

Sea Hearts

By Margo Lanagan

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Summary

Beautifully written, *Sea Hearts* is an intriguing and beguiling story based on folktales of selkies (seals that can shed their skin to take on human form), written by award winning author Margo Lanagan.

Sea-witch Misskaella rules the remote island of Rollrock because she can conjure beauty from beasts. The men of the island are enthralled by the power that Misskaella's creatures have over them and the men are in her debt for the rest of their lives.

Suitable for students aged 15+ (particularly years 10-11)

Australian Curriculum (Draft version 1.1.0) year 10. VELS level 6 and year 11 VCE (Victoria), Stage 5 and 6 (N.S.W.), Standard 5 - stages 13 to 15 and year 11 (Tasmania), Year 10 - 11 (Queensland), Late adolescence (Western Australia), and SACSA Standard 5 (year 10) and SACE Stage 1 (year 11) (South Australia), Band 5 (year 10) and NTCE (year 11) (Northern Territory) and Early and Late adolescence (years 10-11) (A.C.T.)

Sea Hearts is a piece of historical/folklore/speculative fiction that is sure to spark classroom debate about the nature of love, cruelty, humanity and society.

Use in the curriculum

Using *Sea Hearts* as a class text (either in English or Philosophy) could lead to in-depth discussions relating to the role and rights of women, the rights of creatures, truth and honesty, freedom, the power of beauty, infatuation versus love, cruelty and power. It is suggested that *Sea Hearts* be studied:

As an English text:

- as an example of historical/folklore/speculative fiction
- as an example of the use of language to construct a specific time and place
- as an example of the use of language to construct characters and feelings
- as an example of detailed folklore
- as a study of the craft of writing
- as a resource to discuss the use of different narrators to construct truth
- to research the origins of selkie folklore

As a Philosophy resource

- to debate the rights of creatures, women and children
- to discuss the nature and need for truth and honesty
- to discuss infatuation and love
- to debate the importance and power of beauty
- to discuss the power of love
- to discuss the nature and origins of cruelty

Teaching tools to support the study of *Sea Hearts* include *Seven Tears into the Sea* by Terry Farley, *The Water Shaper* by Laura Williams McCaffrey, *Seaward* by Susan Cooper, *The Secret of Roan Inish* (DVD) starring John Lynch, *Ondine* (DVD) starring Colin Farrell and *Mythological Creatures: A Guide to Mermaids, Selkies, and Other Water Creatures and Spirits* by Juliette Hall.

Sample discussion questions overleaf.

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In the classroom...

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Discussion Questions

1. 'Sometimes all she does is sit and cry...' says Raditch about old Misskaella (p. 8). Should the reader feel sorry for her? Why or why not?
2. When Misskaella was a child she explained 'All of Potshead was divided up like this; there were those who had had with the seal-women, and those who had not...' (p. 58). Why does history repeat itself when Misskaella is an adult?
3. What did Misskaella's encounter with the male selkie cost her? Did she gain anything?
4. 'What chance did these men have against my faceless, heartless periwinkle girl? Poor defenceless fools.' (p. 97). Did the men have any chance to resist the selkies or could they have avoided them?
5. '...Each man buying his misery from me, believing it would be his wedded bliss.' (p. 112). If Misskaella knows that bringing the selkies to Rollrock will end in disaster, why does she do it?
6. "'Why should it matter what Cordlin people think, when you have the most beautiful wives in the world?'" (p. 230). Is beauty that important? Is it worth all of the grief it brings in *Sea Hearts*?
7. Did Daniel Mallett and the boys do the right thing by giving the mams their coats back? How did their actions affect society on Rollrock? Should the men have hidden the coats in the first place?
8. Why do you think that in a book about selkies, the term selkie is never used?
9. The author has chosen to use a number of narrators, one of which is used twice. Why do you think she has chosen to employ this manner of storytelling?
10. There is a lot of cruelty in *Sea Hearts*. Who do you think is the cruelest? Is there any excuse for cruelty? Give examples. Is calculated cruelty worse than thoughtless cruelty? Explain your thoughts.
11. With the money made from the men of Rollrock, Misskaella buys a mansion on the hill and stuffs it with worldly goods, yet she lives in a bothy by the beach. Can you explain her actions?

Curriculum recommendation and discussion questions prepared by Judith Way. Judith is a teacher librarian with a Graduate Diploma in Children's Literature and a Master of Arts. She was the recipient of the IASL/Softlink International Excellence Award for 2010, the School Library Association of Victoria's Innovators Grant in 2009, and the SLAV John Ward Award for outstanding contribution to teacher librarianship in 2007. She was awarded the Children's Book Council of Australia's Eleanor E. Robertson prize in 2003. She has presented at conferences locally, nationally and internationally. Judith blogs at [<http://jway.global2.vic.edu.au>]