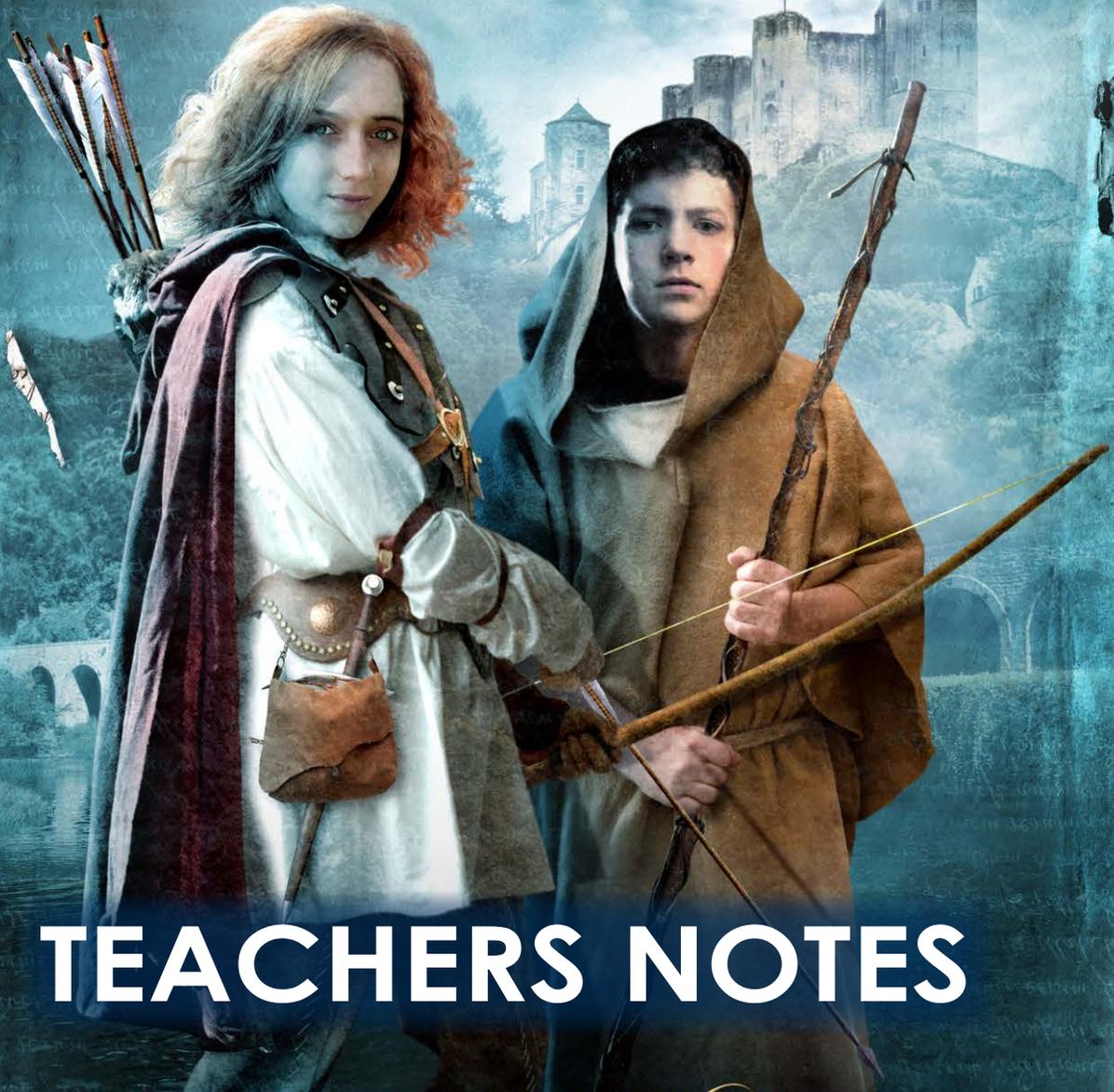


A. L. TAIT



TEACHERS NOTES

THE BOOK OF
SECRETS

AN ATEBAN CIPHER
NOVEL

THE ATEBAN CIPHER: THE BOOK OF SECRETS

Teachers Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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INTRODUCTION

'What a sad place the world outside these walls had always seemed to be. And now he was to step into it.' (pp. 27– 8)

Gabriel (Gabe) was a foundling left on the doorstep of Oldham Abbey as a baby and now is forced to flee the only home he has ever known in order to hide and uncover the secrets hidden in a coded manuscript, given to him by his dying mentor Brother Benedict. From his cloistered life Gabe is thrust into a world of danger, political intrigue, adventure and unexpected friendship.

Brother Benedict had been a mentor to Gabe and had been disappointed when Gabe decided to work in the Scriptorium, not the Librarium. For Gabe had come to the realisation that 'he wanted to copy and illustrate manuscripts, not to simply catalogue and care for them.' (p. 6) On the advice of Brother Malachy, Gabe ventures into the forest in order to hide the book from evil forces within the monastery, however Gabe fears that he has no survival skills. But he is befriended by a group of roving young women – sisters Gwyn and Merry, their cousin Scarlett and friend Midge – and is drawn reluctantly into a life of thieving from the rich to help the poor. Later, in an effort to rescue Merry and Gwyn's imprisoned father Ralf Hodges from a castle dungeon, they are encouraged to take a young man named Eddie instead. They discover that he is Crown Prince of Alban and that Lord Ronan has hatched a dastardly plot aiming to seize power in the kingdom: he has put an imposter in the Prince's place and framed the girls' father for a crime he didn't commit. So begins a hair-raising adventure in which Gabe finds himself tested and also discovers that he's capable of more than he had thought possible.

What is the secret of the book, and why is it so valuable? As he seeks to decipher the code and find a mystery man named Aidan, Gabe learns that survival must be earned and that some of life's biggest lessons are not found in books. Gabe finds himself questioning everything he knows about right and wrong and wondering if he'll ever find a way back home.

He also discovers that the biggest secret of all may be his own.

BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the novel, read about A. L. Tait in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society and Environment and English Language and Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND HISTORY (SOSE)

- **MEDIEVAL HISTORY**

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel is inspired by the Middle Ages or Medieval Times (1066–1485) when Europe was ruled by feudal elitist powers and the church had exclusive control over learning and knowledge. Make a list of aspects of life in these times and invite students to research them, such as food, leisure pursuits (e.g. jousting), social life and conditions, the law, government etc.

DISCUSSION POINT: Parallels with the legend of Robin Hood and his merry men who stole from the rich to give to the poor are obvious here. The Sheriff or Lord Ronan is an evil force in all their lives. Compare the two narratives. One of the major differences is that the 'merrie men' are women! [See Bibliography]

ACTIVITY: This series features knights in armour. Research their clothes, weapons and equipment. They were intended to adhere to a code of chivalry. Research their beliefs and activities, for example, the Crusades were one of the major campaigns launched by knights of the realm in the Middle Ages on behalf of Pope Urban II in order to win back the Holy Lands from Muslim forces often described as 'the infidel'.

DISCUSSION POINT: Midge's pet falcon Albert is a beloved but frightening creature to strangers; research the art of falconry.

DISCUSSION POINT: Poverty was rife amongst some members of society as evinced by Goodwife Alice's circumstances (p. 82). What services did the poor have to draw on?

ACTIVITY: Research and explore the buildings of the time such as the castles lived in by the wealthy, monasteries by the clergy, and the small thatched and stone buildings where the poorer classes lived. (Some picture books listed in the Bibliography may provide useful images of these dwellings.)

ACTIVITY: Punishment for crimes in this era was often brutal torture or death. In this novel, Ralf Hodges is kept in a dungeon and the Abbot has been walled into a room. Research the penal customs of the time.

- **MEDIEVAL MONKS**

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel is set in a time when monks controlled the power of writing. They painstakingly inscribed hand-lettered manuscripts which were beautifully illustrated and often bound not just in leather but in valuable covers encrusted with jewels. Printing had not yet been invented so, reading and writing were only for the privileged few. How did society change when printing was invented?

ACTIVITY: Study the skills involved in medieval manuscript illuminations. For example, 'It's called fore-edge painting,' Gabe said. 'I've heard about it, but I've never seen it before. It's a specialist craft, known only to a few.' (p. 239)

DISCUSSION POINT: Research some of the arcane customs of the monks such as: 'Anchorites were sometimes known as living saints; men who locked themselves away from this world to prepare for the next. But they usually chose larger strongholds with at least one window.' (p. 211)

- **COMING OF AGE & RITE OF PASSAGE**

DISCUSSION POINT: Gabe is learning to live outside his cloistered abbey. The girls rescue him but he proves his bravery and ingenuity as well. What contributes to his maturity?

DISCUSSION POINT: Prince Edward has lived a sheltered life but reveals inner qualities which promise to make him a strong leader. What qualities are they?

- **FORCES OF GOOD & EVIL**

DISCUSSION POINT: Gabe is troubled by the distinction between good and evil when the girls entice him into robbing the rich to assist the poor. This goes against the tenets of his religion but he discovers that there are 'grey' areas between right and wrong.

DISCUSSION POINT: The people in power in this novel are plotting to bring down the King. Does access to power often lead to a greed for more?

- **FAMILY**

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Deep in his heart, he resolved to do all that he could to get back here, back to his home, back to the Brothers who were his only family.' (p. 216) Gabe has only ever known the monastery as a home, and the brothers as his family. What is his likely future family to be?

DISCUSSION POINT: The four girls are 'orphaned' and have therefore formed a kind of family of their own. What constitutes a family?

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

- **NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE**

DISCUSSION POINT: This is a third-person subjective account of Gabe's experiences. How might it have changed had it been written as a first-person narrative?

- **SYMBOLISM**

DISCUSSION POINT: What examples of symbolism did you notice in this novel?



- LITERARY DEVICES & WORD PLAY**

Activity: Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| SIMILE | |
| METAPHOR | |
| PERSONIFICATION | |
| WORD PLAY | |
| OTHER | |



- HUMOUR**

Activity: Identify techniques by which humour is provoked in this novel. Add quotes to the following table:

| | |
|--------------|--|
| SARCASM | |
| IRONY | |
| EXAGGERATION | |
| BLACK HUMOUR | |
| OTHER | |

- **STRUCTURE**

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:

Beginning: 'I don't understand,' Gabe said. 'He was here.' (Chapter Two, p. 13)

Ending: 'I don't know,' she admitted, 'but I don't like it.' (Chapter Eight, p. 158)

Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

b) *Suspense is the key to any narrative's structure.*

There are many instances of suspense in this novel. Discuss some of them.

c) Using a *framing story or idea* makes a narrative more cohesive but sometimes can be used as a foil to trigger a major surprise or turning point in the action. Here 'the coded book' is the framing device which galvanises Gabe into action and leads to change in his life.

Discuss the use of a framing narrative in this novel.

- **SETTING**

ACTIVITY: Choose a passage that describes the locale vividly for you. Discuss the passage with the class.

- **CHARACTERS**

MAJOR CHARACTERS: Gabe, Brother Malachy, Gwyn, Merry, Scarlett, Midge and Eddie/Prince Edward the Crown Prince of Alban.

MINOR CHARACTERS: Brother Benedict, Abbot Phillip, Prior Dismas, Brother Damman, Brother Archibold, Brother Anthony, Brother Gilbert, Brother Nicholas (an oblate), Brother Brophy, Lord Ronan of Feldham, Sheriff of Rothwell (Lord Sherborne's right-hand man), Ralf Hodges, Dain and Hal (soldiers) and Douglas Whitmore.

ACTIVITY: Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events that demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

QUESTION: Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

- **GENRE**

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel falls into the medieval mystery genre. The 'secret of the book' is the heart of the mystery – what does the mysterious code in which it is written signify? Who is Aidan and why did Brother Benedict instruct Gabe to take the book to him? There are other mysteries to be resolved as well such as the secret of Gabe's parentage. Why was he left a foundling on the doorstep of the monastery? When, towards the end of the novel, Eddie identifies the fore-edge painting on the book as a picture of Hayden's Mont (p. 241) the secret of 'Aidan' is revealed. But another mystery is implied: "'It's the home of Sir Lucien Thergood, formerly Brother Lucien.' There was a silence. 'You're sure his name is Lucien?' asked Gabe. 'Oh yes,' said Eddie, cheerfully. 'He'd be ancient now if he's still alive, but he used to be my grandfather's most trusted advisor. He and my father had a falling out years ago.'" (p. 240)

Readers will have to wait to find out the answers to several questions in the sequel. Discuss some of your students' thoughts on the questions raised in this novel. Invite them to write a synopsis for the second book in the series.

- **CODES AND CIPHERS**

ACTIVITY: 'Contrary to layman-speak, codes and ciphers are not synonymous. A code is where each word in a message is replaced with a code word or symbol, whereas a cipher is where each letter in a message is replaced with a cipher letter or symbol.' Mulcahy, Kate, 'Ten Codes and Ciphers', ListVerse, March 13, 2012: <http://listverse.com/2012/03/13/10-codes-and-ciphers/>

Invite students to study codes and ciphers and then to develop a code of their own. [See **Bibliography**]

- **WRITING TASKS**

ACTIVITY: Write an acrostic poem using the letters in Hayden's Mont.

ACTIVITY: Write a diary entry by Gabe about his childhood at the monastery.

ACTIVITY: Write a letter as if it was written by Eddie to his father.

- **VISUAL LITERACY**

ACTIVITY: Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. [See **Bibliography**.]

ACTIVITY: Design a new cover for this book.

ACTIVITY: Create a book trailer for this novel. [See **Bibliography**]

FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'I like this life,' Gabe said now, staring at his feet. 'Only because you know no other,' Malachy said, his voice gentle.' (p. 25)
2. 'Looking at them all, standing shoulder to shoulder, Gabe felt a brief surge of jealousy. They were so close, so full of life, so . . . free. In the Abbey, Gabe simply did the same thing every day now that he worked in the Scriptorium. He woke, he prayed, he ate, he worked, he prayed, he ate, he worked, he prayed, he ate, he prayed, he slept, he prayed, he slept, and so on to a new day. For a moment he felt dizzy, considering the unstructured life that the girls must lead.' (p. 56)
3. 'Gabe frowned. Useless? He could do lots of things – read, write, draw, and . . . He stopped. All of the things he could do were of great use in the Abbey, in his world. But out here? Out here, he realised with a sigh, useful skills were things like tracking and foraging, hunting and shooting, planning and bargaining.' (pp. 95–6)
4. 'I think it's a cipher,' he said, slowly. 'What's a cipher?' said Scarlett, leaning in to look at the page he had open. 'I've never heard of that.' 'I've heard about them but . . . I thought they were a myth,' Gabe said. 'It's a book written in code.' 'Why would anyone write something like that?' she asked. 'Isn't the whole point of a book to be read?' Gabe gulped. 'A cipher holds secrets so great and powerful that they need to be kept safe,' he said. Scarlett sat back and stared at him. 'There must be a key to the code, though?' she said. 'What would be the point otherwise?' (p. 114)
5. 'How do you do it?' he asked, the words falling unbidden from his lips. 'Do what?' she asked. 'Be everywhere and nowhere,' he said. She laughed, stepping out from the shrubbery beside him. 'Practice,' she said. 'Pa's taken me hunting with him since I was a bairn. You learn to move like the animals move.' (p. 153)
6. 'I haven't had much choice,' Eddie said. 'Besides, my father always taught me that no man, not even the King, knows everything and when faced with superior knowledge, a great King uses it to his own end. I couldn't get out of there on my own, so I bowed to those who could help me do so.' (p. 169)
7. 'He knows how to read people, Gabe thought. Brother Malachy, who'd always been given to airing his thoughts aloud on any subject, had once lectured Gabe about the importance of learning to understand that what people said and what they did were often two different things – and that what they did counted for more.' (p. 171)
8. 'She doesn't get to think,' came Scarlett's bitter reply, as she dashed the tears from her face with the back of her hand, leaving white tracks in the grime. 'Her thoughts, like mine, don't count, for we are not men.' (p. 190)
9. 'But that's their home!' Gabe protested. 'Everything they own is in there.' 'What could they possibly have that's worth dying for?' Eddie hissed.' (p. 226)
10. 'And at the heart of it all was the book. For so long, it had been a book of secrets. Prior Dismas had called it the Ateban Cipher, but in Gabe's mind it was now simply a book of questions.' (p. 246)

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Written in the tradition of adult bestsellers such as *The Name of the Rose* (1980) by Umberto Eco or *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown, this is a thrilling medieval mystery for younger readers. Compare to series such as John Flanagan's *The Ranger's Apprentice* series or Catherine Jinks' *Pagan Chronicles*. [See Bibliography]
2. Design a poster to advertise this book.
3. The title of this novel refers to the mysterious coded book. What other title might this novel have had?
4. Debate any of the topics covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.
5. Imagine what might possibly happen to Gabe and his friends on their journey to Hayden's Mont and write a synopsis for the next novel in this series.

CONCLUSION

This is the first in The Ateban Cipher series, which is bound to become a firm favourite with readers. Gabe's journey to discover the secret of the book is likely to change not only his life but also those of the five people he travels with – Gwyn, Merry, Scarlett, Midge and Eddie. They have formed an unlikely friendship, given their varied backgrounds, skills and temperaments, which promises to make their further journey together an extremely lively and rollicking adventure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. L. Tait grew up dreaming of world domination. Unfortunately, at the time there were only alphabet sisters B. L. and C. A. and long-suffering brother M. D. M. to practise on . . . and parents who didn't look kindly upon sword fights, plank-walking or bows and arrows. But dreams don't die and *The Mapmaker Chronicles* and *The Ateban Cipher*, the author's two series for children, are the result. A. L. lives in country New South Wales with a family, a garden, three goldfish and a very cheeky border collie. A. L. Tait writes fiction and non-fiction for adults under another name.

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Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005 (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award.

