

# BOOKNOTES

TEACHERS GUIDE

## thematic connections

### Family Relationships

**Fear • Hope • Dreams**

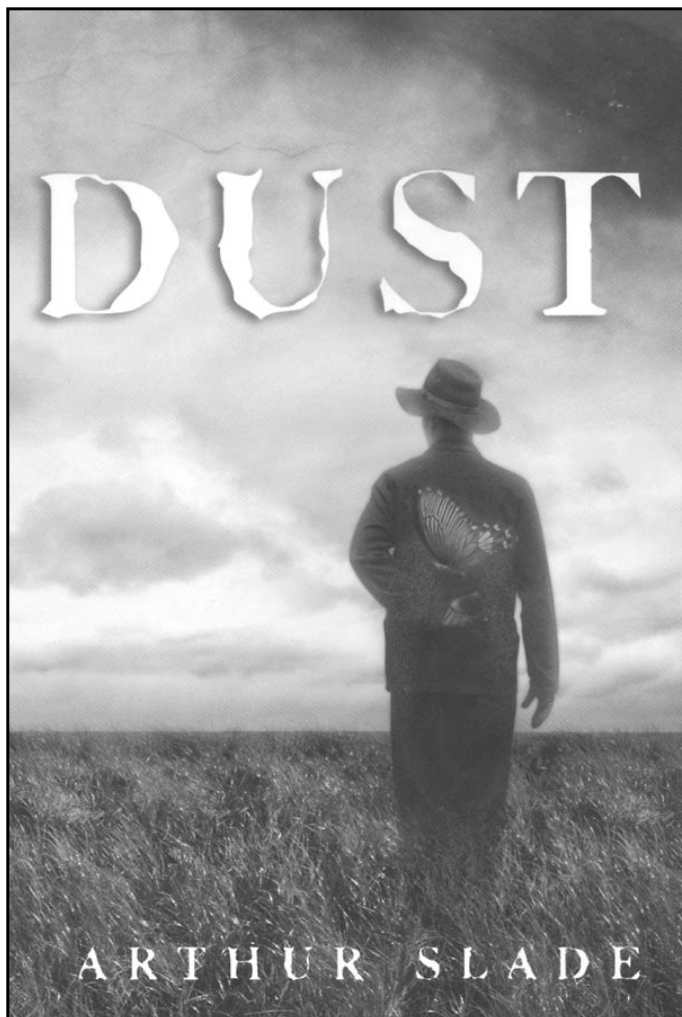
**Good vs. Evil • Courage**

**Grades 5 up**

## about the book

**This haunting and compelling novel tells the story of a town of missing children and a man who casts a hypnotic spell on nearly everyone in the small farming community of Horshoe, Saskatchewan, during the Depression.**

Seven-year-old Matthew Steelgate disappears while walking from his family's farm to the nearby town of Horshoe. When other children are reported missing and Abram Harsich, a mysterious man who promises a rainmaking machine, opens "a kaleidoscopic visual delight" at the Royal Theater, a hypnotic spell is cast over almost everyone in town. Only eleven-year-old Robert Steelgate, Matthew's brother, and their Uncle Alden suspect the haunting truth that something isn't right about Harsich's magic mirrors and the fall of his "sweet tasting" rain. Both Robert and Uncle Alden are readers who have a passion for high adventure, but no novel has ever prepared them for the startling discovery they make in the basement of Abram Harsich's home.



Wendy Lamb Books hardcover • 0-385-73004-7

## reviews

"The plot is strewn with foreshadowing, portents of evil, and foreboding . . . This unusual, well-written story will definitely exercise readers' imaginations."—Starred, *School Library Journal*

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## pre-reading activity

Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to research the Dust Bowl that occurred in the United States and Canada in the 1930s. What were the economic threats to the people? Ask students to find personal stories of people who lived through the devastation of this period.

# thematic connections

## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

**Family Relationships**—Ask the class to describe Robert's relationship with Uncle Alden. Why does Robert's mother feel that Uncle Alden is a "bad influence?" (p. 45) How does his mother change her feelings regarding Uncle Alden at the end of the novel? Ask the class to discuss Robert's relationship with Matthew, his younger brother. Robert saves Matthew's life and soul, and says to Matthew, "I didn't forget you. I never will. I mean it." (p. 173) How does this change their relationship forever?

**Fear**—The Canadian Mounties come to get Robert after Matthew disappears, but they don't tell him what has happened. "There was something Robert should be afraid of right now, but he wasn't sure what." (p. 23) How do the Mounties contribute to his fear? Robert's parents become almost silent after Matthew disappears. Discuss how individuals react differently to a situation.

**Hope**—Engage the class in a discussion about the effects of the Dust Bowl on the town of Horshoe. How does the drought make their lives seem hopeless? Discuss how Abram Harsich represents hope to them. Mrs. Steelgate says, "Matthew's not gone. . . . He'll be back." (p. 120) Discuss whether she really believes that Matthew will be found. How does the ghost of Uncle Edmund contribute to Robert's hope?

**Dreams**—Discuss the relationship between dreams and hope. Abram Harsich introduces the people of Horshoe to his magic mirror at the Royal Theater. He says, "It will show you whatever you want to see." (p. 63) What does Mrs. Steelgate see? Discuss why Mr. Samuelson, manager of Horshoe Savings and Loan, buys into Harsich's scheme. Explain the following statement: "Robert knew dreams weren't real, but he also knew that some could *become* real." (p. 49)

**Good Vs. Evil**—Evil is almost always present in science fiction novels. What is the first hint that Abram Harsich is the evil character in *Dust*? Mrs. Steelgate thinks that reading novels, attending "talkies," and playing pool are evil. Discuss why she is so afraid of these activities, but can't see through Mr. Harsich. Debate whether Robert and Uncle Alden are more astute to evil because they have broadened their lives through books. Harsich is robbing children of their souls. How does having a soul relate to being a good person? What does it mean to "sell your soul?"

**Courage**—Engage the class in a discussion about Robert's courageous acts. How does it take courage to stand up to Harsich? What do you think gives Robert the courage to prove that Abram Harsich is guilty of taking the children? "Now he knew what soldiers felt at the end of a battle." (p. 167) How does the "win" give Robert strength and courage?

# connecting to the curriculum

**Language Arts**—Have students note what Abram Harsich tells Robert’s class about butterflies. (p. 107) Then ask them to explain the cover of the novel. Instruct students to write a short paper explaining the double meaning of the title of the novel.

Mr. Samuelson asks the citizens of Horshoe to make a financial commitment to Harsich’s rainmaking machine. When Uncle Alden questions the scheme, Abram Harsich says, “When Monday’s edition of *The Horshoe Times* comes to your door, there will be a special article outlining our plans and the conditions of Mr. Samuelson’s deal.” (p. 72) Ask students to write the article for the paper.

**Social Studies**—Most people around Horshoe belong to the Anglican Church. Robert’s mother is extremely religious and does not allow books in the house except the Bible, an Anglican hymnal, and her husband’s *Farmer’s Almanac*. Ask students to research the beliefs of the Anglican Church, and write a letter to Mrs. Steelgate from the town librarian telling her why reading adventure stories doesn’t violate her religion.

Discuss World War I and the countries involved. What was the difference between Canadian involvement and United States involvement? How did World War I impact Canada from 1914 on?

**Science**—Throughout history, myth has been connected to science. The Native Americans did rain dances during droughts. Matthew Steelgate believes that “killing a spider meant seven days of rain.” (p. 2) Ask students to research scientific myths regarding weather. How have machines and technology affected the weather and farming?

Franz Anton Mesmer, born in 1734, was considered by some people as the person who invented hypnotism. Read about his life and career, and debate whether or not he actually invented the science of hypnotism. Ask students to find out how hypnotism is used in medicine today. Consider inviting a local doctor to speak to the class about the importance of hypnotism in medical science.

**Art**—Have students design a poster advertising Abram Harsich’s show at the Royal Theater.

**Drama**—Robert never met Uncle Edmund, but he has been told stories of his uncle’s heroic death in the Great War in Europe. At the beginning of the novel, Robert touches his uncle’s photograph, and his uncle winks. As a class, brainstorm the elements that make a good ghost or horror story. Considering Robert’s vivid imagination, and his fascination with his uncle’s story, have each student make up a ghost story about Uncle Edmund and tell it to the class.

**Career Exploration**—Robert once saw a flyer that said, “Join the Mounties, live the adventure.” (p. 21) Ask students to research the training and job of a Canadian Mountie. Then ask them to make a recruitment flyer for the Mounties. Stress the adventure aspect of the job.

Students may also want to research career opportunities as a meteorologist, entomologist, or lepidopterist.

## vocabulary/ use of language

The language in this novel provides students with an opportunity to broaden their vocabulary. Ask them to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context of the story. Such words may include: *ferocity* (p. 9), *prowess* (p. 9), *concocted* (p. 13), *mundane* (p. 16), *intuition* (p. 28), *squadron* (p. 35), *sacramental* (p. 52), *cacophony* (p. 53), *desiccated* (p. 54), *reverberated* (p. 64), *authentic* (p. 70), *mettle* (p. 91), *commodity* (p. 125), *apparition* (p. 148), and *malevolence* (p. 158).

## related titles

### by theme

#### **Gathering Blue**

**Lois Lowry**

Fear • Hope • Courage • Good vs. Evil  
Grades 5 up / 0-440-22949-9  
Dell Laurel-Leaf Readers Circle

#### **The Giver**

**Lois Lowry**

Fear • Hope • Courage • Good vs. Evil  
Grades 5 up / 0-440-23768-8  
Dell Laurel-Leaf Readers Circle

### by topic

#### **The Century for Young People**

**Peter Jennings, Todd Brewster**

Grades 3–7 / 0-385-32708-0  
Doubleday

#### **Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp**

**Jerry Stanley**

Grades 4 up / 0-517-88094-6  
Alfred A. Knopf

## on the web

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## about the author

**Arthur Slade** was born in Moose Jaw, raised on a ranch in the Cypress Hills, educated at the University of Saskatchewan, and now writes full time from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. He is the author of six novels for young adults and has won several prizes, including the Governor General's Award for Children's Literature. *Tribes* and *Dust* are his first two books to appear in the United States.

## internet resources

#### **Dust Bowl**

[www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm)

This site gives information and a time line about the Dust Bowl.

#### **Saskatchewan**

[www.virtualsk.com/maps/index.html](http://www.virtualsk.com/maps/index.html)

This site provides geographical information about Saskatchewan.

#### **Hypnotism**

[www.hypnotism.org](http://www.hypnotism.org)

This site gives an overview of hypnotism and other mind control technologies.

#### **Arthur Slade**

[www.arthurslade.com](http://www.arthurslade.com)

This is the official Web site for Arthur Slade.