

the lost girl

TEACHING GUIDE

Includes Discussion
Questions,
Classroom
Activities,
and an Exclusive
Author Letter

by Anne Ursu

About the Book



ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WERE TWO SISTERS, ALIKE IN EVERY WAY, EXCEPT FOR ALL THE WAYS THAT THEY WERE DIFFERENT.

WHEN YOU'RE AN IDENTICAL TWIN, your story always starts with someone else. For Iris, that means her story starts with Lark. Iris has always been the grounded, capable, and rational one; Lark has been inventive, dreamy, and brilliant—and from their first moments in the world together, they've never left each other's side. Everyone around them realized early on what the two sisters already knew: they had better outcomes when they were together.

When fifth grade arrives, however, it's decided that Iris and Lark should be split into different classrooms, and something breaks in them both. Iris is no longer so confident; Lark retreats into herself as she deals with challenges at school. And at the same time, something strange is happening in the city around them: things both great and small going missing without a trace. As Iris begins to understand that anything can be lost in the blink of an eye, she decides it's up to her to find a way to keep her sister safe.

About the Author

Anne Ursu is the author of *Breadcrumbs*, named one of the best books of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly* and the Chicago Public Library, and *The Real Boy*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award. She is also a member of the faculty at Hamline University's MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults. Anne lives in Minneapolis with her family and an ever-growing number of cats. You can visit her online at WWW.ANEURSU.COM



Pre-Reading Activity

Some voices in society aren't heard or given as much credence as others. This is particularly true of young people, and especially girls. Why do some voices carry more weight than others? Can you think of a time when your voice hasn't been heard or it felt like what you had to say didn't matter to others? In your experience, why do you think this happens? How did it make you feel?

How can you amplify your voice? How does sharing your thinking and your experiences with others help you to gain confidence and/or conviction? Who helps you strengthen your voice? How can you help amplify the voices of others? How can you be an ally or supporter for voices who aren't being heard?

Discussion Questions

1 “The girls were identical, but not the same.” (p. 1) As you read, track the characteristics of Iris and Lark. In what ways are the girls the same? What are the traits and qualities that make them different from one another? How do the girls' differences make them compatible as a pair?

2 Who is the narrator of this story, and what is the narrator's point of view? How would this story be different if it were told in first person, or from the point of view of one twin or the other? From another character's point of view?

3 When Iris and Lark receive their letters with their 5th grade class assignments (pp. 19-24), they are shocked to discover they are in different classes for the first time. Not only that: this decision was made without their knowledge or consent. In the girls' conversation with their parents, Iris asserts that her parents should have involved them in the decision. Are the twins more upset with the decision for them to be in separate classrooms or that the adults made this decision without them?

4 In what ways have Lark's medical conditions (complications from her premature birth, pp. 25-27; hospitalized with meningitis, pp. 157-160) impacted the girls' relationship?

5 Chapter Seven, “Report Cards,” (pp. 49-51) presents a history of observations of Lark and Iris made by previous teachers. What do those observations say about how each girl is doing on her own? In what ways is it in the girls' best interest to be in different classes for fifth grade? In what ways might it have been in their best interest to be in the same classroom? [Make notes of students' observations and tuck them away. Return to this question later in the story, perhaps after the owl pellet activity in Chapter 20 (pp. 175-177) and/or the astronomy project. (p. 262)]

6 Consider the theme of something being lost as it relates to this book (lost objects, lost artwork) and its title (*The Lost Girl*). What is the relationship between something being lost and something going missing? Between something being lost and being stolen?

7 What do crows symbolize in this story? In what ways are they a good fit for this story, its characters, plot, and genre?

8 What is Iris's greatest struggle in the transition to separate classrooms and separate activities? What does she discover about herself when she begins to attend Camp Awesome as an individual?

Discussion Questions (continued)

- 9** The term “monster” (or a variation) is used repeatedly throughout the story as a metaphor. While the girls’ play and conversations make it clear they are describing imaginary monsters, in what ways are the metaphors real to them?
- 10** “My girl. I love how you take care of your sister. You are so brave and loving. But don’t forget to take care of yourself, too.” (p. 199) What message is Mom trying to deliver to Iris? In what ways has Iris lost sight of herself?
- 11** Why is the title *The Lost Girl* so fitting for this book? In what ways does the title refer to either Lark or Iris? Try to make a case for each of the twins. Could the title be referring to girls in general? How or why? Collect and compare evidence to support your opinion.
- 12** In what ways does Iris see parallels between her sister Lark and Mr. George Green’s sister Alice? (pp. 216-220)
- 13** How does Iris change as she makes more visits to Treasure Hunters? Why does she share less and less of herself and her experiences with Lark?
- 14** Among the other things Alice scrawled in the pages of the book Iris found at Treasure Hunters is the statement: “Magic has a cost.” (p. 226) What does this mean? What are some instances or examples of characters paying a high price for magic in other stories?
- 15** Abigail teaches the Camp Awesome girls that it is okay for girls to be loud, and even to stomp. (p. 234-235) Think of people you know who set awesome examples and/or who are leaders. Are they “stompers?” Do you have to be a stomper to make noise or be heard? Are you a stomper? Without Lark, Iris does not think she can be a stomper. “If Lark had been there, Iris would have had no trouble stomping; she could have made enough noise for her and Lark both.” (p. 235) In what ways is it easier to stomp and make noise when you have others to stomp with?
- 16** What happens between Lark and Iris over Lark’s astronomy project? (pp. 250-262) Does Iris handle the situation well? What could she have done differently? Why do her choices upset Lark?
- 17** What is important about the girls’ conversation about fairy tales at Camp Awesome? What does Iris realize that changes her perspective? (pp. 275-282)
- 18** Iris discovers Mr. Green’s manor is full of unique and prized possessions. Why has Mr. Green collected all these things? Explore the idea that having desirable possessions gives one a feeling of power. Does Mr. Green perceive himself as powerful? Why or why not?
- 19** To what extent are Mr. Green’s motives to help Iris good-natured? To what extent are they self-serving? How and why does Mr. Green play to Iris’s vulnerabilities?
- 20** How has our understanding of the story been shaped by the narrator’s presentation of Iris’s side of the story? What parts of the story do you think Lark would portray in a similar way? What parts would be different told from Lark’s side of the story?
- 21** Who is Alice, and what is her role in the story?

Extension Activities

THE SECRET LIVES OF CROWS

While in the nurse's office, Ms. Baptiste tells Iris why she likes crows, including the way they protect one another. (p. 264) "It would be nice to have a flock, wouldn't it?" she says. The crows in *The Lost Girl* are important to the story. Research crows. Look for real-life examples of crows doing fantastic things. Find and read other stories with crow characters. How do these other texts compare to *The Lost Girl*?

AWESOME EXPLORATIONS

Explore your own awesomeness and make your own magic by gathering an inexpensive notebook, old magazines, and craft supplies of your choosing. Design your own Camp Awesome journal. Use it as a place for journaling thoughts, storing observations, or anything you want.

WORD SALAD

Iris pays attention to words. She starts a collection of nouns that people around her turn into verbs, such as "transitioning" and "crafting." What other examples can you add to her list?

NEVER SAY NEVER!

In *Media*, Mr. Ntaba recommends several picture book biographies to Iris. Iris notices that many feature "girls who were told they couldn't do something and did it anyway." (p. 167) Visit your library. Browse the biography section for books that fit this description. Read one or several. In what ways might the subject of the biography you chose be a role model or example for Iris? For yourself?

SUPERPOWERS

Consider the list of superpowers the girls of Camp Awesome generate (p. 183). What other superpowers would you add to this list? Which superpower would you most like to have? Design a short comic or short story about yourself with your chosen superpower. How would it embolden you? What would you do?

MONSTER BUSTERS

In *The Lost Girl*, Anne Ursu uses monsters as a metaphor for circumstances (or people) that her characters must overcome. Choose something (or someone) that poses its own obstacle for you. Name it as a "monster" to personify the obstacle. Envision yourself overcoming this monster. How would you do it? Who would be part of the story? Write this story.

CLASS DISCUSSION

At the Camp Awesome meeting when the girls talk about superheroes (pp. 173-182), they discuss the representation of diverse cultures in the casts of well-known superhero stories. They also talk about the problem of gender-specific marketing. Guide students in inquiry about how and where these problematic microaggressions related to cultural representation and gender representation occur. Help students process what means they have for recognizing and addressing such issues in their community and beyond.



*A Letter from Anne Ursu about *The Lost Girl**

Dear Reader,

Five years ago, I started writing a book about Iris and Lark, two eleven-year-old identical twins who were separated in school for the first time. The book had a lot of false starts—on the cutting room floor lie, for example, allegorical allusions to the tale of Bluebeard, an entire multiverse, and a dragon. I knew I was trying to write about a bond between two girls that the adults around them didn't understand, but I couldn't find the story.

Over the past two years, the issue of how our society treats girls has been heavily on my mind. I've been thinking about the ways in which growing up in a patriarchal society disempowers girls bit by bit; how they get undermined in ways small and large, intimate and epic. And I've been thinking about how girls give one another strength, how they provide one another protection and support, how important girls' relationships with one another are.

And lots of other things have been dinging around in my mind too—art theft, magical birds, fairy tales, cats that travel through clocks, and random facts about Presidential Pets. And out of all of that came Iris and Lark's story.

The Lost Girl is a book with identical twins, a weird antique shop, a mystical cat named Duchess, and crows. Lots of crows. And magic, of course. Because magic is power, and power in the wrong hands is a terrible thing. But there are more subtle forms of power too, and this book is about the subversive force of female friendship and how the bonds between girls are magic.

Thank you so much for reading.

Sincerely,



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