

A Curriculum Guide to

Order of Darkness #4: *Dark Tracks*

By Philippa Gregory

About the Book

Spring of 1461 finds our heroes—Luca Vero, Freize, Isolde, Ishraq, and Brother Peter—in Austria. This time, Milord, the head of the Order of Darkness, sends them to investigate a mysterious outbreak of dancing sickness. People who hear the music of a fiddler and drummer dance away from their daily lives and into exhaustion; no one knows what causes the sickness or how to stop people from dancing themselves to death. Is it insanity? Poison? Possession? The heroes journey to the lands of Lord Vargarten, including the town of Mauthausen and a Jewish village. The Jews seem as mysterious and dangerous as the dancing sickness—but when Isolde starts dancing too, they may be the only people who can save her.

Prereading Activity

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (SL.9-12.1) (W.9-12.10)

1. Freewrite for ten minutes on what you know about physical and mental illnesses. How are they similar? How are they different? What are their causes and cures? How do you think physical and mental illnesses were viewed in the 1400s? Discuss what you have written in pairs, small groups, or with the class as a whole.
2. In small groups or as a class, talk about the history of the Jewish people, particularly in Europe. Generate a list of comments and questions on the board. Identify areas you would like to learn more about, such as Jewish holidays or events of the Holocaust.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (CCRA.R.1, 2, 3, 4, 6) (RI.9-12.1, 2) (RL.9-12.1, 2, 3, 4)

1. Luca, Isolde, and Ishraq come from different backgrounds, which in the 1400s means they are slated for very different futures. Point to places in the text that signal these differences. How important are they to the characters themselves and how the world views them? Do you feel like your own background plays a large role in your future? Are you more free or less free than these characters to pursue your own dreams?
2. What do you think caused the dancing sickness? What do you think was the cure?
3. Isolde measures an acre by time and effort: to her, an acre is the amount of land one team can plow in one day. Luca and Ishraq measure an acre in square feet: to them, an acre is 43,560 square feet. Who do you think is right? Which system do you think is better?

4. Describe Lord and Lady Vargarten. What are their beliefs about their own place in the world? Do you agree with them?
5. How does the peddler get Isolde and Ishraq to try on the earrings and shoes he is carrying? What power do the earrings, shoes, and peddler's words have over them?
6. Luca argues that "times are changing . . . people believe that they should be allowed to go where they want, and work as they wish. They want to work for themselves, and think for themselves and dream for themselves." Lord Vargarten laughs at these ideas and calls Luca a dreamer. Why might these two characters have different views of the world? Which do you think is the stronger argument?
7. What does Giorgio want from Isolde? Why?
8. When Freize and Isolde first arrive at the gates of the Jewish village, the gatekeeper does not want to let them in; the rabbi and the villagers feel the same way. Why doesn't the village want visitors? Are they right to close their gates to Freize and Isolde? Why do they eventually decide to let them in?
9. What is life like for the Jews in Lord Vargarten's Jewish village? Describe how past events have contributed to this state, and how the villagers might go about changing perceptions.
10. When Isolde talks with the rabbi of the village about the treatment of Jews, she says, "I am so sorry for you and your people. I did not know. I did not understand." The rabbi responds, "You say you didn't know. But not knowing is a choice that you make, it is as bad as doing." What do you think of this exchange, and the larger implications? What is the difference between not knowing something and choosing not to know something? How might Isolde have helped the Jews if she had paid attention to their plight?
11. Brother Peter believes his religion, Christianity, is the only correct religion; when Ishraq is unconscious, he says, "She is a lost soul . . . an infidel . . . without a doubt she will go straight to hell." But Radu Bey has a different perspective; he says to Isolde, "May your god guide you, as mine blesses me." Discuss these two perspectives. How might you act toward people who do not share your beliefs? Why might it be important to keep an open mind?
12. Radu Bey tells Isolde that Ishraq's mother was not just an Arab guest that Isolde's father brought back with him from the Crusades—she was his second, Muslim wife. That means Isolde's best friend Ishraq is her father's daughter, and Isolde's half sister. What is Isolde's reaction to this information? Why doesn't she share it with Ishraq?
13. The local ostler, or horse caretaker, is surprised to hear Ishraq say that Jesus was killed over a thousand years ago. "Was it so long? It wasn't a thousand years. It cannot have been, for the priest speaks of it as if it were only the other day." Soon afterward, Luca tells Lord Vargarten that Jews and Christians share scripture. "Their Bible is our Bible," Luca says. "The very same." "Never!" Lord Vargarten exclaims. "Who knew that?" Both the ostler and Lord Vargarten lack historical knowledge and misunderstand the position of their own cultures within the world. Do you think learning more will change their behaviors? Do you think ignorance plays a role in prejudices today?

14. Read the scene in which Lord Lucretili asks how much money he owes the rabbi. What role does each character play in this discussion? What makes Lord Vargarten angry? How does the debt that noble Christians owe the Jews seem to operate?

15. Throughout the book, Freize is aware and apprehensive of the fast-growing Being that has followed them from Venice. He has no idea what it is, but when he describes it, the rabbi and Brother Peter both think it is a golem. What is a golem? Whose side is it on?

16. At the end of the novel, Luca says, ““The dancers are the same as the Jews to Lord Vargarten.”” What does he mean by that? What has Lord Vargarten done to make Luca think this?

17. At the end of the novel, Luca laments that people “fear anything that is other.” Do you think he’s right to describe the characters and their actions in this way? Do you think people feel the same way today? Give examples from the book and your life to illustrate your points.

Activities

The activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (CCRA.R. 9-12.9, 10) (SL.9-12.4) (W.9-12.2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10)

1. The book introduces a romantic complication in the form of a love triangle. Debate whether Isolde or Ishraq is a better romantic partner for Luca. What draws each of them together? Who do you think Luca should choose, and why? How might Isolde and Ishraq’s friendship be impacted? What might happen if he chooses neither girl? Alternately, compare Luca’s attraction to both Isolde and Ishraq to Katniss’s feelings for Gale and Peeta in the Hunger Games trilogy.

2. The non-Jewish main characters in *Dark Tracks* spend time with Jewish people for the first time. Working in small groups, learn more about Judaism and anti-Semitism in fifteenth-century Europe. Each group can choose a related subject to investigate and then create a poster to present what they’ve learned.

3. Research the practice of borrowing money and paying it back with interest. Why do people and institutions lend and borrow money with interest? Why is this sometimes called usury? What is a fair interest rate? What is an unfairly high interest rate? Make a visual representation of how different interest rates change the total amount of money repaid.

4. The physician who comes to Ishraq’s sickbed suggests several possible cures, including cupping and burning. Research these methods and other medieval cures. Create a slide-show presentation explaining how and why these were methods were thought to work.

5. In the last pages of the novel, Isolde has a dream that connects the events she’s witnessed in Mauthausen with the Nazi concentration camp built there hundreds of years later during World War II, where over 100,000 people died. As Isolde, write a letter to be placed in a time capsule to future generations outlining all you’ve learned about your time in the Jewish village, and why it’s important for them to carry this knowledge forward and learn from your time period’s mistakes.

6. Ishraq spends one romantic night with Luca; when he says “I love you,” she responds, “Never, ever say that to me again,” and both she and Luca refer to Isolde as Luca’s beloved. Write a brief opinion piece about this plot development. Is Ishraq wrong for having sex with Luca? Is Luca wrong for saying he loves Ishraq if Isolde is his beloved? Peer edit one another’s writing for grammar and clarity of thought. Share your opinion pieces with one another.

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