connected to Alessandra and Arnaldo? Why does it hold such dangers to all who gaze upon it? Who is the White Lady?

This text provides the opportunity for teachers to explore the Renaissance period and the legacy it has left us. It also illustrates how authors can intertwine two stories into one; however, I did grow tired of the contrived narrative structure where the author merely alternated time periods from one chapter to the next.

A Stage 4 text that would appeal to both girls and boys, as whilst it has romance, it also has sword duels, mysterious accidents, and boyish pranks. This text could be used as part of a fantasy or mystery unit exploring how context shapes meaning.

**Jane Dean, Head Teacher English, Willoughby Girls High School, NSW**