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Teachers Notes – The Girl in the Basement Dianne Bates

Synopsis:

Having consumed too much alcohol on the night of her sixteenth birthday, Libby Bramble makes a rash decision to go to a party with a young man she scarcely knows and against her friends' advice. Before long, she realises her mistake and goes onto the street waiting for a lift. Not for a moment does she realise that this night is the end of her secure and happy life. A mysterious man lurking in the shadows has been stalking her. Within minutes, pounces on and abducts her.

Held prisoner in a basement, Libby grabbles with constant fear and thoughts of escape. What her captor, whom she thinks of as 'Psycho Man', plans to do with her she cannot fathom. This man, later revealed as Ernest Bradshaw, has a plan; he wants a family to help him cope with his loneliness following the death of his mother. He is thus engaged on yet another mission, that of abducting a young boy to complete his 'family'. The boy, Angus, is rebellious and not at all compliant to the man's demands, which includes referring to him as 'Papa'. Libby tries to caution Angus to be obedient for she fears what Psycho Man will do, but the boy refuses to settle. When Angus goes missing Libby, who has twice unsuccessfully tried to escape, fears he might have met a terrible end, as she knows how mercurial and brutal the man can be.

At the same time Libby relates her story, the reader gains insight into the mind of the captor; the teenager's story is told in first person, Bradshaw's in third person and both in present tense.

Eventually, after a long period of captivity and brutal treatment, Libby manages to escape, but the way in which she does so is sudden and unpredictable, not at all what she had planned. At the end of the book the reader is left wondering if Bradshaw has survived, but hoping that he has not.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- How is the story told?
- Who is telling the story?
- Why do you think there are two narrators?
- Where does the story take place?
- What does Libby think Psycho Man has planned for her?
- What do you learn about the man and his life?
- When is the first time Libby speaks to the man? What does she ask for? (P 59)
- Tell about when Libby leaves the basement for the first time. (P 63)
- Why does the man bring Angus to Libby? (P 70)
- What are some ways in which Libby tries to calm Angus? (P70 & P 77)
- Why does the man kill the dog? (P 83)
- Why do you think the man takes Libby and Angus on a ‘holiday’? (P 84)
- At what point does Libby resolve to renew her determination to escape? (P 93)
- Why do you think Libby finally relents and calls her captor ‘Papa’? (P99)
- If you were in Libby’s situation, what would you think has happened to Angus? Why? (P100)
- On Page 103, the man describes himself as being in a state he describes as ‘a kind of joy’: why does he feel like this?
- What are some ways in which Libby gainfully employs her time during her capture?
- Libby says ‘We have developed a relationship of sorts’ (P 108). Describe the relationship from both Libby’s and the man’s points of view.
- When Libby is allowed in the kitchen and living room, what are things she sees that give her further insight into ‘Papa’s’ personality and lifestyle?
- Why doesn’t Libby run away from the house earlier than she does? (P117)
- What are some ways in which Libby prepares herself for escape? (P122)
- What are the consequences Libby suffers when she runs away? (P124)
- How do these consequences change her physically? How do they affect her mentally? (P129)
- How does the man react to Libby trying to flee his house? (P125)
- Why do you think the man goes to Libby’s memorial service? (P132)
- Why do you think the author has Libby recording time in a form of diary? (P139) Do you think she is now happy?
- Why does the man go looking for another ‘son’? (P143)
- What are some reasons the man begins to change his feelings towards Libby? (P146)
- Do you think that when the man says to Libby, ‘You can leave now, if you want to,’ that he genuinely means it? If not, why not? (P151)
- What are some reasons Libby doesn’t leave the house after this episode? (P155)

- Why does Libby decide she must kill the man in order to finally escape? (P157)
- Why does the man decide to find another ‘Serena’?
- On Page 159, Libby talks ‘Papa’ about their relationship. How would you describe the relationship at this stage? How has it evolved after Libby’s period of captivity?
- How is the new ‘Serena’ that the man is stalking different from how he views Libby? (P163)
- What tips Libby off that Psycho Man plans to kill her? (P165). Do you think this is his real intention?
- Describe in your own words how Libby manages to finally escape? (P174)

From the text, find parts that show:

- ❖ kindness, sympathy, empathy
- ❖ fear
- ❖ rebellion
- ❖ anger and brutality

Find sections where thoughts and emotions are conveyed as Libby tells her story.

Opening

- What purpose does the prologue serve?
- What is your initial impression of the man and why do you form this impression?
- Why does Libby leave her party?
- Why do you think Libby would not normally do something so irrational?
- How does Libby realise she ought not to have gone with Karl?

Vocabulary

While reading you can increase your word power by noting words that are used in an unusual manner or words with which you are not familiar.

Use a dictionary to look up any words you do not know the meaning of.

Use sentences to show the meaning of the following words:

<u>uncompromising</u> (page vii)	<u>tepid</u> (P 33)	<u>fraternise</u> (P 36),
<u>rampage</u> (P 60)	<u>venom</u> (P 66)	<u>transit</u> (P 68),
<u>compliant</u> (P 69)	<u>testimony</u> (P76)	<u>skittering</u> (P81),
<u>expletives</u> (P82)	<u>mesmerised</u> (P87)	<u>punctuated</u> (P 90),
<u>fobbed</u> (P101)	<u>dystopia</u> (P101)	<u>artfully</u> (105),
<u>palpable</u> (P 115)	<u>lethargic</u> (P121)	<u>hyped</u> (P124),
<u>tediously</u> (P137)	<u>commodities</u> (P140)	<u>biddable</u> (P143).

At times the author uses images to describe the scenery, for example, '*... a moon, ragged with rushing clouds, stares like a milky, dispassionate eye at the lone house*' (P13).

- Find other examples of similar imagery. Discuss why this imagery is used.
- Examine the use of adverbs to convey more meaning to an action: for instance: violently (P 28), unceremoniously (P88), blithely (P123)

Characters

- Describe Libby's life prior to her captivity
- Show ways in which Libby is resourceful
- Does captivity change Libby and if so, how?
- At what point in the story does it seem that Libby has given up?
- Do a character sketch of Ernest Bradshaw. Does he have any redeeming qualities?
- Why do you think Angus is so rebellious and Libby less so?

Look at:

- ❖ the way the reader sees Libby
- ❖ how her captor sees Libby
- ❖ how Angus sees Libby
- ❖ how Libby sees herself
- ❖ What are some of the signs that Psycho Man's behaviour is not balanced?
- ❖ Find a place that indicates how fearful Libby is
- ❖ Find a place that shows that Angus is not compliant
- ❖ Find places in the novel that show Libby:
 - ❖ is determined to escape
 - ❖ does things to deliberately get a reaction
 - ❖ is kind and considerate
- Do a profile of Libby taking in her background, appearance, attitude, likes and dislikes, how she sees herself, her mode of behaviour – how she operates and why she behaves as she does.
- Mention the strategies she uses to protect herself, the way she thinks and how she relates to Psycho Man and Angus

Setting

- Describe the basement.
- Describe the house and grounds in which Libby is held captive.

Style

- Look at the way in which the author tells the story and comment on the language Dianne Bates uses. Why does she use different narrative voices for Libby and for the man?

Cover and design

- Look at the cover for *The Girl in the Basement* by Dianne Bates and make some observations about it.
- Talk about what a cover does for a book.
- Examine the details of the design and layout of this book and the different fonts used and what their purpose is.

Speaking

- What do you consider are some turning points for Libby?
- Give reasons for your choice.
- Take on the role of Ernest Bradshaw delivering a monologue about why he wants to abduct children
- Act out a scene between Bradshaw and Angus, showing how each behaves and how Angus feels
- Do a review of this novel for your local radio

Discussion

There are many instances in this novel that show different ways of seeing things and different perceptions and perspectives – discuss this further

Talk about the importance of colour and the way it affects how people see things

Using the story as a starting point, talk about the following subjects:

- ❖ family
- ❖ trust
- ❖ friends
- ❖ guilt
- ❖ attitude
- ❖ hopes
- ❖ obsession
- ❖ pretence, lying
- ❖ caring
- ❖ expectations
- ❖ mental problems
- ❖ the place of gifts.
- ❖ how important is it to have a sense of belonging
- ❖ feelings of abandonment
- ❖ the place of mind games in people's lives

Answer these questions:

- What is Libby's greatest need?
- Why do you think Angus rebels against Bradshaw, but Libby doesn't show Bradshaw how she really feels?
- What does Libby do to escape?

- What motivates people?
- What is people's behaviour dependant on?
- Talk about the incidences in this novel where Libby seems to go along with Bradshaw and try to ascertain the reasons behind this
- Talk about how you think you would cope if you were in Libby's situation
- What did you learn from this novel?

Issues:

The following issues can be examined further using this novel as a starting point:

- ❖ mental illness in adults stalking
- ❖ anxiety
- ❖ adaptation
- ❖ hope
- ❖ how to maintain a positive attitude

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

- Look at the use of direct speech and dialogue
- Consider what telling a story in the first person enables an author to do
- There are places in this novel where the reader is given a hint about something that has not happened in the text so far. This is called foreshadowing:
- Find examples and reflect how an author is able to use this device and reflect on using this strategy in your own writing.
- Look at the change in style and writing at the end of the prologue; what purpose does it serve?
- Find a section that you felt was vividly portrayed and read this out to the rest of the class saying why you have chosen this portion.
- Pick a place in the story that is descriptive and assess what this adds to the novel.
- Find an image from the text that you felt was particularly powerful or apt and read it out to the class
- The Girl in the Basement deals with a very serious subject but are there any light moments that provide relief?
- Thoughts and feelings play a big part in this novel. Chose an example of each from the text and read them aloud to an audience, putting them in context. Ascertain what they do for the story
- Find what you felt was a poignant piece from the story and attempt to express what the writer has done to move you.
- Find a place where Dianne Bates portrays the physical side of emotional turmoil
- To be a writer you need to be a good observer and relate details to make your characters credible for the reader
- There are many mannerisms that belong to various characters – Find some instances and see how they make the character come alive
- Find a part where body language is used to convey meaning
- Examine a portion from the story that you found confronting

Writing

- Describe Libby's first interaction with her captor
- Write about how you would feel if you were held captive in a basement
- Imagine you are Angus and tell your story
- Write about the differences between Libby and Ernest Bradshaw
- As an investigating detective, write a report on Libby's disappearance
- Write a dialogue between Mr Bramble and Chrissie the night that Libby goes missing
- Tell Ernest Bradshaw's story from his (first-person) point of view

Research

Do some further study of the following:

- ❖ psychotic behaviour
- ❖ captivity
- ❖ relationships
- ❖ depression
- ❖ Stockholm Syndrome
- ❖ anger

About the author

Dianne (Di) Bates has published 120+ books for the education and trade markets. Some of Di's books have won national and state literary awards; others have sold overseas. Di has received Grants and Fellowships from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and has toured for the National Book Council.

Di has worked on the editorial team of the NSW Department of Education School Magazine. She was co-editor of a national children's magazine, Puffinalia (Penguin Books) and editor of another national magazine, Little Ears.

In 2008, Di was awarded The Lady Cutler Prize for distinguished services to children's Literature. Her latest books are *Crossing the Line*, short-listed for the NSW Premier's Awards and sold into Germany, and *Nobody's Boy*, won a 2013 CBCA Notable Book. *The Girl in the Basement* was released in 2013 by Morris Publishing Australia.

Currently Di works as a freelance writer and manuscript assessor. She lives in Wollongong, NSW, Australia, with her prize-winning YA author husband, Bill Condon. Di writes a blog: Writing for Children, <http://diannedibates.blogspot.com.au/>