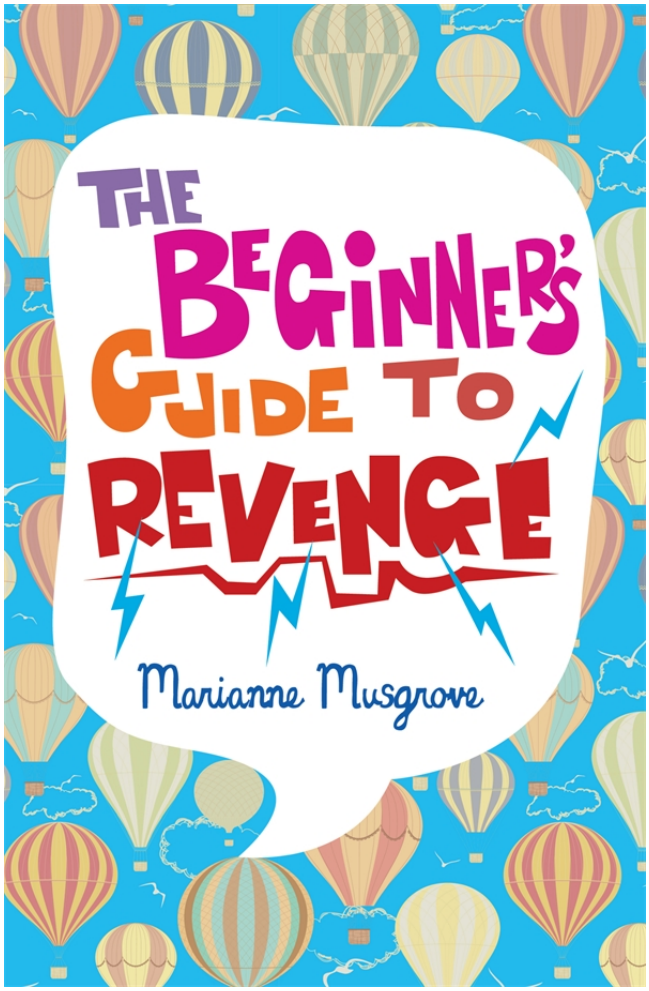
THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO REVENGE

MARIANNE MUSGROVE



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

by Marianne Musgrove

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THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO REVENGE
Teachers' resources

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a soldier's daughter, Romola's already been to five schools, always having to make new friends ... and now enemies. Meanwhile, Sebastian's mum is about to make the biggest mistake of their lives, unless Sebastian can find his dad in time to stop her.

Thrown together by chance, these two thirteen-year-olds set out to even the score. But once that big old ball of revenge starts rolling down the hill, there's not an awful lot they can do to stop it ... or is there?

2. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marianne Musgrove is an award-winning South Australian children's author and poet. She is a descendant of King Henry VIII's librarian, so you could say that books are in her blood! Marianne decided to become an author in Year Five, eventually achieving her dream 25 years later. Her first book, *The Worry Tree*, won the Australian Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature 2008 as well as being shortlisted for the national Children's Peace Literature Award 2007, the Queensland Premier's Literary Award 2008 and the SA Festival Awards for Literature 2008. Her third novel, *Don't Breathe a Word*, was a Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Book in 2010, and the German language edition of this title won the 2011 Swiss Prix Chronos. A trained social worker, law school dropout and one-time tomato picker, Marianne has also written *Lucy the Good* and *Lucy the Lie Detector*, a series about a seven-year-old philosopher with an unusual take on the world.

To find out more, check out www.mariannemusgrove.com.au

3. AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

I'll never forget the day a girl in my class accused me of copying a poem I had written and slaved over. How I wanted to get back at her! How I wanted to take my revenge! But I didn't – I'd been taught it was wrong to do so. Despite this, the feelings simmered inside me for a long time, and thirty years later, the memory is still vivid. This got me thinking about how children's feelings are often at odds with how they are told to behave. I wondered how a character might feel and act given extreme provocation. Would they dwell on it? Would they pay the person back or forgive them? Or go into denial, convincing themselves nothing that bad has happened? Having observed many children paying each other back for various crimes and then getting in trouble for it, I wondered: if society tells you you're not allowed to take revenge on someone, where do the feelings of revenge go? Are they merely buried? And what is the alternative to revenge?

During the 1990s, I worked as a community development worker for the Department of Veterans' Affairs. During that time, I met many ex-servicemen and women and got to hear their stories – some tragic, some brave. I marvelled at how these people were able to forgive the 'enemy' despite watching many of their friends and colleagues perish. This got me thinking about the nature of forgiveness and how it is quite a different thing to condoning or excusing another's actions. I wanted to explore this idea and apply it to two young protagonists who have both been significantly betrayed. How would they respond to the ones who had hurt them most?

I also love writing funny stories, and if any subject ever needed lightening up, it is revenge! And so, with the help of two quirky characters, Romola and Sebastian, *The Beginner's Guide to Revenge* was born.

4. STYLE AND STRUCTURE

The Beginner's Guide to Revenge is told from the perspectives of two thirteen-year-olds, Romola and Sebastian. By alternating between their first-person narratives, the novel provides two unique voices from which to explore the main theme of revenge. While Romola and Sebastian have quite different personalities, they both encounter the same dilemma of dealing with their vengeful feelings and, on a larger scale, resolving the origins of such feelings.

Both voices are set in the present tense, giving the story a sense of immediacy. This acts to engage the reader, bringing them closer to the action and the characters. The combination of the first-person narration and the use of present tense help the reader to empathise with the characters and what they are going through.

While the novel touches on serious subjects, it is also filled with humour. Romola's quirky style provides much of the comic relief, particularly from Sebastian's darker musings.

The theme of revenge is also manifest in the epigraphs that precede certain chapters. All the epigraphs are quotations about revenge, used to reflect the character's current state of mind and attitude towards revenge.

5. PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Think about the title of the novel. What do you think it could be about? Do you think the story will be pro-revenge or anti-revenge?
- Create a mindmap centred around the word 'revenge'. Brainstorm words, feelings and images that come to mind when you think of that word. This will help you to identify the different issues involved in the theme of revenge and to explore the relationships between them.
- Using library resources and the internet, research the history of ANZAC Day and the significance of laying a red poppy.
- Read the first chapter where Sebastian sends an email to his father. He refers to doing something extreme. What do you think that extreme thing might be? What can you tell about Sebastian's father from the email?
- Romola's father is a soldier in the Australian Army. What do you think it might be like to have a parent serving overseas in the military?
- Revenge is a strong theme in Greek mythology. After reading some of these legends – and the tale of Circe, Glaucus and Scylla, in particular – think about how the Greek gods and goddesses view the act of revenge.

6. THEMES

- Revenge
- Forgiveness
- War and peace / Conflict resolution
- Friendship / Bullying
- Facing painful truths
- Family
- Self-esteem / Self-determination

REVENGE

KEY QUOTATIONS

You will find many of the chapters in the book are preceded by a quotation on revenge by other writers. In addition to these, the in-text quotations listed below highlight Romola and Sebastian's differing views on revenge.

> 'Look, forget about revenge. Think of it as getting even. She did something to you and that put things out of balance. You need to get things back in balance – you know – even. If you don't, you'll always be a pathetic victim who gets walked all over.'
> (Sebastian, pp.84–5)

> 'Answer me this,' says Sebastian. 'Do you believe in putting people in jail for breaking the law?'
> 'Yeah.'
> 'That's the court's way of taking revenge on a person for what they've done. It's justice. You don't think justice is wrong, do you?'
> (Romola, p.85)

> 'You have to help me – I can't think of any revenges!'
> As she thrusts the book at me, her dark hair is loosely pulled back from her face and her eyes burn with hate. She looks just like Circe holding out her dish of poison. Did I look like that when I deleted Marshall's files? It's not pretty. In fact, it's kind of scary.
> (Sebastian on Romola, p.130)

> I let myself imagine getting back at Riley for a second, but stop just in time – once those thoughts are off their leash, there's no telling where they might run. 'Isn't it better to forgive people?'
> (Romola, p.184)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Sebastian's *Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends*

At the beginning of the novel, the encyclopedia is a positive influence on Sebastian. As it is never far from his side, it is clear from early on that the encyclopedia holds great sentimental value to Sebastian. Previously owned by his absent father, reading the encyclopedia is a way for Sebastian to feel connected to him.

But it soon becomes apparent that the content of the book – the various tales of Ancient

Greek gods and goddesses enacting their vengeful turns upon one another – begins to fuel Sebastian's desire for revenge. By writing his own revenges in the back of the book, Sebastian discovers a way to feel better about his situation, giving him a temporary sense of empowerment and control over his life. And later, through Sebastian, it stokes the flames in Romola's vengeful heart, leading her down a dark path.

When Romola and Sebastian eventually toss the book into the lake, they are symbolically releasing their desire for revenge.

The J W Waterhouse painting, *Circe Invidiosa* (1892)

On the cover of Sebastian's encyclopedia and Romola's postcard, is a painting by J W Waterhouse. It depicts Circe, a figure in Greek mythology, tipping a nasty potion into a pool of water in order to take revenge on Scylla, a beautiful sea nymph, for rejecting the sea god Glaucus. It embodies all that is vengeful.

Achilles heel

Every character in the novel has a weak spot. For Romola, it is her lack of self-confidence, her need to fit in and her desire to be 'normal'. This is played out in the novel through her desire for acceptance by her friends which morphs into her goal to be acceptable. For Sebastian, it is his need to be loved by his father. When Romola discovers the letter from Riley's orthodontist, Sebastian explains the story of Achilles and how Romola has found Riley's weak spot. As revenge is most effective when you strike a person's weak spot, Romola finds herself faced with a moral dilemma: to take revenge or not take revenge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is Sebastian drawn to his father's book of myths and legends?
- In many ways, Romola and Sebastian start out as opposites – he wants to take revenge while she does not. As the story progresses, their views change. What do you think causes this shift?
- Initially, Romola does not wish to hear the myth of Circe, Glaucus and Scylla. Why? Why do you think she later changes her mind and demands that Sebastian explain it to her?
- Throughout history, people have sought to exact revenge on each other. Why do you think that is?
- Sebastian suggests to Romola that putting someone in jail is the government's way of taking revenge on that person (p.85). Do you agree? If not, what makes it different?
- Why doesn't Sebastian want to wear Rex's medals?
- Does a person's motive for taking revenge make a difference?
- Sebastian takes revenge on Marshall on the spur of the moment whereas Romola plots to take revenge on Riley. Is there any difference? Do you consider one worse than the other? Why?
- What are the disadvantages of taking revenge?
- Is remaining a victim the only alternative?
- The expression 'getting even' suggests there is an imbalance when someone does you wrong. Other than revenge, what alternatives are available to you to restore the balance?

ACTIVITIES

- Divide the class into an even number of teams. Each team will be given a specific line of argument to debate one of the following topics:
  - Revenge is never acceptable
  - 'Those who plot the destruction of others often perish in the attempt' (Thomas Moore)
  - Revenge is the same as justice
- Where Do You Stand

  Clear a space in the classroom or go outside for this exercise. Write a list of different scenarios (three examples are provided here). Your teacher will read out a series of statements. For each statement, move to the left of the room if you agree, and move to the right of the room if you disagree, or stay in the middle of you are undecided. The more strongly you feel, the further to the left or right you should stand. Your teacher can select students at random and ask them to explain why they chose to stand where they are.
  Example 1: If someone commits a crime, sending them to jail is a form of revenge.
  Example 2: It is okay to forgive someone if they do something bad to you once, but if they keep doing it to you over and over, you should never forgive them.
  Example 3: Forgiving someone is the weak option.
- Pick a myth or legend, and draw a scene from it. Knowing the Ancient Greeks and Romans, your myth probably features some revenge in it! There is usually a positive message buried in the myth, too. Do you know what it is?

FORGIVENESS

The notion of forgiveness – of putting things to rest and releasing them to attain freedom – is also explored in the novel. Sebastian is forgiven for his actions by Marshall, but he also lets go of his anger, his desire for revenge, and his illusions about his father. Romola must decide whether or not to take revenge on Riley. If she does, she risks becoming locked in a cycle of revenge.

KEY QUOTATIONS

> The ballast is let loose, the pilot calls, 'All clear!', and the balloon lifts straight into the air. The passengers wave to us and we wave back, watching them soar higher and higher into the sky. And just for a moment, I feel light.
> (Romola, pp.108–9)

> 'Hate's a funny thing, Sebastian. Hang onto it too long and it starts to shape who you are. I realised that if I didn't forgive those people, I'd be tied to them forever and I'd still be in prison – up here.' [Rex] taps the side of his head.
> 'But how could you forgive them after the terrible things they did?'
> 'Forgiving isn't the same as excusing. They'll answer for what they did. Nothing to do with me – that's my two cents' worth, anyway.'
> (Sebastian, p.137)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Balloons

A balloon cannot soar into the sky if it is weighed down by ballast. In the novel, the balloon represents freedom from negative thoughts and emotions, such as hate and pain. Letting go of the ballast is the equivalent of forgiving someone and putting that negativity and hurt to rest.

Poppies

Poppies are traditionally laid at the ANZAC Day service to remember those who died while fighting for their country. As poppies only grow in soil that has been disturbed, they symbolise the blossoming of new life and hope after a crisis. In *The Beginner's Guide to Revenge*, laying a poppy has multiple meanings: forgiveness, laying a burden to rest, peace, and hope for a better future.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- List all the characters in the book who need to forgive someone for something, or who need to be forgiven for something they have done. Why do you think it is sometimes so hard to forgive?
- Rex is an advocate for letting go of one's hate and vengeful feelings. What reason does he give for holding such a view? Do you agree?
- What exactly is forgiveness? Is it the same as saying that what the person did was okay (i.e. condoning their behaviour)? Is it the same as excusing someone for what they did? Or is it something else altogether? Give reasons for your answers.
- Laying a poppy means different things to different people. What does it mean to Rex? What does it mean to Sebastian? What does it mean to Romola when she watches the old man lay a poppy? What does it mean to you?

ACTIVITIES

- Research the history of the poppy. Why was this flower chosen as a symbol of remembrance?
- Let The Balloon Go

  For each person, you will need something heavy, such as a lump of Blu-Tack or a rock, a handkerchief or square of cloth, a piece of string, a piece of paper, a pair of scissors, a pencil, a balloon and helium to inflate the balloon.

  Write or draw something for which you would either like to forgive someone or for which you would like to be forgiven. Place the sheet of paper and the Blu-Tack inside the handkerchief and tie it up with string. Fill a balloon with helium and tie the bundle to the bottom. Note how the balloon cannot take off. Now cut the string and see how the balloon rises when the weight is released.

  Note: Before the activity, you will need to test how heavy the weight needs to be to stop the balloon from ascending before it is cut. To keep this activity environmentally friendly, make sure none of the balloons escape from the classroom!

WAR AND PEACE / CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Related to the overall theme of revenge, the book explores the idea of conflict on a personal and a universal level. On a personal level, Romola finds herself at odds with someone she considers a friend while Sebastian is in conflict with his stepfather-to-be. The story also draws on the history of Australia's involvement in the Korean War – an example of large-scale conflict that is explored in the novel through the supporting characters of Rex and his war-veteran mates. Rex, in particular, shares his views on revenge and forgiveness with Sebastian. These conflicts are played out against the backdrop of ANZAC Day.

KEY QUOTATIONS

> It's as if a grenade's gone off in my belly. Riley said she couldn't see me today because she had to help her mum. That means she lied and my friends made plans without me. I should never have walked out on that party.
> (Romola, pp.67–8)

> All I can think about is hurting Marshall. Really hurting him. That's when I see his laptop open on the table. There's an icon on the desktop which says 'Canberra interviews'. It must have all the audio files of his recent research. A surge of rage courses through me. I click on the icon and drag the folder into the trash, then I empty the trash before I can change my mind. There. I shut the computer and run out of the house.
>
> As I bolt down the street, it's as if there's petrol in my veins and someone's lit a match. I could tow a Mack Truck up a hill or rip a tree right out of the ground. I did it. I took charge and Marshall got what he deserved. I am not a victim.
> I am not a victim.
> (Sebastian, p.94)

> I return my gaze to Riley and, for the first time, see her for what she is: a girl who's so desperate to be popular, she'll hurt anyone to keep her position. I could get her back, sure, but then what? She'd get me back then I'd get her back and we'd be forever at war.
> (Romola, p.152)

> I can't move. I'm like one of those people who's stepped on a landmine – once they've put their foot down, they don't dare lift it up again or it'll explode.
> (Sebastian, p.169)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

ANZAC Day
ANZAC Day is about remembering our fallen soldiers and reconfirming our commitment to peace.

Poppies (see above)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Riley says ANZAC Day is about glorifying war, but Romola has a different opinion (p.7), as does Rex (p.138). Why do you think there are such differing opinions on the

subject? And what does ANZAC Day mean to you?

- At different points in the story (pp.84–5, 94, 133–4), Sebastian and Romola believe taking revenge will stop them from being a victim. Do you agree?
- Read *In Flanders Fields* (p.180). Although this poem is read at ANZAC Day services all around the world, there is some controversy surrounding the meaning of the poem. Some argue it encourages war while others dispute this. Which lines do you think might suggest a pro-war position? What other way could these lines be interpreted? Do you think the author intended the meaning of the poem to be ambiguous?
- Throughout the book, the author uses war imagery to describe how the characters think and feel, even though they do not live in a war zone (see the first and last key quotations listed in this section for examples of this technique). Why do you think she has done this?
- Why do you think the climax of both Romola's and Sebastian's moral dilemmas occur on ANZAC Day?

ACTIVITIES

- Read the poem *In Flanders Fields* and try to write a war poem of your own.
- Attend the ANZAC Day Dawn Service.
- Interview someone who has served in a war and ask them what ANZAC Day means to them. Ask them about their thoughts on forgiveness and revenge.

FRIENDSHIP / BULLYING

Until very recently, Romola has never had a group of friends. At age thirteen, she has finally made it into a group, but it is not the experience she has anticipated as the leader of the group bullies her. The novel also traces Romola's unlikely friendship with Sebastian. Intergenerational friendships are also featured: Rex and Maisie are good friends with Romola, and Sebastian forms a friendship with Rex and, eventually, Marshall.

KEY QUOTATIONS

As I shiver on the dark porch risking frostbite and possible toe amputation, the reality of my walkout hits me. Did I just lose the only group of friends I've ever had?
(Romola, p.9)

New And Improved Romola's plan is to keep talking [to Riley]. As long as we're having a conversation, we're technically still friends. And if Riley and I are still friends, Paige will follow her lead. And Amal likes me anyway. At least, I think she does. She called to see if I made it home okay, which was nice, although, come to think of it, we only became friends in the first place because the teacher asked her to take me under her wing.
(Romola, p.60)

I glance down at the friendship band on my wrist and see that it's started to fray. When did that happen?
(Romola, p.75-6)

Can your heart sink and rise at the same time? I'll be losing another friend, but Sebastian's found his dad and that's great. 'Fantastic news!' I say.
(Romola, p .83)

'It's just, even though what Riley did was pretty awful, if I make a fuss . . . I dunno, sometimes you just have to suck it up.If I want to keep my friends, I don't really have a choice, do I?'
'Romola, Riley's not your friend.'
(Sebastian, p.88)

'That peacock bag bizzo's all in the past. I can't spend my life holding grudges.'
Out of the corner of my eye, I see him regarding me closely. 'You deserve better,' he says.
What's he talking about? They're my friends. I swat his words away and shove my phone back in my pocket.
(Romola, p.110)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Friendship band

Romola constantly looks at the friendship band Riley gave her to convince herself Riley truly is her friend. As the book progresses, Romola notices the band has started to fray, symbolising her deteriorating friendship with Riley. In the end, Romola returns the friendship band to Riley, symbolising the end of their friendship.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How has the author used the friendship band to indicate the state of Riley and Romola's friendship?
- For a long time, Romola thinks Riley and Paige are her friends. What qualities do they display that indicate that they are not worthy of Romola's friendship?
- Romola and Sebastian are very different people yet they become good friends. How do their differences and similarities affect their growing friendship?
- Many different types of friendships are presented in the book. List all the friendships you can think of, including Circe and Glaucus. Giving examples, explain what you admire about these friendships? What do you dislike about these friendships, and why?
- What do you think makes a good friend?
- How does Riley go about bullying Romola? Give examples. Why don't the other girls in the group stand up for Romola?
- List some things you could do or say if you witnessed someone being bullied.

FACING PAINFUL TRUTHS

Both Romola and Sebastian spend much of the novel avoiding painful truths. For Romola, that means pretending to herself that she is not being bullied. For Sebastian, it involves clinging to the belief that his father is a kind and reliable man who will be rejoining the family any day now. By the end of the book, both characters are able to face these painful truths and this, in turn, releases them from their pain.

KEY QUOTATIONS

If I don't get these bad thoughts under control, they'll multiply. Believe me, I know, and since I'm not a huge fan of bad thoughts, I do a little trick I like to call burialisation.
(Romola, p.3)

'I've always wondered what that green stuff was. I have this theory that it's a love potion and she's a sweet nymph in love with a prince.'
'What are you on about?' I say. 'Look at her eyes. They're really intense and evil-looking. Her real name's Circe and she's –'
Romola covers her ears with her hands and starts chanting, 'La la la – don't say anymore! La la la – you'll spoil it! La la la –'
'You seriously don't want to know?' 'La la la – I prefer the fantasy – la la la –'
'Fine,' I say, taking her hands away from her ears. 'I won't tell you the true story.'
(Sebastian, pp.86–87)

'So you want to forget him?' [asks Romola.]
'No, he's still my dad, but I don't need a book to remember him by.'
(Romola, pp.162–3)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Romola's imaginary cemetery
Romola is not a fan of bad thoughts or feelings so she buries them in an imaginary cemetery. Unfortunately, these thoughts and feelings have a habit of unearthing themselves, most spectacularly at the Illumicube right after Riley causes Romola to miss her father's Skype call. Romola eventually erects a 'Closed for business' sign on the gates of her cemetery, making it clear to the reader that she will be facing her problems from now on, rather than burying them.

The J W Waterhouse painting, *Circe Invidiosa* (1892)
Initially, Romola wishes to believe her own romantic version of the Circe myth, saying that she 'prefer[s] the fantasy' (p.87) Later, as her mind becomes filled with thoughts of revenge, Sebastian notes that Romola has begun to resemble Circe (pp.129–30).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why does Sebastian take so long to see the truth about his father?
- Why does Romola bury things in her imaginary cemetery?
- What is the effect of burying all those emotions?
- What are some alternative ways of dealing with bad thoughts and feelings?
- What is the significance of Sebastian likening Romola's appearance to Circe?

FAMILY

The novel explores fractured and blended families, whether the 'fracture' is due to work, as is the case with Romola's father, or by choice, such as with Sebastian's father. Both Romola and Sebastian struggle to find ways to reconnect their families.

The hardships of an army family are explored through Romola's narrative. The sacrifice of a 'normal' home life – moving and changing schools every time Romola's father is transferred, and her father's absence for long periods of time – is shown to have a profound effect on Romola. It is part of the reason why she longs to be 'normal' and puts up with Riley's bullying in order to keep her as a friend. The hardships of an army family are also exhibited in the dynamic between Romola and her mother through their keen understanding of one another. Romola's family reconnect during their conversations on Skype, on which Romola and her mother place immense significance.

Sebastian has, in many ways, taken on his father's role by looking after his little sister and

doing the cooking. Yet he yearns for his father's return. He tries to keep his father's memory alive with his little sister, and he is never far from his father's encyclopedia – an object that makes him feel closer to his father. When Marshall arrives on the scene, Sebastian's efforts are concentrated on removing Marshall to keep his family intact, not yet understanding that his family is already broken. Only when Sebastian accepts the truth about his father is he able to build a new kind of family with Marshall as a member.

KEY QUOTATIONS

> ... I lie under the covers, trying to remember when Dad last called. Was it six months ago? Seven? What about his last actual visit? I think it was at the start of the cricket season – not last year but the year before that ... That's over eighteen months ago – a long time for a six-year-old girl. Even so, I wish her memory was better. Now it's down to me to remember him for both of us.
> (Sebastian, p.18)

> Unfortunately, I'm not speaking to my real dad. I'm talking to my pretend dad – the doll I used to imagine was my father when I was a kid.
> (Romola, p.105)

> 'I'm not trying to replace your dad. But I'd really like it if I could be someone in your life who looks out for you. Do you think you could cope with that?'
> (Sebastian, p.156)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Romola's 'Pretend Dad' doll

As a child, when Romola's father was on a tour of duty, Romola used to pretend a doll dressed as a soldier was her father. When she finds the doll again, she hasn't spoken to her father in weeks so she begins speaking to the doll once more. This highlights her deep-felt need to have a connection with her father.

Sebastian's Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends

When Sebastian tosses the encyclopedia of myths and legends into the lake, he is symbolically throwing away the myth he has long held about his father. He finally sees his father for who he really is and not the myth that he created about his father – that he is a reliable person who will return one day so that they can be a family once again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Romola and Sebastian's fathers are absent for very different reasons. Describe the similarities and differences in their experiences.
- Marshall, and Rex to some extent, are stand-in father-figures for Sebastian. Describe their style of 'fathering' and how it compares with Woody, Sebastian's biological father.
- Neither Romola nor Sebastian come from a traditional family structure with two parents living under the same roof with their children. What do you think makes a family? Do you think there is such a thing as a 'normal' family?
- How do Romola and Sebastian's family lives influence their personalities?

ACTIVITIES

- List all the different kinds of families you can think of. For example, a child living 50% at their mother's house and 50% at their father's house; two grandparents and a grandchild; a sister bringing up her younger siblings; two parents with an adopted

child, etc. What might it be like to live in a family different from your own? What would be the joys? What would be the challenges? Now invent a set of characters with this family structure and write a story about them.

SELF-ESTEEM/SELF-DETERMINATION

The key to healthy self-esteem is being comfortable with who you are and not having to hide your true self to anyone. Romola spends much of the novel trying to repress 'Old Romola' (her true self) and reinventing herself as 'New and Improved Romola'. It is not until Riley tries to force her to cut her hair and, in effect, extinguish our heroine's 'Romola-ness' (p.115), that Romola finally begins to stand up for herself.

KEY QUOTATIONS

> 'Dad says the reason soldiers wear camouflage is to blend into the background. Brightly coloured clothes make you a target so no floral boots or peacock combs for me.'
> (Romola, p.111)

> 'Oh, I, um ...' Finding it hard to breathe, I pull at my clothing. I feel as if I'm wearing one of those old-fashioned corsets and Riley is standing behind me pulling the laces tighter and tighter, trying to make me fit.
> (Romola, p.114)

> I can't help thinking of the Navajo Indians and their belief that every thought they've ever had is stored in their hair. The longer the hair, the greater the wisdom. I run my fingers through my thick dark mane and wonder, would my wisdom, my personality – my Romola-ness, as Dad likes to call it – disappear with each chopped lock?
> (Romola, p.115)

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Romola's hair

Romola has very long hair which she loves and which symbolises her individuality. Riley, envious of Romola's hair, and wanting to crush her rival, pressures Romola to cut it. Romola has a decision to make about how much she is willing to compromise to be a part of a friendship group.

Peacock feathers

Romola loves peacock feathers. At the start of the book, Romola always wears her peacock feather hair comb. However, as the story wears on and Romola tries harder and harder to fit in with her group of friends, she stops wearing the comb so as not to draw attention to herself when she goes to the shops (p.111). She does not wear it to the ANZAC Day service either. She is not herself in this scene but fuelled by a desire for revenge. It is not until the final chapter when all is resolved and Romola has begun to make a new life for herself that we see her wearing the comb once more (p.176).

Riley tries to spoil Romola's love of peacock feathers by suggesting they are bad luck. Later, Sebastian shows her that they can also be good luck, so their positive symbolism is restored.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Read the passages where Romola refers to 'New And Improved Romola' (pp.2–4, 7–8, 59–61). Why does she think she needs improving? How does trying to be 'New And Improved Romola' harm her? Who does Romola become in the end? Describe that person.
- There are many stories about the importance of hair (Medusa, Sampson, the Navajo Indians) and the significance of cutting it off (or in Medusa's case, having it transform into snakes). Discuss the significance of Romola's hair to her identity. Why does Riley want her to cut it off? Why does Romola refuse?

ACTIVITIES

Being You

Write a list of things that make you who you are (your interests, personality traits, background and abilities). Is there anything you're embarrassed to write down because you're afraid others will laugh at you? (You don't have to share this with others unless you want to.)

7. ACTIVITIES

Characters' Physical Appearance and Personality

One way of conveying a character's personality and/or emotional state is through their physical appearance. For example, Sebastian has a long fringe that he hides behind, thus showing his desire to be left alone. Write down what you know about each character's clothing, hairstyle and accessories then explain what it shows about that character's personality or emotional state.

If an aspect of a character changes over the course of the novel (e.g. Romola's clothing), it is usually an indication of an underlying shift in the character's personality or emotional state. Take a note of this by tracking the change through different periods in the book.

Character	*Physical description*	*Personality trait / emotional state*
Sebastian		• Hair: Sebastian's fringe is described several times in the novel as obscuring his face, signalling that he likes to be left alone.
Romola		

Character	*Physical description*	*Personality trait / emotional state*
Riley		
Marshall		
Rex		
Maisie		

Character	*Physical description*	*Personality trait / emotional state*
Cass (Romola's mum)		
Gina (Sebastian's mum)		
Idgie		

Creating Characters and Conflict

A book without conflict is, generally speaking, a very boring book. Conflict adds drama to a story, shows characters in a different light, moves the plot forward and keeps things interesting for the reader. Much of the action in *The Beginner's Guide to Revenge* comes from the interaction between the two very different main characters, Romola and Sebastian.

Break into an even number of small groups. Each group will create a character by completing the questions below. Once you have finished, swap your sheet with another group.After reading the other group's character statements, imagine how your character and their character might meet. Would they get along? What might they fight about? Think of a situation in which there might be conflict between the two of them. You now have the beginnings of a story!

If there are any actors in the class, ask them to come up in front of the class and pretend to be their character. The class can ask them questions about themselves and each volunteer can answer, thus fleshing out their character.

Complete the following statements as if you were this character:

- I am male / female (choose)
- My name is .....
- My age is .....
- My greatest fear is ... .
- The first thing people notice about my physical appearance is my .....
- A secret I am keeping from everyone is .....
- What I want more than anything in the world is .....
- The obstacle in the way of achieving my goal is .....
- Something people find irritating about me is the way I .....
- I'm very good at .....
- I'm very bad at .....
- When someone betrays me, I react by .....
- If I could change one thing about myself, it would be .....
- My life would be perfect if only .....
- Something I would never do is .....