

Reading Group Guide to

Goblin Secrets

By William Alexander

With a sure hand, William Alexander here creates a wholly convincing world of mechanized soldiers, chicken-legged grandmothers, sentient rivers, and goblin actors. In that uncertain landscape, young Rownie learns the mysterious craft of masking to search for both his brother and his own story, unaware that the solution to these searches may be the salvation of his city. Alexander's world is one of possessiveness—and true love—brilliantly revealing our own selves by holding up our masks.

—Citation by the Judges of the 2012 National Book Award

About the Book

Rownie, the youngest in Graba the witchworker's household of stray children, escapes and goes looking for his missing brother. Along the way he falls in with a troupe of theatrical goblins and learns the secret origins of masks. Now Graba's birds are hunting him in the Southside of Zombay, the Lord Mayor's guards are searching for him in Northside, and the River between them is getting angry. The city needs saving—and only the goblins know how.

Prereading Activities

Before reading *Goblin Secrets*, review different types of genres, including fantasy, fables, fairy tales, and folklore. Have students work with a partner or group to research the different types of genres and write a summary explaining the elements of each. What elements are found in each genre style? For example, what are the characteristics of a fable? Hold a class discussion allowing students to share their findings with the rest of the class. List popular movies from all different types of genres, and allow each group to try to classify the movies into their correct category.

Before reading the novel, have students research the author William Alexander and write a short objective summary of his life. Without giving personal opinions or judgments, provide important details from his life that may have led him to write the novel *Goblin Secrets*. Use the following questions as a guide: What are some of his accomplishments? What did he study in school? Where does he live now? What is his profession? What are his interests? Among the many sources available such as Simon and Schuster's website, you can also go to the author's official website: <http://willalex.net/>.

Discussion Questions

Please use examples from the text to support your answers.

1. Describe Rownie's personality and physical traits in Act I of the novel. How do the other grubs in Graba's house treat Rownie? What does his relationship with the grubs show you about his personality?
2. How is Graba like a grandmother to the children in her house? How is she different? How does she treat Rownie?
3. Analyze the impact of the repetition of words and phrases throughout the novel. Find words that are repeated and consider why the author repeats these particular words. How does the author's word choices support the tone of the story? What does his choice of words reveal about Zombay?
4. Why do you think the author chose to name the town "Zombay"? What does the name indicate about the setting? What effect does the setting have on the plot in the story?
5. What genre do you think the story belongs to? Why?
6. Why do you think the author chose to write in this genre?
7. The author chose to structure the text in a play format. How does this impact the overall story?
8. In the beginning of the story, Rownie tries to hide from Graba's grubs that are chasing him. How does the author's choice of words, and the situations Rownie finds himself in, add suspense to the novel? What impact does this have on the rising action?
9. Sometimes the author wants the reader to read between the lines and make inferences. The author indicates that Vass, Blotches, and Stubble sometimes sound like Graba. What is the author implying? How do you know?
10. The author uses sensory imagery throughout the novel to bring the reader deeper into the story. Give specific examples of sensory imagery in Act II, Scene III, including smell, taste, touch, sight, and sound.
11. What does it mean to be a changeling? Do you think it is a good thing? Why or why not?
12. What is the theme of *Goblin Secrets*? How does the author develop this theme throughout the course of the text?
13. Flashbacks are interruptions in the story when a character returns to an earlier time. Give examples of how flashbacks are incorporated into *Goblin Secrets*. Why does the author use this literary technique?
14. Rownie's personality starts to change in Act II and Act III. How does he grow up and develop over the course of the novel? How does his personal growth advance the plot towards a resolution?

15. Personification, the literary technique of bringing inanimate objects to life, is woven throughout the novel. For example, the fox mask comes alive and portrays a sly and quick-witted individual. Evaluate more examples of how the author uses personification, and why it is important to the story.

16. Consider the author's use of onomatopoeia—using words to mimic the sounds associated with an object or action that it refers to. Alexander uses onomatopoeia when he writes, “Rownie’s teeth clacked together. Thomas and Essa gave squawks of protest from inside.” How does onomatopoeia enhance the story? Find other examples of it throughout the story and evaluate how it improves the scenes described.

17. Objectively summarize the story. Create a time line to chart the plot and important details crucial to the story line. Present the summary in chronological order.

18. What is Thomas and Semele’s relationship with Rownie like? How does meeting the troupe shape Rownie’s personality throughout the novel?

19. When Rownie finally finds Rowan, Rowan has been changed. What happened to him? How does this contribute to the story’s plot development?

20. Why do you think Rowan’s “change” transforms Rownie?

21. What impact does the Mayor have on the story? What is his purpose?

22. How would the story be different if it was told from Rowan’s point of view? What about Thomas’s point of view?

23. How is the mood at the beginning of the story different from the mood at the end of the story? Does the novel end with a positive or negative resolution?

24. Make a prediction about what would happen next in the story. Do you think Rownie will stay with the troupe? Why or why not?

Postreading Activities

1. Have students research Alexander Jansson Mystical Artwork. Students should analyze Alexander Jansson’s artwork and compare and contrast his artwork to the novel *Goblin Secrets*. Based on what they read in *Goblin Secrets* and what they viewed in a piece of modern artwork by Alexander Jansson, have students write an essay objectively summarizing a few common elements. Remind students to use textual evidence to support their answer.

2. William Alexander has many different kinds of masks on his website, www.goblinsecrets.com, available for students to download and illustrate. Have students pick a mask and decorate it. Then write a summary explaining what factors influenced their decision to represent the character or mask they created.

3. Acting and theater are at the heart of *Goblin Secrets*. Ask students to split into groups and to pick a scene from the book that they think would make a good skit. Have them write a script and perform a brief scene for the class.

This guide was written by Michelle Carson, Reading Teacher, Reading Endorsed, Palm Beach Central High School.

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