

# EDUCATORS' GUIDE

## AGGIE MORTON MYSTERY QUEEN

THE BODY UNDER THE PIANO



By Marthe Jocelyn • Illustrated by Isabelle Follath • ISBN 9780735265462

tundra

# AGGIE MORTON, MYSTERY QUEEN: THE BODY UNDER THE PIANO

Aggie Morton lives in a small town on the coast of England in 1902. Adventurous at heart but deeply shy, Aggie's main company has been her imagination since the death of her beloved father . . . until the fateful day when she crosses paths with twelve-year-old Belgian immigrant Hector Perot and discovers a dead body on the floor of the Mermaid Dance Room! As the number of suspects grows and the murder threatens to tear the town apart, Aggie and her new friend will need every tool at their disposal—including insatiable curiosity, deductive skills and not a little help from their friends—to solve the case before Aggie's beloved dance instructor is charged with a crime Aggie is sure she didn't commit.

Filled with mystery, adventure, an unforgettable heroine and several helpings of tea and sweets, *The Body under the Piano* is the clever debut of a new series for middle-grade readers and Christie and Poirot fans everywhere, from a TD Canadian Children's Literature Award-winning author and Geoffrey Bilson Award-nominated author of historical fiction for children.

Lexile Reading Level: 750L

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toronto-born **MARTHE JOCELYN** is the award-winning author and illustrator of over forty books for children of all ages. Her most recent picture book for Tundra (which she also illustrated), *Sam Sorts* (2017), was honored by the United States Board on Books for Youth as an Outstanding International Book. Her novel *What We Hide* was the 2015 recipient of the Amy Mathers Teen Book Award, and her novel *Mable Riley* won the inaugural TD Canadian Children's Literature Award. Marthe is also the 2009 recipient of the prestigious Vicky Metcalf Award for her body of work.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**ISABELLE FOLLATH** has been a freelance illustrator for advertising agencies, magazines and book publishers for over fifteen years, but her true passion lies in illustrating children's books. She uses pen and ink, watercolor, and pencil alongside digital techniques to create her work. She loves drinking an alarming amount of coffee, learning new crafts and looking for the perfect greenish-gold color. Isabelle lives with her family in Switzerland.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: AGGIE MORTON

## Pre-reading activity

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.7.4

- Ask students to brainstorm the different genres of fiction that they have either read or know of. The genres can relate to books, TV or movies. Depending on the grade level of your students, examples may include science fiction, historical fiction, mystery or horror. Explain that *The Body under the Piano* is a mystery. Have a class discussion about what students know about mysteries as a genre.
  - What other books have students read that were mysteries?
  - Have they watched a TV show or movie that was a mystery?
  - What are some of the common characteristics of a mystery story?
  - How does reading or watching a mystery make you feel? Curious? Nervous? Afraid? Excited?
- Before reading the story, you may wish to review or introduce some of the following concepts and terms associated with mysteries:

• Motive	• Hook	• Foreshadow
• Suspense	• Anonymous	• Blackmail
• Alibi	• Inheritance	• Red herring
• Suspect	• Disguise	• Cliffhanger

Ask students to consider why the words in the list on the right have these names.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3

- The story begins with Aggie explaining to the reader, “I will tell first about making a new friend and save the dead body for later.” What does this opening line tell you about the type of story *The Body under the Piano* is?
- What do we learn from the opening chapter about Aggie’s experiences and attitudes towards friendship? By the end of the book, do you think Aggie’s thinking has changed?
- The opening chapter uses many clues to help the reader understand the historical and geographic setting of the story. For example, Aggie says that, “The Morton family, with all of England, had mourned Queen Victoria’s demise nearly two years earlier.” What are some of the other clues used in the opening chapter that lead the reader to understand the setting of the story? Consider Aggie’s language, descriptions and activities.
- What do you think it was about Hector Perot that peaked Aggie’s interest and provoked her to pointedly share that she is at the sweet shop every week?
- Throughout the story, Aggie refers to her shyness. When she was scheduled to read a poem at the “Befriend a Foreigner” fundraiser, she says, “An audience caused in me a dizzying panic.” On page 26, Aggie describes what it feels like to panic when asked to speak in front of an audience. How does she describe how it feels? Can you relate to Aggie’s feelings of shyness? What is your strategy for tackling something that makes you nervous?

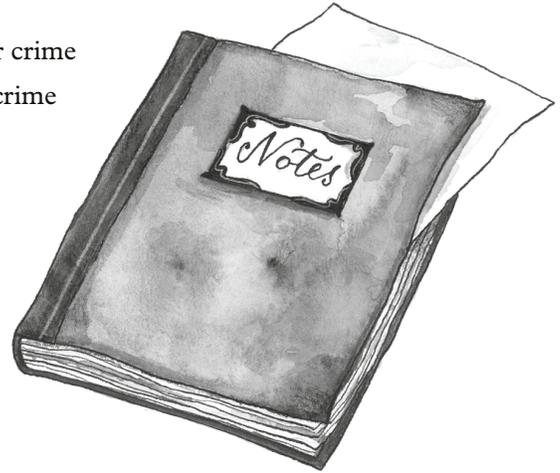
- Can you find an example of foreshadowing at the end of Chapter 2? How does it contribute to the mystery aspect of the story?
- In Chapter 3, Miss Marianne gives a speech about giving women the right to vote. When did women receive the right to vote in your country? Were all women granted the right to vote at the same time?
- Throughout the story, Aggie imagines certain conversations or events. What are some examples of this in Chapter 6? What do you think is the purpose of these asides (for example, to entertain the reader, to tell us more about the character, to give information about the story, etc.)?
- What do Aggie and Hector have in common that connects them as friends? How does their friendship evolve and grow over the course of the story?
- In Chapter 8, Aggie asks herself three important questions that are often asked in mysteries: Who? Why? How? What are some of the answers Aggie comes up with? At the end of the story, what was she right or wrong about?
- In Chapter 8, after realizing that Hector was one of the foreigners the charity had been organized for, Aggie notes that “His hair was clean, his teeth bright and his manners good enough to have impressed Grannie Jane. His accent was odd, but he did not smell of any exotic spice.” This kind of thinking was not unusual in the time period in which *The Body under the Piano* is set. How did it make you feel to read Aggie's thoughts with a present-day perspective? How are things different today?
- Throughout the story, Aggie mentions her father and the impact he had on her life. In Chapter 12, Aggie realizes that being distracted by the murder is helping her deal with the loss of her father. What does she mean by that?
- At the end of Chapter 20, Charlotte accuses Aggie of trying to blackmail her. Why does Charlotte say this? What does it mean to blackmail somebody?
- A shocking plot twist occurs at the end of Chapter 25. What is the plot twist? In retrospect, what clues were there earlier in the story that hinted at the plot twist?
- The person responsible for the crime is mentioned in the very first chapter. Why do you think he is referenced in such an innocent way so early in the story?
- A “red herring” is a technique used by mystery writers to mislead or distract the reader from the truth. Now that you’ve read the whole book, can you identify places where a red herring was used?
- In the Author’s Note at the end of the book, the author asks, “What made Agatha an expert on betrayal, suspicion and wickedness?” These three concepts are important themes in *The Body under the Piano*. What does each of these concepts mean? What are examples of betrayal, suspicion and wickedness in the story?
- After reading the Author’s Note, what was included in *The Body under the Piano* that was based on the real life of Agatha Christie and what was imagined by the author?
- When reading a mystery, what kinds of details or types of information should you look for as you read? How is reading a mystery the same and different from reading a different genre of story (for example, a work of science fiction)?
- Aggie and her grandmother both exhibit strong curiosity about the behavior of other people. Can you identify examples of this in the book? Do you share similar interests with an adult in your life?

## SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

### Characteristics of a mystery

With respect to literature, genre refers to a specific type of writing. Skim through the text and have students find examples of the following characteristics of mystery texts in *The Body under the Piano*:

- A mysterious death or crime that needs to be solved
- Several suspects that could be responsible for the death or crime
- Suspects with credible motive and opportunity to do the crime
- Main character(s) who eventually solve the mystery
- Clues written throughout the story
- The element of suspense built into the story
- The use of foreshadowing

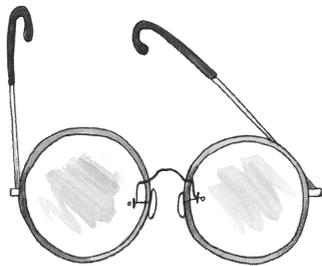


CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3

### Mystery in a bag

Divide students into pairs. Place groups of mysterious and seemingly unrelated items in different paper bags. Distribute a bag of items to each set of partners. Tell students to take the items out of their bags and then, with their partner, create a mystery story that uses the items. The partners can either write their stories down or tell their stories orally to the class. Remind students that every good mystery story ends with the reader or audience knowing the answers to the questions who, what, where, when and why.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1



### Finding clues

Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Assign one chapter to each pair or group to reread for clues about suspects and motives for the death of Irma Eversham. Remind students that clues can arise from the way characters behave or what they say, or other events in the story.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1

### The main suspects

Divide students into small groups. Distribute chart paper and markers. Have students create a t-chart and label one side Suspects and the other side Motive. Have students work together in their groups to fill in a list of all the possible characters who were suspects at one point or another in the story and identify their motives and any suspicious behaviour or comments that they made which caused them to be suspects. Then ask students to reimagine the story with a different character responsible for the murder and rewrite the last few chapters of the book.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3

## Traditional rules of storytelling

The author starts the book with Aggie explaining to the reader that she is going to first introduce how she made a new friend, and then talk about the dead body: “This follows the traditional rules of storytelling — lull the reader with pleasant scenery and lively dialogue, introduce a few appealing characters, and then — aha! — discover a corpse!” She is referring specifically to mystery stories; not all stories have a dead body! Discuss with students some of the key elements of writing a successful mystery. These may include:



- Including a strong hook: This refers to beginning the story in a way that will peak the interest of the reader and make them want to keep reading. It also can mean ending parts of the book (for example, the chapters) with something that makes the reader want to keep reading
- Encouraging the reader to act as a detective: The reader is motivated to try to piece all of the clues provided together to solve the mystery
- Using a red herring: This is a clue or piece of information that is supposed to intentionally mislead or distract the reader
- Using interesting dialogue: Dialogue can be used to both give readers important information, but it also can be used to lead readers astray, which ultimately may help build suspense
- Using setting to create mood: Creepy places in which the action occurs can go a long way in creating feelings of suspense

As a longer-term writing project, assign students the task of writing a mystery story. Have students plan out their stories as they would if they were writing any genre of story (for example, plan the setting, characters, problem and solution, beginning, middle, and ending). After they have planned out their stories, have them think about their story in connection to the key ingredients of a successful mystery (a strong hook, reader-as-detective, red herring, interesting dialogue, setting and mood) and have them revise or add to their story plans. Once the first draft is completed, have students share their story with a partner and evaluate if they have included the key elements of mystery stories, including whether they have answered the questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3

## Authors studying authors

Have students reread the Author’s Note at the end of the book. The author explains that some of the events and details in *The Body under the Piano* were based on real events in Agatha Christie’s life or the time period in which she lived. Some events or details were imagined by the author. Ask students to think of a person, living or dead, that they admire or find interesting. Have them research similar details about their selected person (for example, the era in which the person lived, location, major events in the person’s life) and write a short newspaper article (in the style of the articles included throughout the book) about an event involving the person that includes some of the researched details. Tell students that they can reimagine certain people or events or make up entirely new people or events when writing their article. Remind students to keep in mind the time and place in which the person lived.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.9

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7

# CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

## Speaking and listening

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on seventh-grade topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

## Reading: Literature

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3

Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g. how setting shapes the characters or plot).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.9

Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

## Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

## Language

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.7.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on seventh-grade reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

