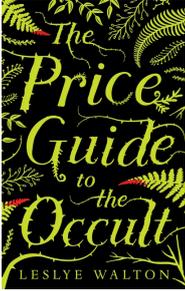




Walker Books Classroom Ideas



The Price Guide to the Occult

By Leslye Walton
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

When Rona Blackburn landed on Anathema Island more than a century ago, her otherworldly skills might have benefited friendlier neighbors. Guilt and fear instead led the island's original eight settlers to burn "the witch" out of her home. So Rona cursed them. Fast-forward one hundred–some years: All Nor Blackburn wants is to live an unremarkable teenage life. She has reason to hope: First, her supernatural powers, if they can be called that, are unexceptional. Second, her love life is nonexistent, which means she might escape the other perverse side effect of the matriarch's backfiring curse, too. But then a mysterious book comes out, promising to cast any spell for the right price. Nor senses a storm coming and is pretty sure she'll be smack in the eye of it. In her second novel, Leslye Walton spins a dark, mesmerizing tale of a girl stumbling along the path toward self-acceptance and first love, even as the *Price Guide's* malevolent author – Nor's own mother – looms and threatens to strangle any hope for happiness.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Leslye Walton was named a William C. Morris YA Debut Award Finalist for the publication of her debut novel, *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender*. Born in the Pacific Northwest, she has an MA in writing. She lives in Seattle, Washington.

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Secondary, years 8+
- Ages 14+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Mental Illness
- Magic
- Murder
- Family



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

Exploring the text

The prologue of the novel lays out the history of Anathema Island and the curse that has lain heavy on each Blackburn daughter's shoulders. Why do you think the splintering and separation of gifts – or “burdens” – was a side effect of Rona's binding curse?

Nor first makes the choice to keep the true range of her gifts secret when she's only eleven, even then not wanting to be mistaken for Fern. How much of Nor's secrecy stems from fear of her mother, and how much from fear of herself and her own potential power?

Nor is desperate to prove to herself that she's nothing like her mother, but she “. . . never had the heart to tell anyone that all she wanted was to make the slightest mark as humanly possible on the world” (p 24). Why would she keep such a clear distinction to herself? What does she risk by saying it aloud?

Why do you think Nor spends so much time working at The Witching Hour when she knows the “witchcraft” practiced by Madge and sold to tourists is so unlike actual magic?

Charlie, Gage, and the rest of the Coldwaters have watched over the Blackburn witches for generations, but there's an obvious difference in the way some of them feel about their roles as protectors: Gage is resentful, Dauphine is matter-of-fact, Charlie is almost eager. Why are their reactions so varied? Why might the Coldwater men feel differently than the women?

Fern fell in love with Quinn Sweeney, and he remained the only thing she ever actually wanted – and never got. Does her ability to fall in love and suffer from a broken heart make her a more empathetic character?

Nor reads the warning signs on the island: the frantic, fleeing wildlife, the creeping vines, the strange fog. Why doesn't she speak to Judd about the ominous changes that spread over all of Anathema?

Do you think some part of Nor always knew she had to stay on the island to face – and stop – her mother at some future point? What might have happened if Nor had left?

Fern was the only Blackburn daughter ever actually conceived in love, which Nor considers ironic. How do you think Judd might view it?

Even after trying to heal Madge, Nor doesn't tell Judd about her abilities. Judd can see the evidence right there on Nor's hands, but doesn't pry. Why can't Nor put words to her abilities, even with the person she trusts the most?

Quinn Sweeney makes a surprise appearance in the ruins on Halcyon Island. How was he different from Nor's ideas of him? How do you feel about his final act – trying to save Nor, her friends, and himself by drowning?

Why can't Fern hurt Nor anymore? What has changed since the incident at the dinner table when Nor cut through one of her mother's choking vines?

As Fern's power weakened, the hold she had on Quinn broke and he regained control over his own actions. Why didn't the same thing happen to the other followers?

Nor's fear is a through-line from the start of the book to the end, at times holding her back and at times strengthening her. How do her fears change throughout the story – does she still carry any at the end of the book that she had at the beginning? Has she grown somewhat fearless? Or have new fears just taken hold?

Speaking about Fern, Judd says, “Some hearts can't do anything with love except turn it rotten” (p 259). Nor is probably the only thing Fern ever touched that wasn't turned rotten. Do you think any part of Fern ever loved her daughter?

If Rona had known that in binding her blood to that of the island's founding families, she was cursing her descendants to heartbreak, would she have made the same choice? She was gifted with prophetic dreams – do you really think she was unaware of the true price of her magic? Or was her anger and desire for revenge simply stronger?

Is Judd correct in saying Nor is her own person, unlike Fern or Rona? How do you predict the Blackburn family history might continue to affect Nor and her choices?

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