

THE WITCHING HOURS: VAMPIRE KNIFE TEACHERS NOTES

Written by Jack Henseleit

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont in August 2017

SYNOPSIS

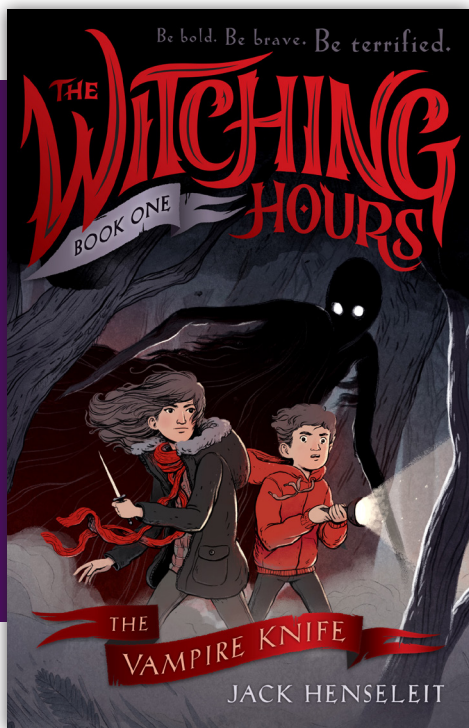
On a dark and stormy afternoon, Anna starts telling her younger brother, Max, a scary story to pass the time during the long drive to a remote Transylvanian village. Anna loves scary stories and fairy tales – the real kind of fairy tales, where witches and goblins can't be trusted. The kind that don't always have a happy ending.

Together with their father, the Professor, Anna and Max are met by the innkeeper, Mrs Dalca, a wrinkled old woman who speaks very little English. Mrs Dalca looks like a witch, feeds the children a pungent garlic stew (which Max tips into the plants when she isn't looking), and won't let Anna and Max do anything fun. Her granddaughter, Isabella, seems friendlier, but Anna is still suspicious about the old inn and its inhabitants. When Anna sees a terrifying pale figure in the darkness during a game of hide-and-seek, and Mrs Dalca starts muttering warnings about strigoi, Anna knows her suspicions are correct – fairy tales are real, and there are vampires in the woods!

That night, Anna has a strange dream. When she wakes her window is wide open and she sees the vampire running away – with Max flung over his shoulder! Anna runs to Mrs Dalca for help, but the old woman refuses to come out of her room. Ignoring Mrs Dalca's warnings, Anna and Isabella pack a bag and make their way into the dark, stormy forest to try to catch the vampire and rescue Max. But even if they can save him, Max will never be the same again ...



The storm rushed into the car.



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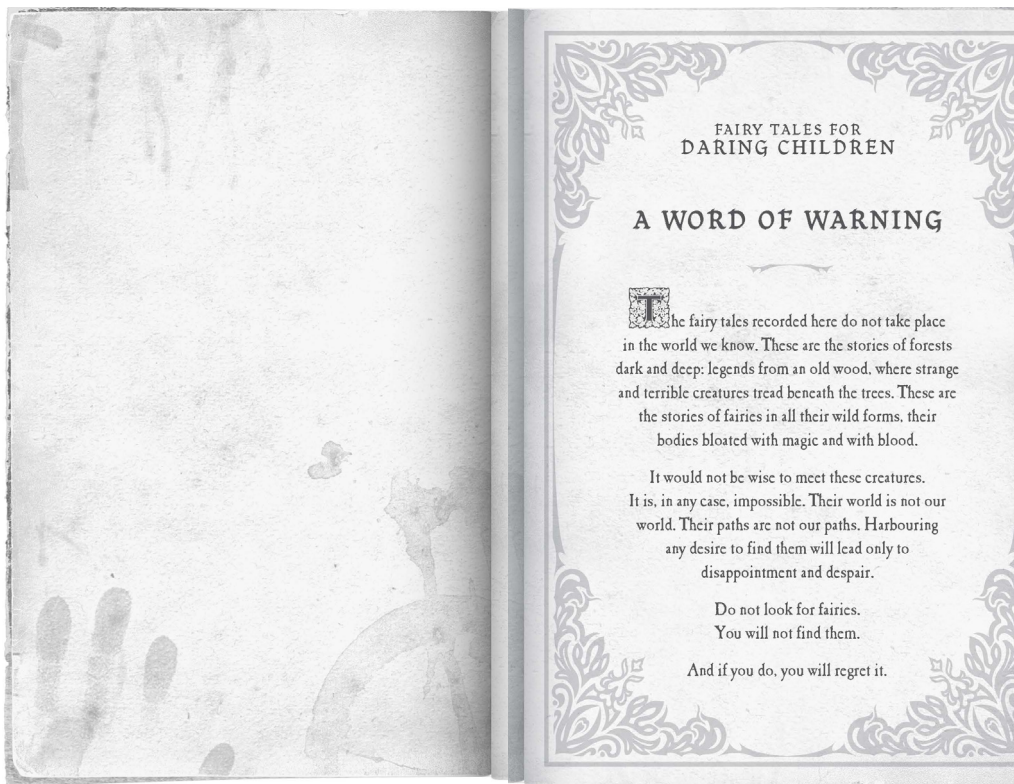
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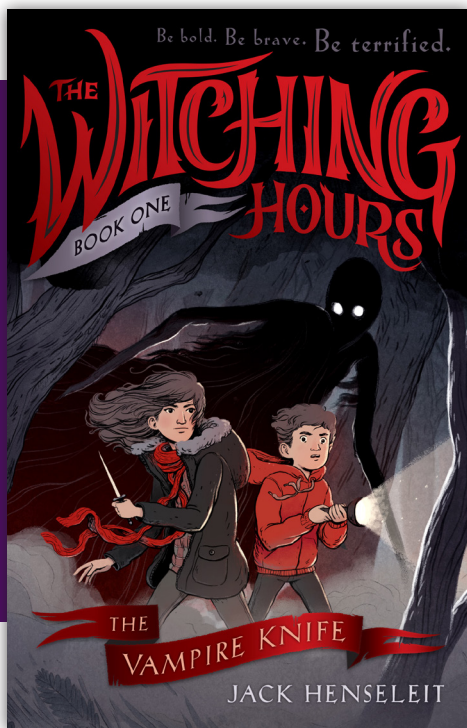
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Henseleit was born on a winter evening in 1991, just after the stroke of midnight. When the weather is dark and stormy, he writes fairy tales – real fairy tales, where witches and goblins play tricks on unwary girls and boys. Not all of the tales have happy endings.

The Witching Hours is his first series of middle-grade horror novels.

<https://jackhenseleit.com>





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THEMES

Fairy tales

Anna wrinkled her nose. The Professor had bought her a fairy book at the airport, but it was entirely the wrong kind. The cover was a bright, glittery pink, and the fairies in the story weren't even slightly scary. The books she liked (sealed in her suitcase, buried somewhere in the great pile) were real fairy stories – the kind with witches and goblins who played dangerous tricks on unwary girls and boys. The children would usually have to win their freedom from the enchanted forest, outsmarting the fairies. Sometimes they would even take some magical treasure back with them.

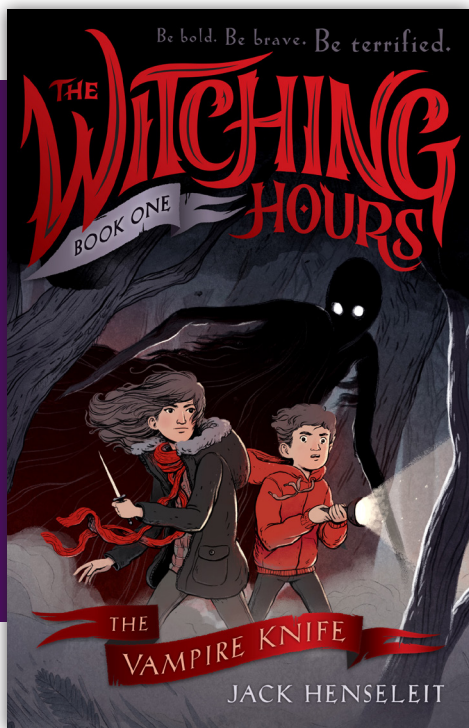
But the stories didn't always have happy endings. Sometimes the monsters won.

(From pages 6–7)

- What kind of fairy tales are described here?
- Are they the same as the fairy tales you're familiar with, or different? How?
- Why do you think Anna prefers to read stories that are slightly scary?
- Do you prefer fairy tales to be scary or safe? Why do you think this is?
- Are there any parts of the book that remind you of other fairy tales you're familiar with? Which ones? How does the author twist these stories into his work and why do you think he does this?
- What does Max mean when he tells Anna that 'it's like one of your fairy tales' (p51)? What does Anna realise when he says this?
- Where does Anna find information about vampires that helps her?
- Read the 'Word of Warning' that is printed in the first few pages of the book. What does the author warn you against? Does the warning make you want to read the story more or less? How does it set the tone for what you are about to read?

Activity:

In class, discuss the way the writer uses our prior knowledge of fairy tales to play with readers' expectations. Come up with your own idea for a scary story, and make a plan for what you will write about using the prompts above.



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Activity:

In response to the following prompts, make a list of elements you might expect to find in a fairy tale.

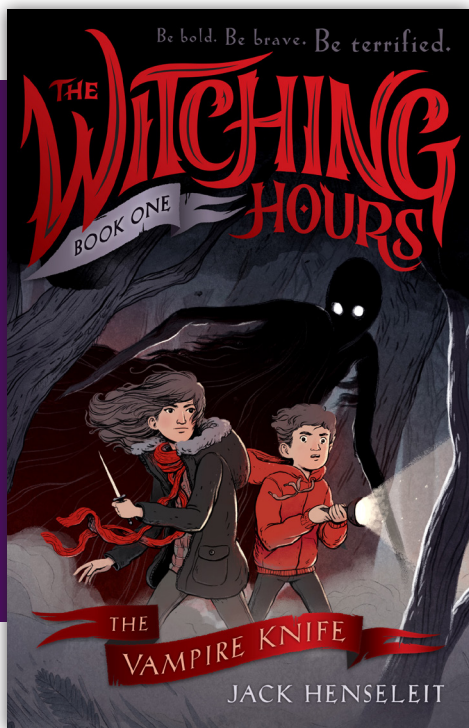
- characters
- setting
- illustrations
- ending
- use of magic
- emotion

Bravery

Anna tried to look her bravest. She took the knife from Isabella, squeezing the ever-warm handle in her palm. Suddenly she felt brave.

(From page 88)

- Is there a difference between feeling brave and being brave?
- Do you need to be afraid of something to be brave? Why? What is Anna afraid of? What else do you need in order to be brave?
- How do each of the characters in the book – Anna, Max and Isabella – show bravery in different ways?
- When is bravery important?
- How do each of the characters overcome their fears in order to be brave?
- In class, share a time when you've been afraid of something and have had to be brave enough to face it. What happened? What or who helped you to feel brave? What makes you feel that you can't be brave? How might you help someone else be brave?



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THEMES

Suspense

What she saw made her gasp in fright. A wrinkled old woman was leaning into the car, her withered hands stretching out from beneath a long, black cloak. She was reaching straight for Max.

(From p16)

This paragraph is from the very end of Chapter One.

- What do you call this kind of ending?
- Why do these endings make you want to keep reading?
- Does the author use cliffhanger endings for any of the other chapters in the book?
- How do cliffhanger endings ignite our imagination? What do you think will happen next?

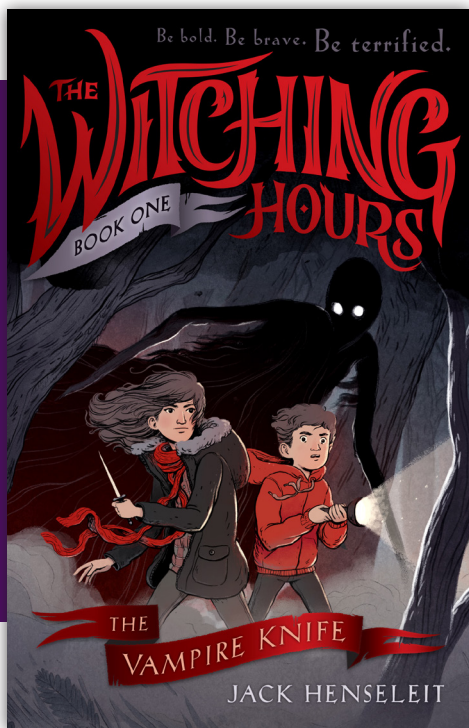
Activity:

Suspense is the moment you hold your breath in a story, when you are desperate to know more.

Cliffhanger endings invite readers to predict what will happen, pulling them into the story and making their imagination work to fill the space between the end of one chapter and the start of the next.

Write your own scene imagining what comes after the cliffhanger – using either the example provided above, or a cliffhanger from another chapter in the story.

Share your pieces in class and discuss the concept of suspense and the role cliffhangers play in it.



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CHARACTERS

There are some characters that are common to most fairy tales – these are called archetypal characters. You can find a list of fairy tale archetypes here: <http://thewriterspot.weebly.com/miscellaneous/common-character-archetypes>

- Which of these archetypes can you see in The Vampire Knife?
- What other famous examples can you think of for each of the archetypes?
- How do archetypes help us understand fairy tales?
- Can archetypes be used badly in a story? Can you think of a time you've read a character archetype that hasn't worked?

The bedroom door crashed open. Mrs Dalca strode into the room, her eyes ablaze.

'You are very bad children,' she said in a wheezing voice. 'You will go to bed without any supper.'

(From page 54)

- Which archetype is Mrs Dalca?
- What other story does the line 'you will go to bed without any supper remind you of'? How does this make you feel towards Mrs Dalca?
- How else is Mrs Dalca described? Make a list of how she is described each time she appears in the story. How does this make you respond to her? Is she an adult that the children could turn to?

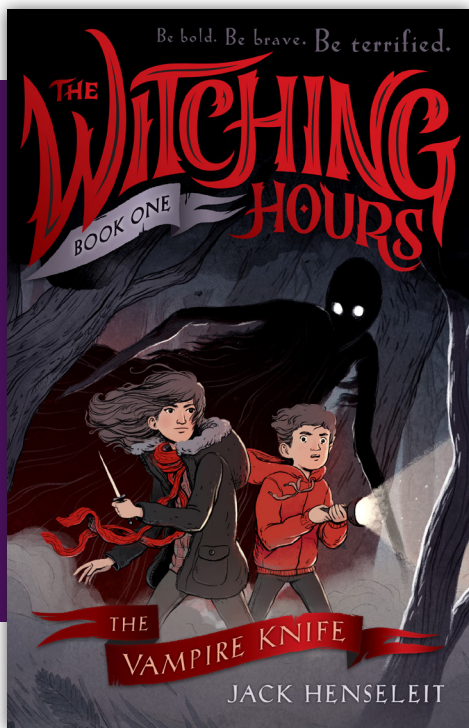
Activity:

Choose one of the ten archetypal characters and write a profile for a character that fits that archetype.

Describe:

- What they wear
- How they speak
- Their body language
- Their expressions
- What they eat
- What they do
- Any special objects they carry
- Who and what is important to them

Share your profiles with the class and see if they can guess which archetype you've chosen to base your character on.



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SETTING

Anna hadn't expected the sky to get any darker, but now the true night was falling upon the forest, and the mist was growing thicker with every new shadow. Strange noises began to echo through the woods, carried by the wind: the scratching sounds of something moving beneath the trees, often followed by the faintest trace of a howl.

(From page 55)

- How does the setting affect the mood of the book?
- Is a setting just a physical place? How else do we describe a setting?
- What kind of words does the author use in the example above to create an emotional tone for the setting?
- Is this story set in a place that is familiar to you? How does the author turn places that may be familiar into something that seems otherworldly and scary?

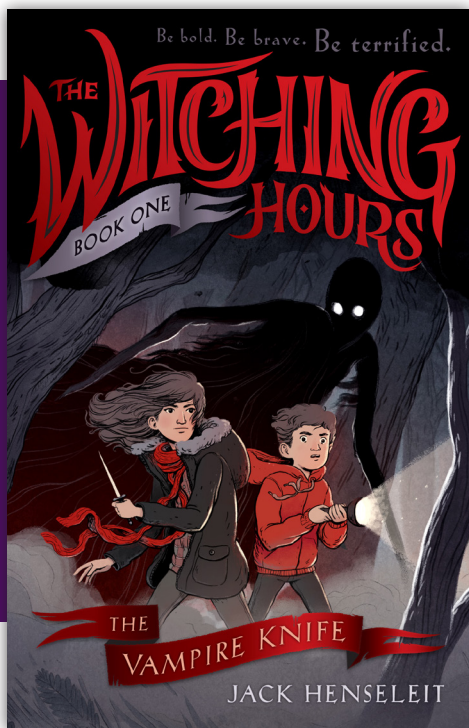
Activity:

Think of a place that is familiar to you and choose an emotion you would like to explore with your writing. Start by making a list of all the details you can remember about this place – what you can see, what you can smell, what you can touch, what you can hear.

Write a short scene that describes the place and also conveys your chosen emotion. Use the way the author has done this in *The Vampire Knife* as inspiration.

Activity:

Write your own short and scary fairy tale. Use the activities you've completed as a basis to create your own story – bring together your plan, your character profile and your emotional and physical landscape to create a short story that you can share with the rest of the class. Compile your stories into a collection of fairy tales – do they need a word of warning before you can share them with the world?



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CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TOPICS

In groups or as a class, go through the following:

1. What type of book do you think *The Vampire Knife* is? Do any of your first impressions suggest that it will be a type of fairy tale? What kind of ending do you predict the story will have? How does knowing what genre a book is help you predict certain things about the story? What other genres can you think of?
2. Anna uses her fairy tale book to learn more about vampires. Have you encountered vampires in any books or other stories? Which ones? What have these stories taught you about vampires? How are the vampires in this book similar or different to those you've seen in other stories?
3. Where is *The Vampire Knife* set? What is your emotional response to the story? How does the author use the setting of the book to influence your emotional response to it? What elements of the setting can be adjusted to alter the way that readers respond to it?
4. Fairy tales often incorporate the use of magical objects that help the protagonists escape, or defeat the villains. What magical objects exist in *The Vampire Knife*? Who do they belong to? What role do they play in the story? How are they used? Are there any other objects which might not be magical, but that help the characters feel brave, or safe, or which offer them protection?