

# THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS OF BEING TRILBY MOFFAT



TEACHERS RESOURCES

# THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS OF BEING TRILBY MOFFAT

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## Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

Introduction	3
Before & After Reading the Novel	3
Themes & Curriculum Topics	3
<i>Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)</i>	4
<i>English Language and Literacy</i>	5
Narrative Person & Tense	
Genre	
Symbolism	
Literary Devices	
Humour	
Structure	
Setting	
Characters	
Writing Tasks	
<i>Visual Literacy</i>	
Further Quotes for Discussion	12
Further Activities	13
Conclusion	13
About the Author	13
Bibliography	14
About the Author of the Notes	15

# INTRODUCTION

'This is a legal document. If you know anything at all about the law (which I do), you will know that notation is everything. Once something is written down, it becomes evidence . . . and evidence can be a very dangerous thing in the right hands.' (p 5)

This is the dangerous story of Trilby Moffat, who took on one of the most treacherous jobs of all time. Well . . . outside of time, to be precise. Fans of the *Nevermoor* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* series will love this series.

A mystery illness is making people speak ancient languages and bake old-fashioned cakes. It is because of this strange illness that Trilby Moffat and her mother find themselves sitting on a train.

Behind them are a number of things they will never see again, including a comfortable home, Trilby's school, a regular job and all the people they consider friends. Ahead of them is a surprise relative, an unusual inheritance, an opportunity that will never be repeated and a man in a top hat who will try to kill Trilby . . . more than once.

This is the story of how Trilby Moffat flees to a fabulous island where time doesn't exist and is accidentally promoted to one of the most important jobs of all time. The job of Time Keeper.

This is the dangerous business of being Trilby Moffat.

**Warning: this book contains a truly ridiculous number of delicious cakes, a herd of rude cats, a ramshackle gang of kids, and a dangerous organisation determined to spoil things for everyone, even you.**

## 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 Dangerous Business of Being Trilby Moffat*, read reviews and articles about the novel and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

## THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Humanities and Social Sciences [HASS], English Language and Literacy and Visual Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

### HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

Several themes and topics are relevant to the following Curriculum Area:

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/hass/>>

## LOST OR ABANDONED CHILD

### Key Quote:

“You’re a child. A very wonderful child, but a child can’t be alone with a sleeping mother for months or years. You know what would happen.’

‘They’d put you in a hospital and take me away,’ said Trilby robotically. It was a line she’d heard her mother say too many times.

‘Exactly. We couldn’t let that happen. We need somewhere safe to stay while I get better. And I will get better. You do believe that, don’t you, darling?’ said Arwen, holding her daughter’s hand tightly.’ (p 20)

**Discussion Point:** The idea of a child being left to embark on adventures and solve mysteries is a common narrative convention in children’s literature. Not only does Trilby’s mother succumb to a sleeping sickness but her great-great aunt Thumbelina Mince suddenly dies leaving her to confront the evil Mr Colin on her own. How does Trilby cope? What skills does she possess? Who assists her in her journey?

## COMING OF AGE & RITE OF PASSAGE

### Key Quote:

‘How was she going to be able to help the children find the treasure and fix the Passage of Time when she was always running? Running away. Running for safety. Running for her life. Then it occurred to her . . . Perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps it was time to stop running.’ (p 149)

**Discussion Point:** As in most stories for young people Trilby develops new confidence in grappling with challenges in this novel. How does she change in the course of the narrative?

## BUREAUCRACY

### Key Quote:

‘I’m the Night Manager and I work for the Office of the Ministry of the Board of the Department of the Appropriate Division for the Committee of the Commission for the Corporation of the Agency of Association for Managers Administering Time. Otherwise simply known as O.M.B.D.A.D.C.C.C.A.A.M.A.T.’ (p 49)

**Discussion Point:** This novel parodies the workings of bureaucracy and the actions of managers such as Mr Colin:

‘An induction, my dear, dim child is an official introduction. It involves pamphlets and handbooks and lots of little boring talks, usually in a room with a whiteboard and sometimes with little sticky-notes. It will be lovely.’ (p 124)

Humour is employed to satirise bureaucratic processes in this novel, for example, when ‘Shut up Brian’ speaks to Trilby at the Department of Box Maintenance:

“I was promoted,’ he said flatly. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to wander off without explanation.” (p 179)

The obligatory safety drill is also satirised:

*“ATTENTION EVERYONE. Umm . . . This is a safety drill? All employees should exit the building in a . . . hysterical manner. BEEP BEEP.”*

'Oh, shut up, Brian!' said Mr Colin from the top of the stairs, but it was too late. Doors from all directions flung open. Workers from various departments flooded the stairwell. Black hats everywhere. Bodies jammed in between the children and the sorters.' (p 190)

What are your thoughts on bureaucracy after reading this novel?

## VALUES

### Key Quote:

'Trilby Moffat was a survivor, and she could swim, so she did.' (p 73)

**Discussion Point:** Duty, self-sacrifice, bravery, honesty and empathy are all values shown in this novel. Invite student to locate quotes in the novel which illustrate any of these values.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

This is relevant to the following Curriculum Area:

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>>

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

## NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE

**Discussion Point:** This novel is written in third person, past tense with Benjamin the thylacine as the narrator. How might it have been different had Trilby written it in first person?

### Activity:

'Now you may be wondering how I am able to recant the details of the terrible mess that is to follow – after all, I was not on the boat. The short answer is: it is my job to know these things. I am the narrator. If you would like the long answer, you will need many more hours and a marshmallow cupcake or seven.' (p 66)

This is an example of metafiction wherein the narrator is discussing his role and limitations as a narrator. How does his self-reflection engage the reader's attention?

## GENRE

**Discussion Point:** This novel is an example of fantasy and magical realism in which reality and fantasy collide and overlap.

**Discussion Point: Detail** in fantasy helps to create a convincing secondary world. Arcane details regarding several subjects are mentioned throughout the book, for example,

*Food:* 'olden-day treats like bleeding eel or sparrow's feet' (p 7), 'a flamingo-tongue pie' (p 11), 'a jellyfish pie.' (p 16), 'It's Smelt Pie! Little fishies, raw egg and sea nettle. Very popular in ancient Rome.' (pp 24–5)

*Places:* Lost in Time Antiques on Nowhere Else Pier (p 14) and the Island Between Time. What other details made this world come alive for you?

**Discussion Point: Narrative Conventions** of fantasy (or mythic dimensions) include, for example,

*Hero Invested with Special Powers:* Trilby was an ‘ordinary’ girl until she was thrust into the role of heroine when her great-great aunt Thumbelina dies and leaves her to take on the mantle of Time Keeper.

*Turning Point:* ‘This moment is known as a fork in the road.’ (p 63) Read the rest of this paragraph on page 63 and discuss what it says about this particular narrative convention.

*Quest:* The Time Guild’s role is ‘to protect the Passage of Time’ (pp 97–8) but they haven’t been doing that well and need Trilby’s assistance as the Time Keeper to help them to do their job better.

*Clues:* ‘This was exactly where Trilby Moffat wanted to be. To be precise, she wanted to be between the letterboxes marked B and C.’ (p 172)

*Logic of Secondary World:*

‘I have not approved any fires. Any fire here is unauthorised, unofficial and without permit. Therefore, it doesn’t exist.’

‘It might be unauthorised, but it’s happening!’

‘Is it, though? Think about it with your little bird brain . . . what does a fire need to survive? Oxygen, something delicious to burn like an Edwardian timber mantelpiece or an ancient oak tree, and one more thing . . . do you know what it is?’

Trilby shook her head.

‘Time. A fire cannot burn without time.’ (p 161)

*Time and Space Overlap:* On the Island Between Time no time passes at all. ‘It was incredible to think that all these places, all these times, existed simultaneously – islands floating on the sea of time.’ (p 172)

**Discussion Point:** What other narrative conventions of fantasy did you observe in this novel? [See for example, Jane Mobley’s ‘Toward a Definition of Fantasy Fiction’ in Bator, Robert, *Signposts to Criticism of Children’s Literature*, Chicago, ALA, 1983, pp. 249–260.]

## SYMBOLISM

**Discussion Point:** What symbolism did you notice in this novel?

## LITERARY DEVICES

**Discussion Point:** Literary devices can contribute to meaning in evocative ways. Read this passage and identify the forms of literary device which contribute to its meaning:

‘In Trilby’s hands the object hovered and danced. It smelled like warm rocky mountains and riding your bike down a country lane on an autumn afternoon. It felt like bedtime stories, reading in the bath and her mother’s smooth hands. It was balmy and light and, under that dark heavy coat, it transported Trilby to a far-away place that was foreign, but which she instantly understood completely. She was filled with a knowledge that felt old and also new – green like the shoots of spring leaves on an ancient tree.’ (pp 183–4)

**Activity:** Find examples of literary devices used in this novel and fill in the table below.

<b>Simile</b>	
<b>Metaphors</b>	'It was enough to make anyone lose their mind, but Trilby held her secret tightly, and that knowledge poked holes in the monotony, and through those holes the sun shone.' (p 175)
<b>Personification</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the meaning and relevance of the aphorisms which appear in this book, for example,

'As I often say, a frog without a cigar is just a toad in fine trousers.' (p 29)

'It's like the old saying, if a tree falls in a wood and no one hears it, did it really fall?' (p 62)

*'If you love your job, you'll never work a day in your life.'* *'Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the job.'* *'Make each day your masterpiece.'* *'The most powerful thing on earth is the human soul on fire.'* (p 128)

### **Discussion Point:**

“Alphabetically? That would make no sense. No, no. These are organised by mood. If you want a book that makes you feel timid, that’s over here.’ Thumbelina pointed to a high shelf. ‘If you want to feel swanky, look over here. Books to make you feel infuriated are there, and books to make you flummoxed are down here, right next to books that will bamboozle. See?’

Trilby did see, and in a way, it made sense.’ (p 33)

Discuss with students the idea of organising a library by mood. Try to classify a range of your favourite books by mood.

**Discussion Point:** The novel is filled with examples of Trilby’s obsession with crosswords, such as:

“Valuable!’ balked Mr Colin.

‘Yes, you know, like, important, significant, prized or cherished,’ said Trilby, exercising her love of thinking in crossword clues.’ (p 60)

‘Neither did Trilby, it was not her life that flashed before her eyes but crossword clues. Kick: boot, punt, hit with foot, strike with foot. Float: bob, drift, glide, tread water, parade display, moving exhibit, carnival sight. Breath: exhalation, blow, wheeze, aspiration, respiration, essence of life, what swimmers run out of. Rescue: liberate, save, set free, remove from danger, free from harm, pet shelter for destitute dogs.’ (p 73)

‘Trilby had purpose. Amongst religious folk, this is known as ‘a calling’. On the sports field, they call it ‘motivation’, and we in the legal profession know it as ‘intent’, an unwavering desire to commit one single act. In this case, Trilby’s intent was to find that treasure.’ (p 109)

Discuss the meaning of some of the words in these quotes and come up with your own synonyms.

**Activity:** Each chapter title contains a crossword clue. Invite students to complete this crossword quiz. The answers are on page 216.

**Discussion Point:** Word play can be fun, for example,

“Are you *sure* you came from the *shore*? You seem *unsure* and *un-shore* is about as far away from the shore as you can get!’ said Koji.’ (p 77)

“Now, Trilby Moffat knew a lot of words – far more than most people. She could tell you when to take your jentacular, or where to catch a funicular, or how many eggs you’ll get if you ask for a quire, or where to put your Biedermeier, but she could not tell you what maximise efficiency meant.

‘What does that even mean?’” (p 126)

What other examples of word play did you observe in this novel?

“Except for one small issue. You see, Mr Colin, in all the laws of time, there is one small clause.’

Now for those of you unfamiliar with the legal term ‘clause’, it does not refer to my razor-sharp ‘claws’, nor to the Christmas fellow who may or may not throw presents at children after invading their homes. A clause is an exception . . . it is the ‘but’ in a promise.

I continued. 'A Time Keeper can't work for anyone. So as long as Trilby Moffat is the Time Keeper, she cannot work for you.'

Mr Colin smacked the contract in anger.

'You really should read the fine print, Mr Colin,' said Trilby.' (pp 203–4)

Discuss these and other examples of word play in this novel.

**Discussion Point:** Benjamin refers to 'A nuisance of fluffy white cats' (p 119). What other collective nouns for cats are there? Brainstorm collective nouns for other animals as well. [See **Bibliography.**]

## HUMOUR

**Activity:** Identify different types of humour in the novel. Add more quotes/examples to the table below.

<b>Sarcasm</b>	'Have you ever been chased to the brink of extinction? I have, and I can tell you, it's not as fun as it sounds. Survival is a terrible drag.' (p 196)
<b>Irony</b>	'That's because they're working! If you want to talk, you go stand by the water cooler . . . everyone knows that. You'll find it over there, near the tearoom.' (p 169)
<b>Exaggeration</b>	'Trilby watched the water intently, the way a lost rabbit watches a game of beach volleyball – bewildered and in need of a snack.' (p 83)

<p><b>Black Humour</b></p>	<p>Thumbelina's death is treated with black humour (pp 38–39).</p>
<p><b>Other</b></p>	

## 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) The map on the inside front cover outlines the journey which Trilby is about to embark upon.
- b) On p vi there are three quotes which you might wish to discuss with students. They set the tone for some of the issues discussed later in the novel.
- c) The prologue opens with a significant incident which is repeated later in the novel.
- d) Strong beginnings and endings to chapters are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:  
*Beginning:* 'I've seen this door before!' exclaimed Trilby. (p Ch 12, p 100)  
*Ending:* 'This tiny, cold, wet girl is Trilby Moffat. She's the new Time Keeper. She's here to save us!' (Ch 10, p 91)

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

- e) Suspense is the key to any narrative's structure. What elements of suspense were used in this narrative?
- f) The open ending of the novel invites the reader to expect a sequel.

## SETTING

**Discussion Point:** Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices. The first time the reader views Lost in Time Antiques it is described as follows:

'Next to the pier was a large wooden house sitting in a carpet of bright green moss. Half of the house clung to the moss and the other half hung out over the lake like it hadn't decided if it was going for a swim or not. It was an unusual place to build a house, but then it was a very unusual house. It was old and its timber had turned a ghostly grey, making it look tired yet elegant. It had a pitched roof at one end, topped with a tall clock tower. Wrapped around the house was a rickety veranda with fancy timber columns. On the second floor, little windows popped out like cuckoos. The house was dark.' (p 17)

What literary devices did you identify in this description?

**Discussion Point:** Read the description of the Island Between Time on page 83-84. Discuss the devices used in this passage.

## CHARACTERS

**Major Characters:** Twelve-year-old Trilby Moffat, who becomes the Time Keeper; Benjamin, a talking thylacine; Xipil and Koji, two boys who are part of the Time Guild; Mr Colin, Night Manager.

**Minor Characters:** Trilby's mother, Arwen Moffat; Thumbelina Mince, proprietor of Lost in Time Antiques and Trilby's great-great aunt and the previous Time Keeper; Carole, Assistant Vice Night Manager; Brian, Assistant to the Assistant Vice Night Manager; Momo; Maisy, Claudia and Werner, three of the children at the Time Guild; Crow and Byron, the children's missing friends are mentioned but not seen.

**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?

## WRITING TASKS

**Activity:** Write an acrostic poem using the letters in Time Keeper. [See **Bibliography**.]

**Activity:** Write a diary entry as if written by Xipil about meeting Trilby.

**Activity:** Write a poem in ballad form about Trilby's adventures in this novel. (This might be a group activity in which each student contributes a verse.) [See **Bibliography**.]

## VISUAL LITERACY

This is relevant to the following Curriculum Area:

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>>

**Activity:** The cover of this book has a 'retro' aesthetic suggestive of children's adventure stories of the past, which is in keeping with the 'timeless' quality of this story. Design a new cover for this book.

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

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

## FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Context is just facts you haven't met yet. It has the power to change everything (or nothing).' (p 8)
2. '...it is not the book that matters, only the story.' (p 28)
3. 'There are always rules, sometimes they are hidden so you can't see them but always they are there. "No sorrys" is one of them. You can end up in all sorts of trouble around here saying sorry to the wrong person.' (p 30)
4. 'This kind of feeling is best listened to. It is called instinct. Adults often train themselves out of hearing the roar of instinct so that they might accomplish important tasks, like finishing their tax or being pleasant to people they don't like at work. Children and thylacines have no such training, and for us it is painful to ignore our instinct. So, even though Trilby was afraid, she did not readily offer up the golden key, for one very specific reason: it felt wrong. Very wrong.' (pp 52–3)
5. 'You see, assumptions are like bear traps; they are to be avoided at all costs.' (p 72)
6. "Trilby, think about it. The only thing that makes you older is time. So, if there's no time, there's no getting older. It's not that complicated,' said Koji.' (p 86)
7. 'Shame can be a very powerful stick.' (p 125)
8. 'These things don't just happen. You think they do, but they don't. They require paperwork, meetings and contracts. It is our job to manage things when things cannot manage themselves!' (p 131)
9. 'You see, those of us in the legal profession do not make things up from thin air. We do not create fictions from fictions. We create fictions from facts. To do that, you need evidence and context and by now, you are familiar with the importance of context.' (p 151)
10. 'Opening a window of opportunity is much like opening a window on a submarine. If you are very lucky, the submarine is travelling on the surface of the water, and you will be bathed in much-needed fresh air and light. But submarines are not sailboats, and it is much more likely that you will be bathed in five million tonnes of ice-cold water, crushing you in one painful agonising moment. For this reason, many people avoid ever opening a window of opportunity. But, if you never open one, the alternative is worse; you are destined to sit on the other side of the glass breathing stale air as life passes you by.' (p 180)
11. 'Perhaps there were smarter, more sensible ideas, but sometimes a ridiculous idea is the best idea.' (p 182)
12. 'Priceless is the most expensive thing there is.' (p 195)

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. **Compare** this novel to other junior fantasy novels. [See **Bibliography.**]
2. **Design** a poster to advertise this book.
3. What **other title** might the book have had?
4. **Debate** any of the topics covered in these notes or suggested by the novel.
5. Locate and study **poetry** which explores the concept of time.

## CONCLUSION

Trilby Moffat (aka Time Keeper) is a feisty heroine and this exciting and very humorous series is peopled by a range of quirky characters including Benjamin the talking thylacine who narrates the story. The story describes the dangerous business of being Trilby Moffat and its ending suggests that further thrilling adventures lie ahead!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kate Temple** has had many dangerous jobs – from making hatpins out of darts to climbing ladders at midnight. Now Kate is in the dangerous business of writing books for children.

She has written more than twenty books with her writing partner, Jol, and *The Dangerous Business of Being Trilby Moffat* is her first solo book. Kate lives in Sydney with her two children. When she is not writing, Kate enjoys eating cake, and so do the characters in this book.

See: <http://katejoltemple.com/>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM** 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. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.