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THE KILLING WOODS BY LUCY CHRISTOPHER

SYNOPSIS

When Emily Shepherd watches her dad return from the woods near her home late one night, she believes he is carrying an injured deer. But after he enters the house, she soon realises it is not an animal but a person. Worse than that, she recognises it to be Ashlee Parker from her school – and she’s dead.

Meanwhile, waking up with an extreme hangover and acute memory loss, Damon Hilary is asking himself some searching questions about the night before: who won ‘The Game’? Why isn’t Ashlee answering her phone? And just what did he do in Darkwood last night?

As an army veteran suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder, Emily’s dad is unable to account for his actions that night, and is subsequently charged with Ashlee’s murder. This of course makes things very difficult for Emily at school, and after the sports prefect – none other than Ashlee’s boyfriend, Damon – catches her fighting defending her family’s name, she is sentenced to a special detention with him in the middle of Darkwood.

Still unable to piece together the events in the woods that led up to Ashlee’s death (but laying the blame for this firmly at the Shepherds’ door), Damon seeks to punish Emily for what happened. But after he challenges her to a strange (and violent) game of chase through the woods, he is surprised to find her an admirable, and feisty, opponent.

The conviction that Damon and Emily exhibit in asserting their beliefs about what did, and did not, happen on the night of Ashlee’s murder makes them both begin to doubt their own assertions. Emily trawls through her father’s belongings and revisits his hidden bunker in the woods, and in the process



uncovers one of her dad's nature illustrations: a picture of wolves hungrily pursuing a deer ... which happens to look very much like Ashlee! Damon, on the other hand, tries to retrace his movements that night by arranging a commemorative version of The Game; the one that he, Ashlee, and his friends (Mack, Ed and Charlie) had been playing just before the murder took place.

Just as Damon is starting to fear that he could be the one who killed Ashlee, and Emily is beginning to suspect her father had been stalking Ashlee from his bunker, the two unexpectedly meet. Emily agrees to take Damon to the bunker and decides to show him the sketch of the deer and the wolves. However, instead of viewing the sketch as evidence of Emily's dad's guilt, Damon sees something else in it and rushes off to confront his friends.

Arriving at Mack's house, Damon shows him the sketch, claiming it proves that Emily's dad knew about The Game (a rough game of chase similar to the one Damon initiated with Emily during the detention). He points out that the deer not only resembles Ashlee, but that the wolves also look like the boys (as, in the picture, the wolves wear collars like those the boys wear when they play The Game). According to Damon, this means Emily's dad probably knows what happened to Ashlee that night. Mack dismisses this, asserting that it could only have been Emily's dad who killed Ashlee. He then presents Damon with a joint and tells him he needs to go home and relax. Undeterred, Damon accepts the joint but heads back to Darkwood.

At the same time, in search of answers, Emily calls on her friend Joe, who has been spending time in the woods taking photographs for a school project. She comes across photographs that suggest Ashlee had her own, sexually motivated, agenda when playing The Game. This is a discovery that Damon also makes as he experiences a drug-induced flashback, revealing something rather disturbing about Ashlee's character - a desire to be strangled!

Concerned about Damon's whereabouts, and worried he may inform the police about Ashlee's involvement in The Game (thereby implicating the boys in the events of that night), Mack leads Ed and Charlie to Darkwood to look for Damon, though this soon turns into more of a hunt - something akin to The Game. On hearing the boys' howls, and feeling strangely drawn towards Damon, Emily also enters the woods.

Damon, still suffering the effects of smoking the joint, comes across both Ashlee's Game collar and her phone hidden in the woods. Finding that the phone still works, Damon manages to open up some videos taken on the night Ashlee



died. When watching the videos, it dawns on him that he could not have been the one who was responsible for her death, as he is pictured having collapsed after overindulging in drugs and alcohol. He does, however, see who was to blame on that night.

Having reached the bunker, Emily is confronted by Mack, frantically searching for Damon. He enters the bunker, and it is here, amongst her father's sketches, that she spots the resemblance between Mack and the wolf pictures her father drew. As Mack becomes more agitated, an enraged Damon enters the bunker. He takes out the phone and tells Mack he has seen what really happened on the night Ashlee died. As the two boys fight, the phone is dropped, and Emily, anxious to get help, scoops it up and runs in the direction of home.

However, Emily does not get far before curiosity gets the better of her and she checks the videos on Ashlee's phone. She watches a video taken on the night of the murder in which Ashlee seduces the person shooting the video, asking him to put his hands around her throat and squeeze - which, she says, is all part of her own 'game'. But the person she's talking to is not Damon (as he can be seen on camera, collapsed on the ground). Instead it is Mack; who presses his hands around Ashlee's throat as she requests. This 'game' goes wrong: Mack holds on for too long, and Ashlee is strangled to death.

Emily hurries back to find the bunker ablaze, and Damon and Mack still fighting. Damon rescues Mack from the flames, as Mack repeatedly claims 'he never meant it'. Soon after, the police arrive (having been alerted by Joe), and Mack is arrested.

Mack is charged with Ashlee's death and Emily's dad acquitted. At the station, Damon learns that Ashlee's penchant for strangulation is not uncommon amongst young people, with other, similar, teenage deaths having been recorded. Some weeks later, Emily and Damon's friendship begins to blossom. Finally, accompanied by her mother, Emily goes to visit her dad, who has been moved to a psychological assessment unit.



WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

From the stories we hear in childhood, to our fantasies of freedom and fear, woods with their dark places and sudden bursts of light mean a lot to us. Lucy Christopher's brilliant and frightening imagination takes an unexplained death, a complicated and emotional set of teenage relationships, and one black night in the woods to mix a sensual cocktail of terror and suspicion. It's gripping, compulsive and totally dangerous. I'm still scared. And, no, I didn't guess the truth.

BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Lucy Christopher is the critically acclaimed and international award-winning author of teen novel *Stolen*. Her second novel *Flyaway*, for younger readers (middle grade) was published in 2010. Her third novel for Chicken House, *The Killing Woods*, was published in October 2013.

Stolen won the Branford Boase Award (UK) and the Gold Inky Award (Australia). It received a Printz Honor Award (USA) and was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Award for Older Readers as well as winning the CBCA Book of the Year Audience's Choice Award (Australia). Both *Stolen* and *Flyaway* have been shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards (Australia) and longlisted for the Carnegie Medal.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Born in Wales but having grown up in Australia, Lucy Christopher later returned to the UK and currently lives on the edge of the woods in Monmouthshire. She has a PhD in Creative Writing and lectures in writing for children and young adults at Bath Spa University.

Lucy Christopher was just 25 years old when she came to prominence with her debut novel *Stolen*, which garnered international critical acclaim. It has now sold a quarter of a million copies worldwide and has been



translated into 16 languages. Her second novel, *Flyaway*, was shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award. Inspired by her fascination with wild places and the teen psyche, *The Killing Woods* is Christopher's third novel.

Lucy is a born speaker and performer. She is passionate about sharing her love for writing both as a lecturer and as a visiting author to schools and festivals. The fact that she veers fearlessly towards darker subjects makes her an exciting figure in teen fiction. Her controversial themes (*Stolen* centres around a kidnapped girl's increasingly dependent relationship with her handsome and secretive kidnapper, while *The Killing Woods* deals with dark teenage games that veer on the sexually dangerous) speak directly to her teen and twenty-something fanbase.

Lucy loves to travel and one of her most adventurous experiences involved being one of the first women to hike up a dormant volcano in Nigeria's Cross River Rainforest, which was not, in her guide's words, 'a gentle slope'.

THEMES

- Secrets
- Guilt
- Doubt
- Teenage life
- Loyalty
- Friendship
- Trauma

WRITING STYLE

The Killing Woods is a gripping psychological thriller for young adults. It is a dual narrative, told from the perspective of a teenage boy and girl. The writing is fast-paced and richly descriptive. A substantial portion of the novel concentrates on the protagonists' pursuit of the truth, and there is a strong emphasis on notions



of loyalty and trust. All the action takes place around a British garrison town, with much of the novel focusing on the events that occur in the nearby woods. The story contains many adult themes, including drug use and some violent and sexually explicit scenes. There is also strong swearing throughout. 58 chapters, 369 pages, age 14+.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1: Bunker diary

We learn from Emily that her dad spends much of his time in the bunker in the woods, especially after he becomes affected with post-traumatic stress disorder. It becomes clear that, from this vantage point, he is able to see many of the things that take place in Darkwood – including Damon and his friends playing The Game. Of course, there are many positive reasons why Emily’s dad spends so much time in the woods; he is a nature lover, and enjoys studying the plants and animals that reside there. But he is also a man struggling to deal with the things he experienced while fighting in the army. Pupils could create a new perspective on the events at the start of the novel by writing Emily’s dad’s account of what happened in the weeks leading up to Ashlee’s death. This could take the form of a bunker diary, with pupils – in the guise of Emily’s dad – composing entries revealing what he saw and heard from his location in the woods, and also what he was thinking about at the time. Pupils might also want to write entries where they assume Emily’s dad’s persona during one of his flashbacks. This would contrast significantly with the other entries, and it would challenge the pupils to incorporate a more psychologically tense element in their writing, as well as providing an opportunity for pupils to research the causes and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

2: Trial by jury

After Mack is discovered to have been involved in Ashlee’s death, the police charge him with her murder. At the end of the novel, however, we learn that the sentence given to him may be reduced. Perhaps one of the most important things to consider when thinking about how Mack should be punished is whether or not



Ashlee's death was an accident. Could it be argued that Ashlee was also responsible for her own murder to some extent? Pupils could debate what they think an appropriate punishment would be for this crime. It might be interesting for pupils to be divided into groups, with one half responsible for making a case for the prosecution, and the other half for the defence. These cases could be heard in a courtroom-like setting with a jury and a judge presiding. Pupils could even assume the roles of some of the characters in the novel and be cross-examined – as in a real courtroom. The jury could retire to consider their verdict, where they should give reasons for their opinions. Finally, once the verdict has been reached, the judge would need to pass a sentence: is Mack guilty of murder? What sentence is appropriate for the crime? Following this activity, the class could discuss how difficult it was to decide on a sentence for this crime. This activity could also provide an insight into the workings of the judicial system.

3: The memory game

In the same way that Damon tries various methods to piece together his half-memories from the night Ashlee was killed, pupils could attempt to recall something that happened to them. Damon does remember certain images and sensations from the fateful night, but he struggles to comprehensively recall what happened, and it is this that bars him from arriving at the truth. Clearly his memory problems are in no small part due to his having taken drugs and alcohol, but the major problem Damon faces when trying to retrace his steps is that he can only summon up vague notions about the things that occurred, and also the things that were said. One of the questions arising here is whether any of us can say for certain what we have seen and heard – at least in fine detail. It might be interesting for pupils to explore this idea further by devising some memory recollection games in which pupils must recall what they have experienced. Small groups could be tasked with devising an elaborate series of sights, movements, sounds, and pieces of dialogue which one pupil must experience, and subsequently recall in as much detail as they can. For example, the pupil could be shown a picture in which there are a number of things happening while a particular piece of music, featuring some distinctive instruments, is played. Then, he or she could then be blindfolded and led around the room (moving in very specific ways), while a short, but detailed, story is read out to them. The length and level



of detail of this activity can be tailored to those taking part, but ideally it should fully test the abilities of those taking part. To act as a definitive record of what happened (and echoing the novel), the activity could be filmed; this would certainly help avoid any disagreements later on! The pupil who took part can then be tested as to what they heard, saw and felt. After which, the accuracy of their recollection can be revealed to them. Whilst it will be interesting to note how successful the pupils attempting the activity are in recalling the events, what is perhaps more interesting is how they go about trying to remember what they experienced. The activity can act as a catalyst for some illuminating class discussions about how we best recapture memories, and what tactics we employ to recall certain events. Perhaps most importantly in relation to *The Killing Woods* however, is for pupils to question how reliable our memories are, and if we ever really remember the ‘truth’ of an event.

4: Animals

One of Emily’s dad’s favourite pastimes is to draw pictures of animals. However, these animal pictures also take on some of the characteristics of the people he knows and sees in Darkwood. For instance, of all the animals in the woods, he associates Emily’s mum most closely with a squirrel and makes a hybrid drawing in which the characteristics of both Emily’s mum and a squirrel are somehow combined, almost as if he was sketching what he thinks Emily’s mum would look like if she were a squirrel. At the climax of the novel, it is Mack’s wolf-like qualities that make Emily realise her father’s drawing of the wolves chasing the deer is actually a picture that represents Mack chasing Ashlee through the woods. Pupils could replicate the type of drawings Emily’s dad produces by making studies of different woodland animals (or perhaps any wild animal). They could look at particular features of certain animals, their shape and size, and the way they move. They will also need to select a person on which to base their drawing, and subsequently decide which animal best represents the characteristics of the person they have chosen. Pupils could base their drawings on their friends or on famous people, but the important thing is that the pairing of person and animal is well observed and appropriate. Fundamentally, pupils should be given the chance to explore which features of both the person and the animal can be accentuated in order that the person or animal can be seen to



represent the other. In this way, the activity is also a study of caricature, as it demands the pupils exaggerate a certain character trait in order that the person or animal it is based on can be more easily recognised. Following on from this, the activity could be broadened out to include a writing element. In the same way that the objective in the drawing was to emphasise the link between a person and an animal in visual terms, pupils could undertake a writing task in which they must suggest these links using descriptive language. This could be a short piece of fiction that describes the meeting of two people, both of whom exhibit specific animal-like characteristics and behaviour. The objective, building on the work completed in the drawing section of the activity, would be for pupils to understand how likening a character to a particular object, being or force of nature (in this case an animal) can greatly enhance both the writer's ability to project their vision to the reader, and the reader's appreciation and enjoyment of their work.

5: Cracks

Emily and Joe reminisce about a game they once played in Darkwood, which Joe calls 'Cracks'. In this game the two of them would seek out shadowy places in the woods and imagine these were doorways to alternative worlds. Emily recalls Joe showing her a fissure in a large rock which was so deep and dark that the pair were unable to work out what might be inside. These areas of darkness inspire their imagination, and encourage Joe to start thinking about the woods as being two distinct places: a 'light' place and a 'dark' place. Pupils could be encouraged to create images that revealed both the light and dark elements of a wood. These could be overlapping images, in which we can see both 'worlds' at the same time, or alternatively they could be two separate images of the exact same place - one image revealing the wood in the light, one in the dark. Images might be realistic or abstract, but they should suggest two very different atmospheres. Pupils might like to consider an image that depicts a torch beam illuminating the darkness, or an image of a section of wood at daytime and the same section at night time. Pupils should question what might happen in these alternative worlds. Could one world influence what happens in the other? This activity is also a good starting point for a piece of creative writing in which Darkwood is the focus. Pupils could be prompted to think about the 'alternative' Darkwood, a place with a noticeable supernatural element. They



should concentrate on establishing links with the Darkwood in *The Killing Woods*, where the events that take place in the novel are influenced by those in its sister self (or vice versa). When setting up this work, it might also be interesting to reference the Greek myths, drawing attention to the gods' influence on the events in the real world. A further example of two coexisting worlds – and one that is certainly appropriate to the woodland setting – can be found in Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

6: *The character who wasn't there*

Despite having an enormous impact on the events in *The Killing Woods*, Ashlee Parker is dead before the novel begins. Her death is the driving force behind the storyline but, while she is constantly alluded to, she only appears as a living person in the recollections of others (and when the incriminating videos on her phone are replayed). While it might be unusual for such a pivotal character to be absent during the bulk of the story, she provides an important link between the characters that we get to meet. In fact, her death is the reason the characters come together as they do. Lucy Christopher uses Ashlee's absence as a device to force an interaction between two people who might not normally have anything to do with one another (Emily and Damon). Using this device as a starting point, pupils could be tasked with writing a short play in which the 'central' character is absent throughout. Ideally, the missing character should be intrinsic to the plot, rather than being arbitrarily name-checked by the characters that are seen. This task could encourage pupils to consider how they might expand a storyline beyond the visible interaction of the characters present onstage. These plays could then be read, or perhaps performed, by others in the class. Later, the class could discuss the sort of person they thought the absent character to be, and reflect on the difficulties of visualising a character when they are out of sight.



WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In chapter 4, Damon thinks punishing Emily for what her father is believed to have done would be 'an eye for an eye'. What does Damon mean when he says this? Do you agree with his point of view? Why/why not?
2. At the end of chapter 28 (page 197), Damon says, 'I'm thinking that I've been keeping secrets, secrets even from myself.' What secrets do you think he means? Can you keep secrets from yourself? What reasons might there be for keeping a secret from yourself? Are these justifiable reasons?
3. Throughout the novel, both Emily and Damon face some difficult decisions. They sometimes feel torn about telling their friends, family and the police what they know, and also how they feel. Do you think Damon and Emily make the right decisions? What would you have done differently if you were Emily or Damon?
4. Darkwood, like other woods and forests that appear in novels and in films, is depicted as both comforting (a place where Emily recalls spending many happy times with her family) and frightening (when, at night, it becomes the setting for the dangerous game that leads to Ashlee's death). Discuss the different impressions we get about these woods. What is it that makes Darkwood both a pleasant place and an intimidating one? Are all woods like this? How do you feel when you enter woods? Why?

