

BOOK CLUB NOTES

Magrit, a novel by Lee Battersby (Walker Books)

Summary

10-year-old Magrit has lived her whole life in a cemetery with no entrance and no exit. When the stork accidentally drops a baby into the cemetery grounds, Magrit decides to raise him as her own, despite the warnings of her skeletal best friend and advisor Master Puppet, and the ghostly voice that starts to taunt her from the area of the graveyard where Magrit never dares to go.

A delightfully dark fairy tale, full of Battersby's whimsy and charm.

– Jody Holmes, *ReadPlus*

About the Author

Lee Battersby is the author of several adult novels and over 70 short stories, published in Australia, the US and Europe. His work has been praised for its consistent attention to voice and narrative muscle and has resulted in a number of awards, including the Aurealis, Australia Shadows, and Australia SF Ditmar gongs. Lee lives in Mandurah, Western Australia, with his wife, writer Lyn Battersby and an increasingly weird mob of kids. He's been a stand-up comic, tennis coach, cartoonist, poet, and tax officer in previous times, and he currently works as Arts Officer for a local council, where he gets to play with artists all day. *Magrit* is his first novel with Walker Books Australia.

Questions for Discussion

- What's it like to read a story told primarily about a younger character? Does it affect the way you read the work as an adult? How important is it for children's books to be written for both young boys and young girls?
- Death is a key theme in *Magrit*. How important is it for children to be aware of death? Does children's fiction play a role in introducing it and similar themes in an accessible and enjoyable way?

- *Magrit* has been likened to the work of Neil Gaiman and particularly his 2008 children's fantasy novel, *The Graveyard Book*. What are the purposes of such comparisons, do you think? Do they help you as a reader in deciding which books to read next, and why?
- How did you feel about Magrit's best friend, The Puppet Master? As her only 'parental' character, he treads a fine line between guidance and authority. Is it possible for parents to be friends with their children, or is that not the role of the parent?
- Battersby has stated in interviews that he does not believe in the afterlife, and yet *Magrit* explores the nature of life and death in great detail in his work. What can one leave behind by which to be remembered? Is life dictated not by what we've done, but the mark we've left behind on the living?
- WA reviewer A. R. Levett wrote of a certain truth contained in Battersby's novel that children 'often show older people how things really are in the world.' How true do you find this statement? If true, what happens to adults that leads them away from such awareness?
- Battersby dedicates *Magrit* to his children Erin and Connor, 'in the hopes that their journeys of discovery will uncover boundless wonders, and that all windows will lead to new worlds'. And yet, for adult readers, there is an extra layer of pathos to these words. How important is wonder to a life well-lived? Can wonder co-exist with more practical concerns?
- In *Magrit*, there's a certain section of the cemetery that Magrit fears, and fears entering. What is your take on fear, its realities and falsehoods? What central fears fuel the narrative of *Magrit*, and are these fears applicable to you, as a reader?
- How important is it for children's books to educate as well as entertain? Is there a danger of such books being too didactic, alienating the very kids who are meant to read them?
- While it may be seen that Magrit is surrounded by cold, unkind parental figures, Battersby contends that this is necessary given the demands of fictional narrative. That in fiction, a protagonist must have something to rally against, and that, any parents (and parental figures) must be represented in a way that will increase the conflict. Is this an inherent challenge of children's fiction? Is it possible to write a children's novel with two sympathetic and unconditionally loving parents as key characters?
- What's the difference between judgment and curiosity, as it pertains to the creation of worlds in children's fiction? Is it possible (and indeed, commendable) to create

such worlds without judgment, or do kids need such delineation as they grow up in an at times puzzling or complex world?

- In *Magrit*, hope often comes from surprising places, and from characters who may, at first, seem cold, or unfeeling. Is growing to accept 'otherness' an inherent part of maturity?

If you liked this book, you might also like...

- *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman, Allen and Unwin, 2002
- *Johnny and the Dead* by Terry Pratchett, Random House, 2010
- *Skellig* by David Almond, Hodder, 2007
- *88 Lime Street: The Way In* by Denise Kirby, Scholastic Australia, 2016
- *Where the Shoreline Used to Be: Stories from Australia and Beyond* by Susan La Marca and Pam Macintyre, Penguin Australia, 2016