

Teacher's Notes



The Chameleon Thief

Written by Mat Larkin

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Primary aged readers (ages 8+, grades 3+)

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
 - ACELT1603
 - ACELT1605
 - ACELT1794

THEMES

- Friendship
- Non-nuclear families
- Working together

SYNOPSIS

For Attica Stone, good things have always come in fours. But when one of her four Aunts goes away, with no explanation, Attica feels abandoned and confused. And to make matters worse, one of her best friends in the world, Jinni Miscamble, declares that they are now worst enemies! Even though Attica still has two of the best, best friends and three of the greatest Aunts, she won't be happy until she's figured out:

- Why Aunt Polly left
- Why Jinni is being so mean to Attica, Snez and Neil
- What's so important about the LIZARD test and the ladybug flash drive.

AND she has to do all of it while planning entertainment for the whole school LIZARD party and trying not to upset anyone else. It's going to take a heist, a bit of magic, and a very special chameleon. Can Attica overcome her own fears to work out what's going on with her best friend – and stop her from making a terrible mistake?

The Chameleon Thief is a chaotic, oddball story about how far you'll go to help the people you love.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mat Larkin writes children's adventure stories with heart. After starting out on the Zac Power junior fiction series, his debut middle-grade novel, *The Orchard Underground*, was voted Best Children's Book of 2018 by Readings Books customers. His follow-up, *The Chameleon Thief*, is a standalone prequel to *The Orchard Underground*, featuring everyone's favourite character, Attica Stone. Mat lives and works on unceded Wurundjeri land in Naarm-Melbourne.

THEMES

In *The Chameleon Thief*, Mat Larkin explores the complex dynamics of changing friendships and non-nuclear families. Attica is being raised by four (sometimes three) Aunts, which is unconventional in itself, and each Aunt has their own way of supporting and teaching Attica (a conflict which is eventually revealed to be at the heart of Polly's disappearance).

Meanwhile, Attica's best friend Jinni is struggling to come to terms with her parents' separation, and the bullying she endures from her two older brothers – although it takes her friends a while to figure this out.

The extremity of these two situations opens up conversations to include all kinds of families, and the different ways families support (and sometimes hurt) each other. The following questions might help to shape discussions around families in relation to the story.

- What makes a family?
- Why do people sometimes find it hard to communicate with people in their family?
- How do different families resolve conflict?
- What's the most important part of being in a family?

In addition to this, Attica has to navigate her own changing friendships – not only in terms of the larger conflict between Jinni and the rest of their friendship group, but also Snez's romantic feelings for Jinni, and Neil's disappointment when Attica doesn't choose him as the entertainment for the school party. Attica is forced to ask herself what it means to be a good friend, and how to make it up to her friends when she fails, which is something that all readers will have experienced.

The Chameleon Thief provides space to have discussions around these complex aspects of friendship and encourages empathy, understanding and self-reflection when friendships aren't going the way we would like them to.

WRITING STYLE

Mat Larkin uses **flashbacks** to show the way that Attica, Jinni, Snez, and Neil all became friends. Why do you think he does this?

When we write a flashback we write a scene from the past as if it were happening in the present. Flashbacks allow a writer to contrast elements of the past and present including character, emotions, place, and parts of the plot, in order to add to the story or reveal a piece of information.



In the flashbacks in *The Chameleon Thief*, what information tells us that these scenes are from the past? What do we discover about the characters or the story?

Do you like the technique of using flashbacks to tell parts of the story? Why/why not? What other examples of flashbacks can you think of? Think of something from your own past – how would you write it as a flashback?

COMPREHENSION

- What are the four elements required for the cup-and-ball trick? Which element is Neil missing in the opening scene? Which part of the cup-and-ball trick is vital to Attica's plan at the end of the book?
- Why is Neil called 'the Non-Believable Neil'?
- How does Attica feel when she thinks about Aunt Polly? Does it help that everyone keeps telling her that it's not her fault?
- What pictures are on Attica's wall of 'Things That Make No Sense'? What do they all mean?
- Who wrote 'this sucks, but nothing is forever'? What is the secret behind this message?
- When do you notice what's really wrong with Jinni? Why does it take her friends so long to notice? Are they being good friends?
- What qualities do Neil, Snez, Jinni and Attica each bring to the friendship? What kind of person are you in your friendship group?
- Quick's animals are all a bit ... unusual. What is Keith the tarantula afraid of? What does Quick say about his animals that makes Attica think of her friendship with Jinni?
- What does Attica do that upsets Neil and Snez?
- Why did Jinni want to win the LIZARD so much? Do you think her plan would have worked?
- Why does Attica's Aunt Polly tell her to 'be the monster'?
- What does the note that Attica finds beneath the shotput say? When do you think Principal Katz left it there?
- Is Attica's punishment really a punishment? Does she deserve something worse?

WRITING EXERCISE

Jinni spends a lot of the beginning of the book isolated from her friends and navigating her hurt alone. How do you think this makes her feel? Why doesn't she tell her friends what she's going through? Imagine that you are Jinni and write a diary entry describing one of the earlier scenes in the story from her perspective. How do you think she feels about her family and friends during this time? What might she wish she'd said or done differently?



CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

1. There are a lot of interesting characters to love in this book. Who is your favourite? Choose one and come up with a list of reasons (using facts and examples from the book) to support your argument. Present your argument in class. Who is the overall class favourite? What makes a great character?
2. Attica drafts a lot of messages to Aunt Polly that she never sends. Imagine that she does send one and write the conversation that takes place.
3. Attica and her friends use the steps in Neil's cup-and-ball trick to plan their heist. Draw two columns in your notebook. Label one column 'obstacles' and the other 'opportunities' and make a list of all of the things the friends could use to help them in the heist, and all of the things standing in their way. Can you come up with a different plan to help them save Jinni?
4. Write about a time when a friend has let you down or hurt your feelings. How did you handle it? Discuss what Attica learns about friendship in the story. With that in mind, would you do anything differently if you could go back in time?
5. Why is Attica's toy kraken so important to her? What do the other characters in the story have that is as important to them? Describe an object you own that makes you feel brave. Would you give it up for a friend?

RELATED READING

- *The Orchard Underground* by Mat Larkin (Hardie Grant Children's Publishing, 2018)

