

THE LANTERNIST

STEPHEN ORR

TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper Primary and Lower Secondary

Ages 10-16

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

LEARNING AREAS:

English, Science, Technology, Art, HASS

GENERAL CAPABILITIES:

Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding

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PLOT SUMMARY

1901. The magic lantern team of Bert and (his son) Tom Eliot put on slide shows across the city. 'Phantasmagoria' includes battles, bear fights and dragons flying through town halls and institutes. Bert and Tom use the ancient art of storytelling to entertain the dwindling crowds. Tom's mum, Emmy, has gone to live in Sydney with a stranger. But why?

One day Tom wakes to find his father has headed east in search of Emmy. Tom is soon evicted from the family home, and (dreaming of food) wanders back streets until he's recruited by arch-villain pawnbroker, Jimmy Sacks. Soon, Tom and his new friends, Max and Edward, are working as apprentice criminals for Jimmy's son, Eli. Tom lives in the back room of an industrial incinerator and guards his dad's projector, waiting for the day the show can go on. He escapes the clutches of Jimmy Sacks by (maybe, maybe not) pushing him under a train.

After weeks of rough living, and close calls, Tom persuades Max to accompany him to Sydney in search of his parents. They find a room full of fleas and rats in the Rocks and start their search. Soon they find Bert, but he hasn't found Emmy. Out of the shadows, Eli Sacks reappears, determined to seek revenge for his father's death. The secret of Emmy's disappearance unfolds, and the Eliots, and Max, set out on their last big adventure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Orr has spent his life dreaming up stories, teaching high school kids about the joys of stories, reading and grammar. He's been nominated for awards such as the Miles Franklin, Commonwealth Writers' Prize and Dublin International Literary Award (he is very good at coming second, but that's another story). This is his first book for people still imprisoned in school (and some who have got out). He lives in Adelaide with his wife, sons and two ducks who have made his swimming pool their permanent home.

INTRODUCTION

Books are not about the bothersome business of becoming an adult, so much as the desperate desire to avoid growing up. Although bodies get bigger, dream worlds don't change, and it's here that most of us feel most comfortable. So halfway through my supposedly grown-up life, I've decided it's time to write stories for the little person I was, for the kids I've taught for twenty-five years, but also, for the sulking, not-quite-happy adults who inhabit a world of tax returns, lawnmowers and *sensible things*.

When I was very young I sat on the floor in a charity shop and leafed through a book about an elephant hatching an egg. My gran volunteered at Vinnies once a week, dragged me along, placed me in a forest of old dresses where I worked out that wardrobes weren't for clothes, but entering other (more interesting) worlds. The back of my wardrobe didn't seem to budge, but in a way, it did. Children's books, after all, are the first stories, the original images to fire our imagination, take us around the world in eighty days, or twenty thousand leagues under the sea. *The Lanternist* is set in 1901, an era of unstoppable change. Australia is about to become a federation, our cities are growing, immigrants arriving, the first cars replacing horse-and-cart. War, and a century of change, is just around the corner.

Tom and his dad travel the country giving magic lantern shows, animating wild lions and sinking ships on the walls of institutes and town halls. This book is about the art of story, and imagination, something all of us risk losing as we grow older. After his dad sets off in search of his lost mother, Tom fends for himself, surviving the back alleys, the bear baiting, the crime gangs of Adelaide's inner-west. As with the Eliot magic lantern shows, each chapter is framed by a slide, a glimpse of colour, movement and magic.

I've tried to capture the feeling of listening, of seeing, of succumbing to story for the first time. The voice in your ear, leading you through strange places, describing wild animals, but also, the kid sitting in the corner of the room, abandoned, shivering, waiting for love.

Recently, I've returned to the books of my childhood: *The Human Comedy*, *The Little Prince*, even the day-dreamish verses of *When We Were Very Young*: strange, unexplored worlds that turned me into a writer. I hope other kids, and adults, find some of this in *The Lanternist*. You never outgrow the need to know what's in the darkest part of the forest.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Magic Lantern Shows

Nineteenth-century lantern slide shows were the movies of their day. Paintings, drawings, photos were screened on a wall in a church, town hall or institute and a 'reading' or narration read aloud for educational or entertainment purposes. People paid a penny, or whatever they could afford, to come and watch. This clip from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London explains how the shows worked.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1fUSqH5op8>

Thousands of people (like the Eliots) made a living touring their slide shows around the city and country. The better the slides, the better the narrator, the more popular. This slide (from *Alice in Wonderland*) was shown while the narrator read the words below it.

<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/alice/20>

(The Morgan Library and Museum)

The Times

1901 was a time of great change in Australia. Federation meant that six separate colonies become one country.

<https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/1957410/federation-of-australia>

(Courtesy ABC)

What had been a mainly agricultural economy (especially sheep and wheat) was becoming more industrial, and people were moving to the cities to work in factories. They lived in cold, damp houses with no plumbing or electricity. Most people were very poor, and crime was high. Health care was basic and very few children attended school beyond Year 7. Even worse, hardly anyone lived beyond the age of 50 (today it's about 84). Brompton was one of the poorer, industrial suburbs of Adelaide. Houses were built next to factories that produced toxic smoke and dangerous chemicals. (Photo of an average Brompton street c. 1901 courtesy History SA GN02290)



Past-times in the Edwardian Era

Before movies, television or internet people had to go out to get their entertainment. *The Lanternist* explores some of these past-times. Complete some research and write a one sentence explanation about

a) the cyclorama

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b) hot air balloon rides

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c) a flying trapeze (and tight-rope walkers)

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d) bear-baiting

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e) vaudeville

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(Very) early cinema

Early film-making was basic, experimental and thought of as a novelty. Most films in 1901 only lasted a minute or so. Watch James Williamson’s *The Big Swallow* (1901) and explain, briefly, how you think the original audience might have reacted to seeing something like this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxcVzs88xRg>

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Don Quixote

Don Quixote is a Spanish novel written in two parts (1605/1515) by Miguel de Cervantes. It’s one of the earliest novels ever written, and possibly the most famous. In *The Lanternist*, the Quixote slides are the Eliots’ most popular. Tom goes to a lot of trouble to protect them. The story told in the slides (and by Cervantes) mirrors Tom’s story. A nobleman from La Mancha named Alonso Quixano renames himself Don Quixote and (inspired by books about knights and adventures) goes on a journey to carry out brave deeds. He takes a simple farmer named Sancho Panza. Try and find a summary of Don Quixote, then look at the Eliots’ slides (from Victoria Museums) and see if you can match the story and slide.

<https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1703417>

READING ACTIVITIES

The Lanternist is written in the form of a novel (published in 1932) by Thomas (Tom) Eliot, based on a stage show he wrote with George Brown, a theatre manager, which premiered at the Garrick Theatre Sydney in 1925. This show was based upon Tom’s adventures in 1901 as an apprentice magic lanternist to his father, Bert Eliot.

Part I of the story is set in Adelaide’s inner-west, and Part II in Sydney’s Rocks district. Each chapter takes the form of a magic lantern slide, almost as though we are watching, not reading, the story.

Part I

Adelaide

Slide 1: The Boy Eliot is Detained

This slide shows eleven year old Tom Eliot sitting on a bed in a prison cell. He has just been arrested by Sergeant Patrick 'Paddy' Whitelock. Tom talks to a man in the next cell, and tells him why he has been arrested. What is the reason?

Slide 2: Eliot and Son, Magic Lanternists

Tom and Bert are putting on a magic lantern show in a suburb called Brompton. Find a few words or phrases that help describe the area. During the show Tom has several jobs to carry out as 'the lanternist's apprentice'. Can you name a few?

Slide 4: The Look on Rose's Face

Tom and Bert catch a steam train to Moonta to put on a show at the local hall. On their way they pass through the inner-suburbs of Adelaide and get a good view into people's back yards. Tom practises his *Don Quixote* narration. What makes you think Tom is looking forward to becoming a lanternist?

Slide 6: Bartine, the Flying Man

Tom and Bert walk along Hindley Street asking if anyone wants them to put on a lantern show. No one is interested. People would rather see the films in the new 'Bioscope'. What other popular forms of public entertainment have now died out (for example, vaudeville)? Bert thinks he sees someone in the crowd at the trapeze show. Who does he think it is? Why is he so upset?

Slide 8: The Observation and Practising School

It's been a week since Bert left for Sydney in search of Emmy. How do you think Tom is coping (use some evidence)? Also, what makes you think that Tom hates going to the Observation and Practising School? Why do you think looking at his slides makes him feel better about all of this?

Slide 10: The Monster Windmills

Tom is being evicted from the house in Pickering Street that he shares with his father. What makes you think Tom is a strong-willed character? Do you think there is a connection between Don Quixote and the windmills, and Bert and his lantern show?

Slide 12: The Pickled Feet

Tom explores Jimmy Sacks's collection of pickled feet. What might Tom be thinking while he explores this room? Also, what does he make of Eli Sacks (give some reasons). Do you think Tom wonders why Max and Edward are in Sacks's house?

Slide 14: The Apprentice

Tom is no longer the lanternist's apprentice. What sort of apprentice has he become now? Why do you think Edward and Max feel like they have to work for Eli Sacks?

Slide 16: Never Lose Hope

Tom thinks of letting the Creature out of the yard, but then says, 'That'd be as bad as stealing from a church.' What do you think this says about Tom? When Tom thinks that Sacks is following him, what is the first thing he tries to hide in the incinerator building?

Slide 18: The Boy Eliot Finds Hope

The story starts to become a mystery. Tom tracks down the ship (the *Armalde*) his dad used to get to Sydney. The captain (Bernie Mackay) tells him that Bert was headed to Cumberland Street in Sydney to find Emmy. What are a few things Tom says (or thinks) that suggests he's now more optimistic about finding his parents?

Slide 20: Death In His Many Guises

Tom's life reaches another turning point, again caused by a train. How do you think both of these events (the death of Rose, and the death of Jimmy Sacks) affect eleven year old Tom? Do you think the threat of Eli is worse than the dangers of Jimmy? Why?

Slide 22: An Evening Departure

Tom and Max have escaped Eli Sacks. They wander Port Adelaide on their way to the *Armalde*. The last few lines of this chapter slip from a third-person narration (Tom) to a first-person narration. Why do you think the author did this?

Part II

Sydney

Slide 23: The Rat Catchers

The boys arrive in Sydney and wander around The Rocks. It's rough, tough, full of rats, sailors and thieves. What do we learn about the journey from Adelaide to Sydney on the *Armalde*?

Slide 25: Horse Exercise For All

The boys have snuck into a room at the Ocean Wave Hotel. They wake early, and Tom thinks about his dad. They're discovered, and make a run for it. They walk to Cumberland Street to try and find Emmy. What do the boys find out about her? Who do they meet in Frog Hollow?

Slide 27: Geo. Brown's Gaieties

What are some of Tom's impressions of the Garrick Theatre? What do you think Bert means when he says to Tom, 'Your mother'll soon change her tune when she sees where we're livin'?' Vaudeville was a variety show (singing, juggling, comedy, dancing, anything that would attract an audience). What are some modern equivalents of this type of entertainment?

Slide 29: The Self-Consuming Man

Bert has a lot of hope for his new act, The Australian Gentleman. But it seems the crowd want a different sort of entertainment. Do you think George Brown knew this, and why did he allow Bert to go on knowing he'd fail?

Slide 31: Three Shows A Day

Tom and Max watch the acts at George Brown's Gaieties. They enjoy the Uncrushable Man. Bert has now become a singing plumber, swapping songs for comedy. This time the audience is even tougher, and Tom runs down and asks if anyone can do any better. This tells us more about Tom. What words or phrases would *you* use to describe *The Lanternist's* protagonist (main character)?

Slide 33: The Phantasm and the Iceman

Things have changed. Bert, Tom (and now Max) have returned to their old magic lantern show, this time putting on a show about the adventures of Aladdin. This is much more successful.

What do the stories of Aladdin and Tom Eliot have in common? Who do you think Tom sees in Row S?

Slide 35: Eli Sacks: Thief, Murderer of Children

Tom and Max stop to watch some students in a local school dancing around a maypole. What does the following conversation tell us about Max and Tom? Although they have an exciting life, what do you think they'd rather be doing? What makes you think that Max is missing his brother back in Adelaide?

Slide 37: Mrs Foer Again!

Tom is waiting in the underground cells before he is called in front of a judge. Another prisoner tells him about Dr Alex Bates. Why is Tom interested in this name? Try to compare (similarities) and contrast (differences) Morgan and Lyons. Why does Lyons mention the story of Rapunzel? How does Mrs Foer eventually help Tom?

Slide 39: Destitute, Aged and Imbecile

The asylum is described as a very dark, cold, frightening place. Do you think it looks like a good place to lock away mentally-ill people? Why do you think this happened? What do you think was going through Tom's head when he finally saw his mother locked away in the cell? What do you think the Eliots will help Max do when they get back to Adelaide?

Discussion Questions

- 1) How do some of the characters from the beginning of the story come back at the end to help (or hinder) Tom?
- 2) 'Gothic' stories (like *Dracula*, or stories by Edgar Allen Poe) are dark, filled with dangerous characters, fear, threats, shadows. Like fairy tales, they are meant to scare us without hurting us. And in doing this, they teach lessons. What sort of lessons do you think Tom (and Bert) learned during *The Lanternist*?
- 3) When he was living in Adelaide, Tom thought he might never see his parents again. He planned, waited and worked to find a way to get to them. Can you think of a challenge in your life where you have had to work to overcome an obstacle?
- 4) Do you think the kids (Tom, Max, Edward, Annie) in the story are smarter and braver than the adults? Why?

- 5) In what ways do you think the world is better (or worse) today than it was when the book was set in 1901?
- 6) The following seven points describe **themes** from the story (ideas that keep repeating, that seem to be the 'big message'). Number them from 1-7 in order of importance.
 - a) the power of stories (slideshows, fairy tales, vaudeville acts etc)
 - b) the importance of persistence (eg Tom trying to find his parents)
 - c) the power of love (eg Tom and his parents)
 - d) the way technology changes the world (for better or worse)
 - e) the importance of standing up to bullies (and other 'villains')
 - f) history changes, but people don't
 - g) the way art reflects life, and vice versa (eg slides, music, stories, novels)
- 7) Draw your own magic lantern slide, and write a short narration to go with it.