



THE CRYPTID FILES: LOCH NESS **BY JEAN FLITCROFT**

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Cryptid Files: Loch Ness is an adventure story in which a young teenager, Vanessa Day, sets out to find the mythical creature Nessie. She does this because her mother, a cryptozoologist, died two years ago and Vanessa is finding it hard to come to terms with her death. Vanessa is also having to deal with the untimely appearance of her father's new girlfriend, Lee, who turns up on their family holiday to Loch Ness, Scotland.

Things take a surreal turn when Vanessa eludes her brothers and goes out on the loch in a boat on her own. When she accidentally falls into the water she is stripped of the painful memories and issues of the real world and through an entirely sensory exploration of Nessie's world, Vanessa begins an exhilarating journey of self-discovery.

On the surface the panic and search for Vanessa is interwoven in alternating chapters forcing her father, his girlfriend and her two brothers to wake up to the reality of Vanessa's disappearance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean Flitcroft is a scientist by training (with a doctorate in physiology from Oxford University), a travel writer for the magazine *International Living* as well as author of the Cryptid Files series, which so far consists of three titles. *Loch Ness* is the first in the series.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The word cryptid comes from the Greek word for 'hidden' and refers to animals that have documented sightings but have not been proven to be real. The most famous of them all is the Loch Ness monster. Cryptozoology is the study of these animals.

Many cryptids appear to be based on mythological creatures and have some deep cultural significance to the people of whatever country they are found in. The Loch Ness monster is bound up with the ancient Gaelic mythology of the kelpies, for example.

Although this is the fictional story of Vanessa, the book is infused with non-fictional elements. At the start of each chapter is a real fact that charts the extraordinary 'real' hunt for Nessie that started in the 1930s.

There really is a bye-law to protect the Loch Ness monster, and reward money for anyone who finds her. There have been famous scientists involved; Sir Peter Scott gave Nessie her proper scientific name – *Nessieteras rhombopteryx*. Dr Robert Rhines, the man who set up the Applied Academy of Science in America, believed in Nessie right up until his death in 2009. Tim Dinsdale, an aeronautical engineer gave up his job after seeing the creature and spent the next twenty years hunting it. Benedictine monks from the local abbey and local detectives claim to have seen it, as well as Dr Richard Syngé, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

These sightings and many others are documented in the book and the 'scientific' facts provide an interesting and educational background for the story of Vanessa and her own journey in search of the Loch Ness Monster.

TEACHERS' NOTES

Cryptids live in that glorious space between fact and fiction and make an ideal core concept for the exploration of a variety of themes in this book.

Some ideas are given here for themes you might like to think over and explore with your class as they read the novel or after they have read it.

DEATH AND GRIEVING

Although this is mainly an adventure story, it is also about Vanessa's emotional journey to redefine herself within the family now that her mother is gone. The theme of grief and how different family members cope with the same thing is important in this story. It is never dealt with head on, but is implied through the characters' interactions with each other. One way of engaging children with this theme in the book might be to ask them to discuss why Vanessa reacted so strongly to Lee, her father's new girlfriend.

You could also ask them to track down events in the novel that indicate the following ways of reacting to grief (not just on Vanessa's part, but also in relation to other characters):

- Avoidance behaviour
- Sibling rivalry
- Anger
- Feelings of despair
- Overcoming obstacles
- Forming connections with new people

Ask the children which of these reactions they think are positive, which negative? Are even the negative reactions necessary at first in response to bereavement?

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Myths and legends are a kind of 'cultural memory' of a people. Many legends have some basis in fact, which gives rise to questions about the nature of truth, knowledge or understanding. Myths and legends vary around the world and yet often have common themes, which make their way into children's literature – sea serpents (Jules Verne's adventure stories), hairy hominids (*Five Children and It* by E Nesbit), flying dinosaurs or dragons (the Harry Potter books, Cressida Cowell's How to Train Your Dragon series).

SPOT NESSIE

Nessie, or the Loch Ness monster, features in lots of books, TV programmes and so on. Ask the children where they have heard about Nessie before. What did they know about Nessie before reading the book? And afterwards, how much more familiar are they with Nessie?

HOW MANY MONSTERS?

You could ask your class to identify other monsters from books that they know. Pool your information and see how a long a list you can make as a group.

RESEARCH AND CREATIVE WORK

Ask the children if they can name (or find out about) a strange creature from Irish mythology. (In Irish stories, animals are often people in disguise.) You can find lots of Irish myths online, or check out a book such as *Spellbound* by Siobhán Parkinson and Olwyn Whelan (which has some great pictures of strange animals).

Ask them to write a paragraph about their chosen creature, or to make a picture of the beast. The children could also make their own story featuring the creature.

MAGIC AND BELIEFS

Vanessa, the heroine of this book, has a kind of sixth sense. She tends to ‘see’ things that may not really be there – or are they?

Class discussion: Ask the children if they can identify a place in the story where Vanessa feels a bit uncomfortable about believing something that is outside the norm. Do they think she trusts her own instincts all the same? Where does the story make this clear?

She is told about the Scottish tradition of dunking witches, for example – submerging women into the loch to find the witch and burning them if they survive. She even wonders if she is one herself when she survives the loch. Discuss what the children think about that.

Do the children know any stories from their own locality about people who can ‘see’ things – people who can tell fortunes or see ghosts or whose dreams come true?

Discuss with the class whether or not these stories could be true or partly true. How do we know what is real and what is imaginary anyway?

Creative writing: The children could write a short story about a person who has this kind of psychic gift. The story could explore the idea whether they ‘really’ see things or have they got an over-active imagination.

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

Scientists need to keep an open mind about things. Most scientific discovery started out as unbelievable ideas. In the days before the advent of flight, the Wright brothers had the faith that it could be done, even though it seemed impossible. Copernicus was ridiculed for claiming that the earth rotates around the sun.

Research task: Ask the children to find out about Copernicus or about the Wright brothers. Ask them to concentrate especially on what people thought about Copernicus or the Wrights before they were proved right.

Other examples: The coelacanth is a fish that was thought by scientists to be extinct for 65 million years, but then it turned up in a fish market in Africa. Similarly, a species of sea urchin unknown to science recently turned up on eBay. How do these events square with our ideas about scientific ‘facts’?

More discussion: Ask the children where scientific facts come from anyway? How do we know what we know? How do scientists go about establishing what it is that we know?

Explain the following (or better still, try to elicit it from the class):

- A scientist has a hunch – scientifically known as a hypothesis.
- Then they need to see if the hypothesis is correct. So they conduct experiments and they observe what happens.
- Next they try to analyse what they have observed.
- And finally they reach a conclusion.

Is this a foolproof way to find something out? Could it be that a scientist is so keen to prove their own hunch that they interpret the results of their experiment in a way that suits them? Or is that impossible? (Think again about the ‘fact’ that the coelacanth was extinct, for example.)

BELIEFS VERSUS FACTS

This book is useful for exploring the idea of role of belief as opposed to knowledge.

Class discussion: Seeing is not always believing. GK Chesterton claimed that ‘many a man has been hanged on less evidence than there is for the Loch Ness monster’. What do you think that means? What does it tell us about the evidence for the existence of Nessie? What does it tell us about how the law works? Was GK Chesterton right, do you think?

READING AND WRITING

Beginnings

Look at the opening fact given in the book:

It's hard to imagine how deep Loch Ness is. There is more water in it than all the other lakes in England, Scotland and Wales put together. Enough room to fit every person on earth three times over. Certainly room enough for a few mysteries.

How does this set the tone of the book?

Does it make you want to read a bit more?

What does this paragraph make you think you might find in this book?

Prologue

Discuss the use of the prologue in this book.

Why do you think the author put this piece from later in the story in at the beginning?

Does it affect you as a reader?

Does it make you want to read more?

Suppose the prologue that the author has used was not available for some reason, which other short extract from the book do you think would work well as a prologue?

In this book the prologue is really an extract taken from later in the book and used as a kind of introduction. Have you ever read a book with a different kind of prologue? Can you describe it? Can you think of another way of using a prologue?

DISCUSSION: HOW DOES FICTION WORK?

Discuss the difference between fact and fiction.

How do you know if a book is factual or is 'just a story'? What kind of hints do you get from the cover, for example?

If you know a book is fiction (a made-up story), do you read it in a different frame of mind from when you read a book you know is full of facts (like a school book or an encyclopedia)?

Writing task

Suppose you wanted to write a story about some mythical person or beast or place. How can you make your readers 'believe' it, even though it is just a story?

Try writing a paragraph about a non-existent place or person, describing it as if it really existed. Could you use this paragraph in a story? If so, how would you use it? If not, why do you think it wouldn't work in a story? Is there anything you could do to change it so that it was believable?

Now try to build that paragraph into a whole story. You could do this as a group with some of your classmates. Talk about it first and work the story out, then get one person to write it down. (If you can do it on a computer, that's best, because then you can make changes very easily.) Then read it back and see how you can improve it. (This is how real writers work. They write, they read, they rewrite, they get it right!)