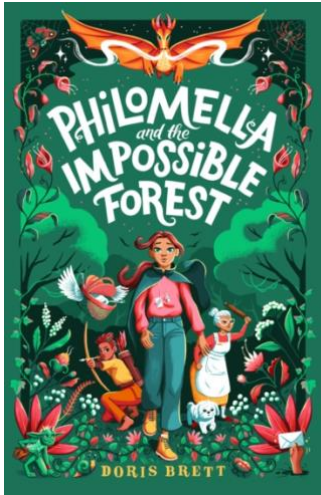


## Teacher's Notes



### *Philomella and the Impossible Forest*

Written by Doris Brett

Teacher's Notes by Bec Kavanagh

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### LEARNING OUTCOMES

#### RECOMMENDED FOR

9+ aged readers (grades 5+)

#### KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
  - ACELT1612
  - ACELT1613
  - ACELT1614

### THEMES

- Bravery
- Compassion
- Heroism
- Fitting in
- Imagination
- Self-acceptance
- Danger

### SYNOPSIS

The day Philomella finds the library is a perfectly ordinary bad day, just like all of the days have been since her father packed his bags and left. She finds the library on the street that isn't supposed to be there, an unfamiliar doorway right there in the middle of the familiar.

Philomella doesn't think of herself as a hero, and she certainly doesn't expect to get the call to adventure when she steps through the library doors. But once inside, she finds herself in a world full of strange things – a cloak that seems to be alive, a librarian with edible clothing, and Mary, the were-dragon who leads Philomella to the Impossible Forest. In the forest, Philomella meets the Great Tree, and reluctantly joins an unlikely crew of heroes to find out what's destroying the pathways and threatening the future of the entire forest.

*Philomella and the Impossible Forest* is about facing your fears and believing in the impossible. Philomella is an unlikely hero who finds strength in compassion, imagination and friendship.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Doris Brett** is a clinical psychologist as well as a multi award-winning author. To her publishers' dismay, she has been promiscuous about genres, publishing books ranging from novels to poetry to memoir, to narrative therapy for children and, in keeping with the trend of diversity, a book on bread-baking. She lives in Melbourne with her husband and is altruistically devoted to keeping her house in a permanent state of untidiness in order to provide friends and visitors with an immediate thrill of virtue as they compare the state of their living spaces to hers.

## THEMES

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Doris Brett uses a traditional quest narrative to explore themes of resilience, courage and confidence, and to develop the emotional literacy of readers. All of the characters have moments where they must reflect on their behaviour, or reconsider their attitude towards other people (for example the assumptions that Ash makes about Philomella when he first meets her). Philomella in particular undergoes significant transformation in the way she sees herself. Consider her reaction when she first meets the Great Tree – she doesn't believe that she has any qualities that might be valuable, and even as she enters her final confrontation with Alazon, she's full of self-doubt. Discuss the way that Philomella's attitude towards herself changes, and which scenes in the story lead to this transformation.

## WRITING STYLE

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Philomella undertakes a hero's journey, a narrative structure coined by Joseph Campbell. In it, the hero goes on a quest that takes them from the known world to the unknown and returns them once more, changed. The quest begins with the call to adventure, and then follows a number of formulaic steps including meeting a mentor, undertaking a number of challenges, and going through a process of transformation and atonement. There are a number of visual interpretations of the hero's journey readily available online. Use one of these diagrams to map out Philomella's adventure – what is the call to adventure? What factors influence her decision to answer it? What other stories can you think of that fit this kind of narrative?

## COMPREHENSION

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- What does the Great Tree say to Philomella about danger? What advice does it give her about how to approach danger?
- Does Philomella have a choice about whether or not to go on an adventure? What does she decide and why?
- Why doesn't Ash like Philomella?
- What power do names have over people and creatures? Discuss names you've been called that have made you feel good or bad about yourself. Has naming something ever changed the way you've felt about something (for example, made it less scary)?
- What did Bill's anger cause him to lose?
- What's dangerous about giving a memory to an Eater? Choose a bad memory of your own – who would you be without this memory?



- What does Philomella want to remember about her father? Why does she find it confusing to think about him?
- When he's talking about his anger, Bill says 'when you're angry all the time, you can't feel any of those [good] things. You can't love any of those things. Anger takes up all the room there is' (p114). Have you ever been so angry that you couldn't think about or enjoy anything else? What did Bill fear he would feel if he let go of his anger? Have you ever felt this way?
- When Philomella reflects on the Dancers, she realises that she wanted so much for them to be as perfect as they seemed, that she'd refused to see that they weren't. Have you ever thought that someone or something was perfect and not wanted to look any deeper to see their flaws? Do you think any of the characters in the book are all good or all bad?
- Tricks reminds Philomella that 'lots of things are weapons. Words are weapons' (p245). Have you ever used words as weapons? Have words ever been used as weapons against you? What do you think makes something a weapon?
- Compare Philomella to heroes in other books you've read. How is she similar or different? Do you think anyone is truly cut out to be a hero? What are the most important qualities for a hero to have?

## WRITING EXERCISE

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When Philomella meets the Tree it tells her that 'safety is comfortable, but it is often only through mistakes, risks and even danger that we truly learn' (p28). Do you agree? Write about a time that you've learned something useful through making a mistake or taking a risk. What was the danger? What was the reward? Was it worth it?

## CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

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1. As Philomella walks home from school, she is thinking that if she were to go to wizards' school, the spells she would like to learn are 'spells for turning back time. Spells for punishing people who were mean to you. Spells for making people never leave you' (p4). What spell would you most like to learn if you could? What would you use it for? What would the risks be?
2. Before they cross the Bridge, Gertrude tells the group to write down five things they would want to remember about themselves or their lives if all of their other memories disappeared. Think about five memories that capture important parts of who you are and write them down. Discuss why each memory is significant to you.
3. The Lady's brother (Tricks) tells Philomella that if he had helped her 'then you wouldn't have had the chance to help yourself' (p191). Do you think his way is best? Do you agree with Tricks that if someone is always helping you then it's harder to learn how to help yourself? Rewrite one of the scenes imagining that Tricks has stepped in to help – how does this change the story?
4. In the Impossible Forest, Philomella meets many impossible creatures. Which one is your favourite and why? Draw a picture that shows how you imagine it looks. Create another impossible creature to add to the Forest and write a scene where Philomella encounters it.
5. Rewrite a scene from the perspective of one of the other characters. How might they see things differently?



## CONVERSATIONAL PROMPTS

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The following may aid conversation between teachers/parents/counsellors/carers and children, and can be used to help children discuss difficult real-life issues.

### CHAPTER 1

**Page 4.** As Philomella walks home from school, she thinks that if she were to go to wizards' school, the spells she would like to learn are: *Spells for turning back time. Spells for punishing people who were mean to you. Spells for making people never leave you.*

**Q:** What spells would you choose to learn, and why? Who would you use them on? What do you think would happen to them? How would that affect you?

### CHAPTER 3

**Page 24.** When Philomella is talking to the Tree, she thinks: *At school if people fought, she never knew what to do. And if she had to admit it, she was really too scared to do anything in case they turned on her instead. That was not an admirable thing to admit to. She was not like the heroines she admired in books. It was easy to read about doing the right thing and standing up to bullies. But if you were Philomella, it was much harder to actually do it.*

**Q:** How does it feel when you see someone being bullied? Have you ever not known what to do, or wished you could stand up to a bully? Have you even been bullied or treated unfairly? What happened? Have you ever bullied anyone?

**Page 28.** When Philomella meets the Tree, it tells her: *'Safety is comfortable, but it is often only through mistakes, risks and even danger that we truly learn.'*

**Q:** Do you agree? Have you ever learned something useful through making a mistake or taking a risk? What did you learn?

**Page 28.** The Tree also says, *'There are times when instead of turning away, you must step towards what frightens you.'*

**Q:** Have you ever 'stepped towards' what frightens you? Have you ever wished that you could? What has stopped you?

### CHAPTER 10

**Page 82.** When confronting the pin-cushion monsters, Philomella thinks: *Names could change how you felt about yourself – and that changed who you thought you were.*

**Q:** Do you agree? Have you ever been called a name that affected how you feel about yourself?

**Page 83.** Philomella also thinks: *Names didn't just change the way you felt about yourself. They had an extra power. They changed how you felt about what you named.*

**Q:** Has naming something ever changed the way you felt about it – for example, made it less scary, or more normal?



**Page 84-85.** The pin-cushion monsters tell Philomella that when they found themselves in the Forest, ‘... we were scared ... We thought the best thing to do was to scare them first, before they could scare us.’

**Q:** Have you ever done that? Do you know anyone who might be doing that?

## CHAPTER 13

**Page 110.** When Philomella is talking to Bill about choosing puppies by their appearance, she thinks: *She knew a lot of people who thought the outside was much more important than the inside.*

**Q:** Do you think the outside is more important than the inside? Have you ever made a judgement based on someone's appearance and then discovered that they were not the kind of person inside that you thought they were? Has anyone ever done that to you?

**Page 114.** When Bill is telling Philomella about how he was filled with anger that he couldn't let go, he says: *The more I thought about it, the more I realised that in a weird way, my anger felt good – and a part of me didn't want to let it go ... It made me feel more powerful, as if, by staying angry, I was punishing them, saying it wasn't okay ...*

**Q:** Have you ever felt that you didn't want to let go of your anger about something or someone? How did holding onto it make you feel? How did it feel once you'd let it go?

**Page 114.** When he's talking about his anger, Bill says: *When you're angry all the time, you can't feel any of those [good] things. You can't love any of those things. Anger takes up all the room there is.*

**Q:** Have you ever been so angry that you couldn't think about, or enjoy, anything else? What made you that angry? What did it stop you from enjoying? Do you regret being that angry? What could you do to prevent feeling that way again?

**Page 115.** Bill also says, *I realised too, that I was scared that if I let go of my anger, I'd feel that awful sadness again – and I didn't think I could stand that.*

**Q:** Have you ever felt that if you stopped being angry, you might be very sad instead?

## CHAPTER 14

**Page 119-20.** When Mary is explaining the River Memini to Philomella, she says: *Well, wiping out your bad memories can also change your good memories, because memories are connected to each other – so you might lose some wonderful memories as well as the awful ones. And changing a memory can also change you. Memories tell you who you are and why you are the way you are. So, if you lose some memories, you also lose a bit of yourself ... And sometimes, the bad memories are the ones you learn the most from. Sometimes you learn important things that help you in all sorts of ways, even years after they happened.*

**Q:** Do you agree with that? How would taking away a bad memory change you? What have you learned from your bad memories?

## CHAPTER 15

**Page 132.** Before they cross the Bridge, Gertrude tells the group to *Write down the five things you would want to remember about yourself or your life if all your other memories disappeared.*

**Q:** What five memories would you choose to write down and why?



## CHAPTER 16

**Page 139-40.** When Philomella is thinking about what she has learned, she realises that the Dancers *were so perfect, and she had been so thrilled to be part of their group, that she had wanted them to be true, and had refused to see that they weren't.*

**Q:** Have you ever thought that someone or something was perfect or amazing and not wanted to look any deeper to see their flaws?

**Page 140.** Philomella also realises that when first confronted by the pin-cushions, *she had been so terrified by their spikes and screams that she had been too frightened to see what they really were.*

**Q:** Have you ever been so frightened by something that it has stopped you from realising that it might not really be as bad as you think?

**Page 142.** Philomella knows the Eater *can't do anything to me unless I let it ... and it can't take anything from me that I don't choose to give.*

**Q:** Do you think that is true in some other situations as well?

**Page 142.** Philomella realises that *her bad memories [don't] have to control her.*

**Q:** Have you ever felt that bad memories controlled your thoughts or behaviour?

## CHAPTER 20

**Page 176.** Philomella sees Ash looking miserable and is unsure whether to speak to him. *She hesitated. He was likely to just snap at her. But he was looking very miserable. She took a deep breath and went up to him.*

**Q:** Have you ever seen someone looking miserable and asked if they were okay? Have you ever been too shy or too scared to ask? Has anyone ever asked if you were okay? How would you feel if they did? Or if they didn't?

**Page 176.** Ash says to Philomella, *'I wasn't fully one thing or another ... You couldn't understand. You're all of something. You're all human. Me, I'm only half-half. Half tree. Half human. Half me.'*

**Q:** Have you ever felt that you were an outsider or didn't belong? Have you ever felt that you were half one thing and half another? Can you explain how that makes you feel? How does it affect other people's perceptions of you?

**Page 177.** Philomella tells Ash that *because he was half-half, he had special and valuable abilities that other people didn't have. '... If you had been all tree, you wouldn't have been able to shoot your arrow and kill the troll ... If you had been all human, you wouldn't have been able to talk to the trees, so that they could get you to where you needed to be to shoot that arrow ... If you hadn't been exactly who you are, you wouldn't have been able to save us.'*

**Q:** If you feel you are 'half-half', what special abilities or knowledge do you have from each of your halves?

## CHAPTER 22

**Page 191.** The Lady's Brother (Tricks) tells Philomella that if he had helped her *'... then you wouldn't have had the chance to help yourself.'*

**Q:** Do you think his way is best? Do you think Tricks is right and that if someone is always helping you, then it's harder to learn how to help yourself?



## CHAPTER 24

**Page 205.** Gertrude says to Philomella, *'Everyone's scared of something.'*

**Q:** Do you agree? What are you scared of? What do you think other people might be scared of?

**Page 206.** Gertrude says that life isn't fair and that *'People don't always help when something isn't fair ... You have to decide what to do about it.'*

**Q:** What do you do when things or people aren't fair?

## CHAPTER 27

**Page 235.** Alazon tells Philomella that she is like him: *'I think you and I have certain similarities. I think you've imagined revenge quite a number of times.'*

**Q:** Have you ever enjoyed imagining revenge? Have you ever done something in revenge?

## CHAPTER 28

**Page 243.** Tricks explains that while wearing an extra-visibility cloak, *'...no-one pays any attention to you. It's as if you're not there.'*

Philomella thinks: *She knew that feeling. She had been walking around with an extravisibility cloak on ever since she'd started at her new school. The only exceptions were when she'd made some embarrassing mistake and everyone had stared at her and sniggered.*

**Q:** Have you ever felt that you had an extra-visibility cloak on?

**Page 244.** [Philomella] *wanted, desperately wanted, to be back there in the past – where everything had been safe and predictable and good.*

**Q:** Have you ever felt that you'd like to turn back time and go back to live in the past rather than the present? Which past would you like to live in? Why?

**Page 245.** Tricks says, *'Lots of things are weapons. Words are weapons.'*

**Q:** Have you ever used words as weapons? Have words ever been used as weapons against you?

**Page 246.** Tricks' advice to Philomella is: *'Do whatever you can, with whatever you have.'*

**Q:** Do you think this is good advice? How do you think it applies to your life?

## CHAPTER 32

**Page 278.** The book tells Philomella: *'Being brave means you're scared, but you do it anyway, because it's the right thing to do! And ... heroes make mistakes. But what makes a hero is that they pick themselves up, learn from their mistakes and keep trying.'*

**Q:** Were you surprised to learn this about heroes? Have there been times when you've been scared but done the right thing anyway? Have there been times when you've failed, maybe more than once, but kept picking yourself up and kept trying again?

## CHAPTER 34

**Page 290.** Philomella realises that while in the Impossible Forest, *She was paying more attention to the good things, the things she appreciated. It wasn't that there were no bad or dangerous things in the Impossible Forest – there were plenty of those – but taking notice of the good things instead of just the things she didn't like made her feel ... well ... happier.*



**Q:** Do you tend to give the most attention to the bad things or to the good things in your life? When was the last time you appreciated a small, good thing in your daily life?

**Page 295-6.** Philomella realises that *She had spent the past fifteen months absorbed in feeling resentful and sorry for herself. She hadn't thought about anyone or anything else ... And she hadn't felt any compassion at all [for them].*

**Q:** Have you had times in your life when you have felt so angry or resentful that you haven't thought about how other people were feeling? What do you think compassion is?

## CHAPTER 35

**Page 300.** When about to face Alazon in a duel, Philomella thinks, *She wasn't stronger than him. She wasn't more powerful than him. She didn't know any of the magical spells that he knew and she didn't have an army of trolls and goblins at her command, but she was going to do her absolute best to stop him. She was going to do everything she could with whatever she had!*

**Q:** Have you ever attempted something you thought was too hard for you? What happened? Did you do 'whatever you could, with whatever you had', or did you do something different?

## CHAPTER 37

**Page 316.** When Ash first meets Philomella, he judges her simply because she's human. At the end of the adventure, he says: *I owe you an apology. I judged you from the beginning. I didn't give you a chance. I just thought you were one of them.*

**Q:** Have you ever pre-judged someone because they looked or talked a certain way or because they belonged to a particular group? Has anyone ever judged you in that way before getting to know you? How did that make you feel?

## RELATED READING

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*The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende

*Dusty and the Outwilds* by Rhiannon Williams

