



THE HISTORY MYSTERY BY ANA MARIA MACHADO

- A book with a lot of cross-curricular potential – history, geography, literacy
- Plenty of areas for discussion, opportunities for independent research
- Boy and girl characters
- Set in Brazil
- Suited for sixth class
- Further class/discussion notes printed within the book

About the book

This story is set in modern Brazil and it focuses on a group of classmates who start to receive mysterious messages from someone who seems to be a historical character.

About the author

Ana Maria Machado is Brazil's most internationally famous writer for children. She lives in Rio de Janeiro and is a professor of literature. She has written more than 100 books. She started her career as a painter then worked as journalist for *Elle* magazine in Paris and for the BBC in London. In 1979, she opened the first children's literature bookshop in Brazil. In 2000, Ana Maria Machado was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Award for her life work, the most significant international prize for children's literature.

About these notes

The book itself contains questions for your pupils to consider after reading each chapter. Those questions, which are at the back of the book, are mostly about the story. These notes here take the form of mini-worksheets on the main themes raised in the book and could form the basis for classroom discussion and research.



Brazilian setting

Before you read the book ...

- Find Brazil on a map of the world.
- Write down as many facts as you can about Brazil.
- What would you expect a book set in Brazil to be like?
- Would you think that children in Brazil live lives much like your own? In what ways would you expect their lives to be different? In what ways the same?

After you've read the book ...

- Did *The History Mystery* confirm your expectations about life in Brazil?
- Did you learn anything from the book about what it is like to live in Brazil?
- If you were going to rewrite this story and set it in Ireland, what changes would you need to make?

More about Brazil

- Robbie, who is a friend of the main characters in the story but lives in a different part of town, comes from a poorer area of the city. Find out what these poor 'ghetto'-type areas are called in Brazil. Find out what life is like in one of these places.
- Find out what you can about typical Brazilian food and write out a recipe that you like the sound of. (You could even try cooking it, if you can find all the ingredients.)
- If someone offered you a free trip to Brazil, where would you go? Why? If you don't know, find out about different parts of Brazil and pick an area you think sounds interesting.
- The person who has been sending the messages to the kids in the story uses various names, nearly all of poets. Look up one of these names and write one sentence to explain who that person was.



Ancient Egypt

- See if you can find a copy in your school or public library of a book called *Ancient Egypt* published by Dorling Kindersley as part of the Eyewitness Project series, and read a bit about life in Ancient Egypt. You could use that book to help you answer the following questions.
- What is a hieroglyphic?
- Who was Nefertiti?
- Who was she married to?
- Who was Tutankhamun? Did he live before or after Nefertiti and her husband? Why is he so famous?
- Write a page about any topic that interests you about Ancient Egypt.

Ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia

- Look up Babylon or Mesopotamia online or in the library and see if you can work out what that area of the world is called today.
- See what you can find out about Hamurabi.
- Find out especially about Hamurabi's Code. Can you find out one thing that was very different about how the law worked in Hamurabi's time and one thing that is much the same as the way our laws work today? Can you explain why Hamurabi's Code is still considered very important today?

Marco Polo

- Find out what you can about Marco Polo.
- When did he live?
- Where did he travel to?
- What famous book did he write?
- What is he supposed to have discovered or invented?



Middle Ages and Alchemy

- Find out when the Middle Ages were.
- Write down three things you know about life in the Middle Ages.
- Write down something you know about reading and writing in the Middle Ages.
- Write down three kinds of jobs people did in the Middle Ages. (Try to think of ones people don't do any more.)
- Name one famous character from the Middle Ages that you have read about or seen a film about. Why do you think that character is still popular today?
- Find out three facts about life in Ireland during the Middle Ages.
- Look up alchemy.
- Write down three facts about alchemy.
- Can you make any links between alchemy and modern science? If so, what are those links?

Missionaries in South America

- Find out about the missionary priests that first arrived in South America many centuries ago.
- Where did they come from?
- Where did they land?
- What did they do when they arrived in South America?
- Why did they go there/
- How did they get on with the people they found there?
- How did they get on with other white people coming from Europe?

Camille Claudel

- Find out when Camille Claudel lived.
- Who was her most important artist friend?
- What were her most important sculptures?
- Write a sentence about what it was like to be a woman artist in Claudel's time.



Literacy

By the time you get to the end of this book, you discover that the main theme of the story is not so much history after all but the importance of reading and writing.

- Go back to the beginning of the book and re-read what Nefertiti had to say about reading and writing in her time. Was this a clue that you noticed at the time? Now that you have read the whole book, can you see why the author put in this message from Nefertiti?

One reason it's so important that children today learn to read and write is that it's very difficult to live in our world if you can't do that.

- Think of three things you would not be able to do if you could not read and one thing you would not be able to do if you could not write that would make your life very difficult. (Not counting school and homework – concentrate on 'real' life!)
- Now choose a time in history that you find interesting (Middle Ages – Robin Hood's time, for example; Celtic Ireland – Setanta's time, maybe; the 19th century – this is when we had the Famine in Ireland). Now imagine what it would be like to be a child of your age at that time. Would you be able to read and write? Would it be good if you could? Why or why not?

Another reason children learn to read is so that they can develop their imaginations through reading stories. But actually people who live in our time have lots of ways of getting stories.

- Think of three stories you know, and try to remember how you know each story. Did someone read it to you when you were small, for example? Did you see a film of it or did you see it on TV? Did someone tell you the story? Did you read it for yourself?

A lot of people get most of their stories from TV and DVDs.

- Think of three really good things about watching a story on TV or DVD.
- Think of one thing that is better about reading a book than watching TV. (Even if you usually prefer watching TV, you should still be able to think of one good thing about reading.)



- If you don't like reading at all, can you say what the main reason is for that? For a lot of people, it's because you have to work a bit at reading, whereas with TV you just have to sit and watch.
- Why is reading hard work? Is it that the words are hard? (If that is true for you, it might be a good idea to try an easier book.) Or is it that you have to do a lot of thinking if you are reading a story? If you are tired, thinking is hard, but as long as you are not trying to read a book that is too hard for you, or that is not interesting for you, you should find that doing the thinking and the imagining is actually the fun part about reading – give it a try. You don't have to like it, but do give it a try. Find a book that is not too hard and that is about something you are interested in (maybe your teacher could help you to choose one), and read a whole chapter. If it's a good book, you might find you want to go on reading!
- Are you good at storytelling? You probably are, you know. It doesn't have to be a big long story with a beginning a middle and an end. Just think of something that happened to you in the last week or two that was interesting or funny or mad, and tell the person sitting next to you about it.
- Now write down your little story – a few lines will do.
- Did you make a better job of telling your story or writing it down? Why do you think that is? Does this experience make you think writers have a hard job?

Another reason that it's important for children to learn to read is that it helps to connect us to other people. Nowadays we can ring people or text them or Skype them or Facebook them – it has never been easier to keep in touch with people we know, and you can even meet new people that way too. But we are connected to other people over time as well as over space, and if we did not have writing, we'd know very little about what the past was like.

- Can you think of one or two reasons why it is important to know what happened in the past?
- Reading what people wrote in the past is the main way we can find out about their lives, but there are other ways as well. Can you think of one or two?
- The Brainy Hacker in the story is pretty obsessed with the importance of reading. Do you think he is right about that? Or is he a bit of a nut-case? Even if he is a nutter, does he have even a bit of a point, do you think?



- Imagine the Brainy Hacker's worst nightmares came true, and people stopped reading. Can you imagine what would happen? Would it matter terribly, or just a bit? Try to imagine one day in the life of a child of your age in a future where there were no books or written words of any sort. (You might think there'd be no homework – but you can bet that teachers would still find a way!)