

GUNPOWDER, MAGIC AND REVENGE:

TEACHERS' NOTES FOR FIREWORKS AND DARKNESS by NATALIE JANE PRIOR

Fireworks and Darkness is an unusual fantasy novel about an apprentice firework-maker's rite of passage into adulthood. It features sympathetic characters, a dark and suspenseful flight-and-pursuit/revenge plot, and (despite its imaginary setting) a strong sense of place and history. It is a story about the way choices and decisions taken in adolescence can shape our entire lives, and how the actions of parents can tragically impact on their children. The following notes have been prepared to focus particularly on these two issues.

Suggested Discussion Points

- What is the symbolic function of the firework boy which appears in the opening and closing scenes?
- Many fantasy novels start from the premise that occult or magical ability is inborn: that the magic is simply 'there' inside the magician, waiting to spill out. In *Fireworks and Darkness*, the exact opposite is true: here, magic is a discipline and indeed, an implied worldview, which is deliberately chosen by the aspiring adept. What implications does this have for the plot and themes of the book? What are some other ways in which the nature of magic in *Fireworks and Darkness* differs from other fantasy novels you have read?
- Why do you think the novel is called *Fireworks and Darkness*? How many kinds of 'darkness' does Casimir encounter in the course of the book? □

- Discuss the various real and surrogate parent/child relationships in the novel, for example Simeon and Casimir (father and son single parent family), Casimir and Jessica (abandonment), Casimir and Ruth (de-facto stepmother and son), Ruth and her parents (abusive, loveless and dysfunctional), Simeon and Ezekial Circastes (a master/apprentice relationship that is also a foster relationship). What are some of the dynamics which drive these relationships, especially the ones where the child is disempowered, and how do they shape the way the characters behave? □
- Consider the character of Ruth. How is the reader positioned to respond to her at the beginning of the text? The middle? The end? How has the reader's attitude changed to her?
- In the final chapter, Casimir wonders whether he will 'ever break free from the consequences of his father's sin'. What do you think he means by this? What are some ways in which the sins of previous generations 'curse' the present one? (Is the reverse also true?) Can you think of some contemporary social or political issues where this has happened? What about issues from your personal experience? □
- Despite the fact that his own life choices have had catastrophic results for many people, Simeon believes that in an ideal world, there must be total freedom of choice, and that ultimately this comes from within. He writes that 'The [real] tyrant is not a person, or a government or an external power of any kind. It is the binding spirit in all of us which will not let us do what we desire or achieve what we hope for.' (Chapter 9) How true is this of the characters in the novel? How much freedom to choose do the characters actually have, and how much are their choices blocked and limited by

political, family and social pressures (think especially of Ruth, who through accident of birth, sex and social position had her choices forced upon her), and by the actions of others? How much real choice do we have in our own lives?

- What do you think the name is that Simeon calls out in the darkness, shortly before his supposed death in the cellar? Why? Why do you think the author has chosen not to be specific here?
- Whose bare footprints are seen in the mud at the end of the book? Carefully re-read the last two pages of Chapter Eleven and the beginning section of Chapter Twelve. Now answer the same question. (Note: this is an exercise in close reading as the textual gaps and silences actually allow for several possibilities. The key issue is the true identity of the corpse found in the cellar, which was cremated as Simeon Runciman's. Bear in mind, however, that there were actually THREE darkhaired men in black clothes in the cellar during the fatal confrontation: Simeon, Circastes and Joachim. If the corpse was Simeon's, then the footprints are probably Circastes's. However, if the corpse was Circastes's, the footprints can also be Simeon's. If the dead body in the cellar was Joachim's, they could be either Simeon's or Circastes's, and we are left with the intriguing question of which of the two magicians is impersonating Casimir's uncle and why...□)
- Where can Casimir go from here? How do you think his life will unfold, and what sort of an adult will he grow into as a result of his experiences? Compare this to his father's experiences, and to Ruth's.□

Extending the Text

Some suggested parallel texts dealing with the issue of choice, and parent/child relationships are Robert Frost's poem, 'The Road Less Travelled', and the Cat Stevens song, 'Matthew and Son'. As an alternative, view the film *Chocolat*, and compare the mother and daughter characters to Simeon and Casimir.

For the enthusiastic, the following books flesh out some of the novel's background. Simeon's politics are loosely derived from those of the eighteenth century English anarchist, William Godwin, as outlined in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (available in Penguin Classics). William St Clair's biography *The Godwins and the Shelleys* (Faber, 1989) provides a useful introduction to Godwin's views. The following book about fireworks might also be useful: *Fireworks: a History and Celebration* by George Plimpton (Anchor Doubleday, 1989). The other historical event which informs the plot of *Fireworks and Darkness* is, of course, the so-called Powder Treason of Guy Fawkes. *The Gunpowder Plot: Terror and Faith in 1605* by Antonia Fraser (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996) is a good recent study of the subject.

Thanks to Helen Weston for her help in preparing these notes.