

TALKING POINTS

CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2013



The CILIP Carnegie
& Kate Greenaway
Children's Book
Awards

Midwinterblood by Marcus Sedgwick

Structure of the book

The book is divided into seven parts and an epilogue.

- Talk about how you felt as you read each part. Did it start to fit together? What clues helped you to piece together the links between each of the stories?
- Where there some sections of the book that you liked or related to more than others? What were they, and why?
- What is the relationship between the types of moon that give each chapter their names and the events that occur in each chapter?
- Did you find each story, and the overall story, believable?

Each part of the book is written during a different period of time, starting in the future and going back to an unknown time.

- Each story is written in the present tense. Did you notice this? What effect does it have?

Love

Midwinterblood is, in many ways, a love story. When King Eirikr is killed he states that he will live seven lives and he will look for Melle and love her in each one. In each story, the love is incarnated in a slightly different way. Talk about the different types of love represented by:

1. The attraction between Eric and Merle.
2. The mother/son relationship between Merle and Eric.
3. The relationship between Merle and the man who saves her father's life.
4. The relationship between the painter and the little girl who shows him kindness.
5. The forbidden love of two women (or rich/poor, in the story).
6. The brother/sister love between the twins.
7. The love between the king and queen.

Sacrifice

The book is based around the idea of sacrifice, with the story starting (chronologically) with King Eirikr being sacrificed to save the failing crops and ending with Eric being sacrificed to bring fertility back to the island. Each of the other stories also contains a sacrifice. Identify the sacrifice of:

- Eric, the boy, when handling the unexploded bomb.
- Erik, the farmer, when saving David.
- The painter who paints Midwinterblood.
- Both Erik and Merle in the story that Laura tells.
- Eirik, the twin, after Tor becomes a vampire.



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Linking pieces in the puzzle

Throughout the book there are recurring themes, phrases and symbols in each of the stories. Talk about:

- The significance of the hares in the book, which appear as soft toys, in dreams, as real hares and as parts of hares i.e. the jewellery made from bones and teeth.
- The role of dragons, dragon orchids and the tea made from the orchids.
- The 'talk of the devil' phrase, which crops up in every chapter. Look in particular at whom it refers to each time. Why do you think this phrase is used so often?
- The phrase 'Well, so it is'. What does this phrase mean? When is it used?

Part One: Midsummer Sun

- Do you think there is a significance to the fact that the sun does not go down on Blessed island at this time of year?
- Do you now understand the significance of Eric Seven's name?
- Thinking about the gadget that Eric has, the OneDegree software that 'bumps' the air around you and tells you who you are connected to, do you think there is a link between the idea of these connections and the connections between the stories? Do you think this is a realistic idea of future technology?
- Eric says his parents chose a new surname that was meaningless but Tor says 'all words have meaning'. Whom do you agree with? Do you think there are any words that have no meaning?
- When Eric meets Merle, he is struck not by her beauty, but by the fact that she looks familiar. Have you ever had the experience of meeting a stranger who seems familiar to you? Do you believe in other lives or reincarnation?
- How do you think Eric feels when his 'device' won't work and when the charger is missing? How would you feel if you found yourself without technology in your daily life (such as your phone or the internet)?
- How do you feel when Eric first arrives on the island? Did it seem like a nice place? How did the author give you clues that there may be a more sinister side to it?
- The first part ends with, 'I, thinks Eric Seven, have lived this before'. Did you understand what he meant at this point when reading the book, and do you now? Have you ever had the feeling that you have lived something before (deja vu)? What do you think causes this?

Part Two: The Archaeologist

- Isabella, one of the archaeologists, describes Eric, the boy who watches them as '... it seems like he knows everything, but is saying nothing'. What do you think she means by this, and is it true?
- Edward says that people assume that civilisation increases and the world improves, but that it's not always the case, and sometimes things become more primitive again. How do you think this relates both to the world today, history as you know it and to the events of the book?
- What did you think about the incident where Eric saves Mat's life by moving the unexploded bomb? After this scene Eric says 'No. I couldn't die. I'm not quite the last.' What does he mean by this?



Part Three: The Airman

- When David first lands on the island, he dreams of hares and dragons. What is the symbolism of this?
- In this story, Eric's name is spelled Erik, with a 'k'. Talk about the gradual evolution of the name Eric to Eirikr. Think also about the evolution of the name Blessed island to Blod island, and the way that other names change in the book (Merle and Tor).
- Why does Erik save David's life?
- How would you describe the relationship between Erik and Merle in this section of the book?

Part Four: The Painter

- When Merle asks her mother if the roots of the orchid are poisonous, her mother replies, 'Yes, in a way'. What do you think this means?
- Merle's mother describes the painter who lives in the church as a 'dragon'. Why do you think this is?
- When the painting is described, how much do we recognise at this stage, based on what we already know about the story? Do we recognise any of the figures?
- Merle says, 'I might be lots of people. Why do I have to be just one? I am lots of people and I love all of them and they love me'. What do you think she means?
- The men who view the painting say that sacrifice is a rather outdated notion, in our modern world. Do you agree with them?
- What does the addition of Merle holding out an apple into the painting mean?

Part Five: The Unquiet Grave

This section of the book tells a story within a story.

- 'Laura' who tells the story is later proved not to be Laura – who is she really?
- Laura tells the story that the two lovers are separated by differences in fortune, but later it is revealed that the original story is that the two lovers are both female. Why do you think 'Laura' alters the facts of the story?
- What is the significance of Erik being a female – Erika – in this story?
- What parallels can you draw between Merle's determination to be with Erik(a) even after death and what we eventually find out about the original relationship between the king and queen?

Part Six: The Vampire

- Melle says: 'Faced with a runaway dog, Eirik would spend ages happily chasing it round the meadows, whereas I... I would have found a bone and let the dog come to me'. How do you think this reflects the personalities of each character?
- Why do you think Eirik makes the decision to go to the vampire, Tor? What does this say about his relationship with Melle?
- What do we understand after reading this section of the book, regarding the discovery made at the archaeological dig in part two?

Part Seven: Midwinterblood

What events that have already happened in the book (although it is in the future) do we now understand when the king remembers bathing with Queen Melle?

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- King Eiríkr thinks, 'It cannot be... that when our life is run, we are done. There must be more to man than that, surely? That we are not just one, but a multitude'. Do you agree with him? In the context of the book, is he right?
- Is there anything else that falls into place as we read this section?

Epilogue: My Spirit is Crying for Leaving

- What do you think the title of this final section means?
- What did you think of the ending of the book?

As Merle is about to die, she thinks, '... if a life can be ruined in a single moment, a moment of betrayal, or violence, or ill-luck, then why can a life not also be saved, be worth living, be made, by just a few pure moments of perfection?'

- What do you think of this idea?

Throughout the book, the character of Eric in his various incarnations uses the phrase 'So it is'. At the very end of the book, the author uses the phrase 'So, it is'.

- Do you think the comma changes the meaning? If so, in what way?

At the end of the chapter on King Eiríkr and Melle, the author states that 'their journeys begin'. At the end of the epilogue, when Eric and Merle are both killed, the author states that 'their journey begins'.

- What is the subtle difference between these two phrases?
- As Eric and Merle are living the seventh of the seven lives, what do you think the author means by 'their journey begins'?

Midvinterblot

The title and central scene in *Midwinterblood* is taken from a real painting called Midvinterblot by Carl Larsson.

- Do a Google images search and look at this painting. How much do you recognise based on what you have read?
- Read the description of the painting in section four – how accurate is it?
- Have you read any other books that are based on pieces of art from real life?

- ❖ **Follow up writing exercise:** choose a painting and write the story surrounding the scene depicted.

Further reading

- *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell
- *Red Shift* by Alan Garner
- *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier

