

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Tiger in the Well

by
Philip Pullman

Book Information

Philip Pullman, The Tiger in the Well

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407 Pages

Book Level: 5.9

Interest Level: UG

In London in 1881, twenty-four-year-old Sally finds her young daughter and her possessions assailed by an unknown enemy, while a shadowy figure known as the Tzaddik involves her in his plot to defraud Jewish immigrants pouring into the country.

Topics: Countries/Regions, England; History, Emigration/Immigration; Mysteries, Kidnappings; People, Jewish; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Series, Sally Lockhart Mystery

Main Characters

Daniel Goldberg a socialist whose investigation of the Tzaddik leads him to Sally

Harriet Sally's young daughter

Mr. Parrish the man claiming to be Sally's husband

Sally Lockhart the main character, who stands to lose her daughter when a stranger claims to be her husband

the Tzaddik also known as Ah Ling, the man behind the divorce scheme

Vocabulary

barrister a lawyer in England who can plead in any court

hansom a two-wheeled, two-passenger cab pulled by a single horse

kippers fish that has been salted, dried, and smoked

penny dreadful a cheap book or magazine containing stories of crime or terror

pogrom an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, especially of Jews

shiv a knife that is usually used as a weapon

verger a church caretaker or usher

Yiddish a language spoken mainly by Jews of eastern and central Europe and their descendants

Synopsis

This book is the third in a series about the character Sally Lockhart. Much of the story makes references to events in the previous books. While her friends are away, Sally is served with a divorce petition from a man she never married. Mr. Parrish claims to be her husband and wants a divorce and custody of her young daughter, Harriet. After seeing her "marriage" entry in the church's records, she realizes the plot against her was planned years in advance. The rector at the time was Mr. Beech. When Sally finally tracks him down, she learns he was blackmailed into signing the registry. He refuses to say any more because he is still being controlled by those supplying him with opium.

While investigating a conspiracy against the Jews, Goldberg learns that the man behind it is an obscenely obese invalid known as the Tzaddik. In Russia, pogroms are being used to set off waves of Jewish emigration so the Jews can be defrauded of their money as they immigrate into other countries. Goldberg feels the Tzaddik is behind the plot against Sally, which he hopes will lead to the discovery of the Tzaddik's identity.

When Sally finally meets with Mr. Coleman, the barrister presenting her case, he tells her the meeting is a waste of time. He advises her to act contrite in court instead of trying to prove she is not married to Parrish. After this meeting, Sally realizes she has to hide and prove Parrish wrong. Sally now goes into hiding with Harriet. When she tries to take money out of her account, she learns that her "husband" closed the account.

After having several near escapes, Sally is taken to a mission by Morris Katz. She is introduced to a "new world" when she views the poverty and problems of the people there. Soon she befriends a young Jewish immigrant named Rebecca. From Rebecca, Sally learns much about the Tzaddik. It is

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then that Sally decides to disguise herself and spy on the Tzaddik by working as his housemaid. In the house, Sally learns that the Tzaddik wants to train Harriet to replace his aging monkey, which attends to his personal needs.

While exploring the house, Sally steals a page from a ledger. This ledger tells of the money Parrish collected from gambling houses and brothels. When Sally approaches the Tzaddik in his bed, she discovers a bullet wound in his chest. She realizes that the Tzaddik is actually Ah Ling. Ling had killed her father, and Sally thought she had killed Ah Ling, but he was rescued and left paralyzed, plotting revenge against her this entire time. She knows she has caused his pain and paralysis and can no longer bear to shoot him. When Ah Ling orders Michelet to shoot her, the monkey stabs a cigarette in Michelet's eye. Sally is then locked in the cellar.

Later, Michelet and Ah Ling come to the cellar, and the floor begins to crack. The room becomes a pit filling with water. As Sally holds Ah Ling's head above the water, he tells a story of a tiger in a well. In this story, the villagers' prayers are answered when the gods send rain that drowns a tiger who has fallen in their well. After Ah Ling dies, Sally is swept under the water. She manages to escape by climbing up Ling's wheelchair lift.

Sally eventually wins in court. She proves her case with the help of Beech's confession of a fraudulent marriage entry, Goldberg's notebook, and her ledger paper. At the end of the book, she is planning on marrying Goldberg because he is the only man in the world who "measures up."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

When Michelet is ordered to shoot Sally, he stoops to pick up the gun and turns his back on Ah Ling's monkey. The monkey seizes a burning cigarette and stabs Michelet in his eye with it. The monkey's actions are never explained. Why do you think the monkey did this?

Answers may include the following explanations: Michelet had burned the monkey with a cigarette, and the monkey wanted revenge; the monkey was simply an evil creature and needed no reason to harm Michelet; the monkey may have thought Michelet was trying to kill Ah Ling and wanted to protect him.

Literary Analysis

In chapter twenty-one, the author describes the lost river called Blackbourne. It carries so much waste that Blackbourne water has become a synonym for "unspeakable filthiness." Why do you think the author describes the river in such detail?

The author wants us to feel a sense of revulsion for the filth of the city. Also, he wants to foreshadow the river rushing through Ah Ling's cellar.

Inferential Comprehension

After being in the cellar with Ah Ling, Sally finally feels she knows the work she was "born to do." What work do you think Sally will do after the story ends?

Students may suggest the following answers: she will work with Dr. Turner at the mission; she will organize unions for the poor workers; she will give speeches about poor working conditions.

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Constructing Meaning

At the meeting of the League of Democratic Socialist Associations, Goldberg is asked in what language the group's new journal should be published. Goldberg believes that since they are in England and he is writing in English, then the new journal should be published in English. Today there is some debate over whether or not American documents should be published in languages other than English. What do you think of this question? Do you think documents should be "English only"? What might be some valid reasons as to why documents should be published in other languages? What might be some of the difficulties in doing so?

New immigrants may not be able to read documents in English. They could be tricked and exploited this way. Some may argue that it would be very difficult and expensive to translate every document into numerous languages.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors While in some lodgings in Villiers Street, Sally walks down to the bathroom in her dressing gown. Several gentleman lodgers see her and complain to the landlady about it. She is asked to leave the house because of her "improper dress." It might be fun for the students to see what being properly or improperly dressed was like in the 1880s. Using either books or the internet, have them find the typical clothes worn by a lady during this time. Then have them draw Sally in "proper dress."

Comparing and Contrasting Throughout this book, socialism and capitalism are subtly debated. Goldberg is a socialist and writes articles about it. At the end of the book, Sally hints that she has "important work to do." The city is seen as a "safe place" but not a "good place." It would be educational for the students to distinguish between socialism and capitalism. Have them research the two ideas and come up with their own definitions of them. Have them compare the two ideas. What are the strengths of them? What are the weaknesses? Which countries are especially known for capitalism?

Which countries are especially known for socialism? If they could choose, would they rather live under a capitalist or socialist society? Why?

Drawing Conclusions When Sally and Ah Ling are in his cellar, his house collapses. While she is holding his head above the water, he tells her the story of the tiger in the well. In this story, a tiger becomes trapped in a village well. The villagers pray to their gods for help, and the gods answer the prayers by sending lots of rain. The tiger drowns when the well fills up. Ah Ling says their circumstances remind him of the story. Sally then asks him which of them is the tiger. He does not answer. The students might enjoy writing an answer to Sally's question. Have them imagine themselves to be Ah Ling and respond to Sally's question. Which one of them is the tiger and why?

Responding to Literature When Sally feels she is about to die, she talks to Ah Ling about evil. In chapter twenty-six, she lists various things she feels evil is. According to Sally, evil is what makes a man get drunk and harm his own child. Evil is what makes men fight each other for jobs. Evil is what makes a family starve. The students might find it interesting to explore their own theories about evil. Have them reread this short dialogue about evil. Then have them complete this sentence: I think that evil is ---.