



Walker Books Classroom Ideas



Hapless Hero Henrie (House of Heroes Book 1)

Petra James
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

Twelve-year-old Henrie is the first girl heir of the Melchior family in 200 years. This was deemed a dereliction of duty by the formidable Octavia Melchior, head of the House of Melchior (HoMe). For HoMe is in the business of heroes for hire. Boy heroes, that is. Girls have no place. When Henrie receives a mysterious note, it sets off a chain of events including a kidnapping, a fancy skateboard manoeuvre and a private jet and she discovers something rotten at the heart of HoMe. As past, present and future collide, HoMe is poised to come tumbling down ... unless a new kind of hero can emerge from the rubble.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Petra James was born in a small town in the South Island of New Zealand, and came to Australia via London. She has written several fiction and nonfiction titles for children and, most recently, is the author of the seven books in the Arkie Sparkle series. Like Arkie, she wanted to be an archaeologist when she grew up (she had planned to work her way through the career alphabet but didn't get past "A"), but instead sold chocolate chip cookies and eventually found her way into publishing. When she is not sending fictional characters (often named after streets) on adventures, she works in children's publishing in Sydney. The House of Heroes series are her first books with Walker.

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:

- Primary years 3-5
- Ages 8+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Family
- Bravery
- Secrets
- Prejudice



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

The story begins with definitions of “hero” and “hapless hero”. Without looking online or in a dictionary, write your own definitions of “hero” and “hapless” and write your own interpretation of “hapless hero”. After finishing the book, revisit your definitions and update them if your interpretations have changed.

Hapless Hero Henrie features a variety of different designs and illustrations throughout the text. Find a page that you think is designed interestingly and discuss why it appeals to you (try pages 8, 10, 28, 97 or 126 as a starting point.) How would the story be different if it were all just text?

Petra James writes interesting chapter openers and ends to entice the reader to keep reading, for example, chapter 1 opens “I know I have to tell you right away. I was the spark that caused the flame that caused the house to burn.” (page 7) and ends “But why was there a room bursting with shrieks? I’m about to get to that.” (page 14). How do these sentences make you feel as a reader? Identify other interesting chapter openers and ends in this book and discuss.

Petra James uses a number of literary devices throughout the story. What is the definition of each device? How do these devices make the story more interesting for the reader? Can you find other examples of them in *Hapless Hero Henry* and other books? Write a short story using as many of these devices as you can.

- Puns – “Claire Voyant” (page 15), “U R A Mazeball” (page 31)
- Alliteration – “...bouncy bubbly baby ‘b’s” (page 18), “Delightful, delicious, delectable, dainty, darling” (page 19)
- Metaphor – “We might look like one big picture of a person from the outside but inside we’re a kaleidoscope.” (page 30)
- The narrator talking directly to the reader – “I know what you’re thinking.” (page 20)
- Oxymoron – “an orphan with parents” (page 27)
- Simile – “Ellie wrapped me in a blanket like a falafel roll” (page 24)
- Repetition – “Dead. Dead. Dead ...” (page 125)

Keep a vocab journal while reading *Hapless Hero Henrie*. Using the list below as a starting point, collect words that you are unfamiliar with or that you find interesting, record the page number and find the definition for each:

- Dereliction (page 25)
- Veritable (page 41)
- Punctual (page 47)
- Saunter (page 56)
- Clandestine (page 74)
- Irrefutable (page 113)
- Scoundrel (page 113)

“Feast of fathers ... A shrewdness of apes, A murmuration of starlings, A parliament of owls.” (page 52). What is a collective noun? Find other collective nouns that are interesting to you

and compile a class list. For example, what are the collective nouns for crows, elephants, hippopotamuses, parrots, frogs and sharks?

“Albert Abernathy was twisting the life out of the truth.” (page 78)

From the time Henrie and Alex meet Albert at the train station to the time they are discovered on the jet, Henrie and Alex believe they are right and Albert is wrong. However, Albert then explains his interpretation of events which makes Henrie question her idea of truth. Do you think the truth is always a black and white issue? Or is it open to interpretation?

In chapter 8 Albert Abernathy explains why HoMe only recruited boys and the Melchior family only had boy children until Henrie. Based on this, discuss the perceived differences between boys and girls in Victorian times and compare that to the differences now. Are there things that boys can do that girls can’t, and vice versa?

As a class, make a list of things that are traditionally attributed to boys and girls using the table below as a template. Think about activities, jobs around the house, clothes, hobbies, etc. Revisit each item on the list and discuss why you think that item is attributed to boys or girls and if you agree or disagree with that.

	Girls	Boys
Hair	Long	Short
Hobbies	Gentle, “nice” hobbies such as dancing, crafts, reading	Active hobbies such as sports, roughhousing; technical hobbies such as video games
Favourite colours	Pink, purple	Blue, green
Toys	Dolls, cute animals, fashion/ beauty-related toys	Action figures, cars/trucks, monsters

What lie does Octavia Melchior tell Henrie’s parents? Why did he tell them this lie? What are the consequences of his lie? Is it ever ok to lie? How do you feel when someone lies to you? What other lies are told in the story?

Why do you think Finn and Carter do not like Henrie, even when they don’t know anything about her?

Henrie Melchior discovers much about her family tree during the book. What is a family tree? Draw your own family tree using information from your relatives.



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Q&A with author Petra James:

***Hapless Hero Henrie* features spies, secrets, clandestine organisations, secret codes and fantastic character names. What influenced you when writing the book?**

I loved playing spies and detectives when I was a kid. We had a set of well-thumbed Agatha Christie novels in our bach (New Zealand for 'holiday house') and I consumed them all. So I've always loved a mystery and skulduggery. I also love the idea that language and secrets hide in codes and have to be teased out into the open. Finding the right character names is one of the best problems to have when writing a book. The names are like hooks on which to (figuratively) hang your characters, and you want these names to embody the essence of your characters.

***Hapless Hero Henrie* is told in first person, and there are plenty of moments in the book where Henrie speaks directly to the reader. How did Henrie's voice come to you, and how did you know she needed to talk to the reader too?**

Maybe it's unusual to have notes to the reader when the book is already in the first-person but Henrie wouldn't stop talking. She kept saying things that were outside the story so, obligingly, I wrote them down for her.

Kids think laterally so when Henrie began to comment on things that were above, below and beyond the story – despite of and possibly because of being stuck in a linear narrative – it made sense to me.

These asides are also a way of giving the reader an even deeper sense of Henrie's thoughts and the way she sees the world. Hopefully, they help to strengthen her voice.

Tell us more about working with illustrator A.Yi to bring Henrie's world to life.

Anne is a brilliant illustrator, and I already knew and loved her work. She conveys mood, energy and quirk so beautifully. One of the earliest roughs I saw was the portrait of past Melchior – and I was so delighted with the expressions, and noses, on all of them. She had totally captured 200 years of Melchior tradition and the different characters who had formed this House of Heroes.

With a wordsearch, a cipher, notes to the reader and more, the design of *Hapless Hero Henrie* is pretty unique! At which point in writing the book did you know that you wanted the layout and design of the book to be special? Can you talk us through your process?

I had always envisaged the book with breakout notes, diagrams, speech bubbles, road signs, arrows and other such visual snippets and included them, where possible, in the original manuscript (I think I might be a thwarted designer). And then the real designer Sarah Davis, Associate Art Director at Walker Books, pulled them all together so wonderfully and made the pages zing.

What is your top tip for aspiring young heroes?

Heroes of the everyday are all shapes and sizes, like you. Bravery is open to everyone.

What's next for Henrie Melchior?

Well, Henrie has just picked up the Hero Hotline so the first thing to discover is who is ringing and why. This revelation kick-starts an adventure called *Henrie's Hero Hunt* with a new mystery to solve, lots of new characters (dishonourable mention to Violetta Villarne from Villains Incorporated*), and the continuing search for Henrie's parents.

* She made me say that. She thinks heroes are boring.

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