

Death Drop

Melanie Jackson

Reading Level: 2.0

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Book Summary

On his way to baseball practice, Zeke lines up for Vancouver's newest thrill ride: Death Drop, an elevator that falls faster than gravity. The ride's theme is based on the story of Persephone, who tumbled into the underworld. Zeke tumbles into a frightening situation himself after he discovers a little girl who is lost. He takes her to the Death Drop manager's office. Later, when he tries to find out what happened with her, the ride's staff say they never saw her! To find the missing girl, Zeke must navigate a devilish plot that includes Dante Gabriel Rossetti's famous painting *Proserpine*, a fiery drop into flames, and an angry coach.

Author Biography

Scottish-born and mystery-minded, **Melanie Jackson** is the author of Orca's Dinah Galloway Mystery Series and several Orca Currents titles, including *The Big Dip*, *High Wire*, *Eye Sore* and *Fast Slide*. Melanie, who lives in Vancouver with her husband Bart, is a business/advertising writer and editor. She is a member of the *Vancouver Sun* Book Club, which reviews current novels in print and online. Melanie likes hiking, piano, English/Scottish history and continually learning from the kids with whom she works as a writing mentor through the Vancouver School Board. Melanie teaches a mystery unit to Grades 8 and 9 at two Vancouver secondary schools.

Connecting to the Text***Character and Novel Study***

To engage students with the main characters in *Death Drop*, use the following as group discussion topics, individual novel study or writing exercises:

1. Dieter's the class bookworm, and Zeke's life is baseball. Describe a time where their strengths/attributes come into play in the novel, and why it was important. For example,
 - ♦ Dieter appreciates art and viewed the painting twice. He said that the second time, the painting was missing its sense of sadness. That's how Zeke knew it was a fake!
 - ♦ Dieter is short so Coach won't let him play. But he was able to get through the crowd without Sherry seeing him (ch. 8). He was a great decoy, and allowed Zeke to get back in.
 - ♦ In chapter 15, Zeke's throwing arm saved the day when he threw "the pitch of [his] life." The ball knocked the tube out of Smythe's hands and forced the elevator doors to stay open.
 - ♦ Dieter ran fast, "more blur than flesh," to get the tube from Smythe (ch. 15). With Zeke and Coach, they were able to grab the tube and save the Rossetti painting.
2. Smythe is a whiner and steals the painting to get a big payout from Sherry. Zeke figures out that Sherry is setting Smythe up, and tells him (ch. 13). Did that scene make you feel sorry for Smythe? Will he learn from this? What will happen after the police get him?
3. In chapter 1, Zeke said, "I wasn't used to dealing with children. I had no younger siblings. And my life consisted of baseball, baseball, baseball." Through his experiences, what do you think Zeke learned about himself, about Dieter, and about little kids?
4. After their experience at the Death Drop, do you think Zeke and Dieter will be friends? Consider Zeke's promise to teach Dieter how to throw, and Dieter on the baseball team. Will Zeke now see Dieter differently—as more than a "brainiac" and a "pest"?

The Writer's Craft

1. Foreshadowing is a literary device where the writer "suggests" things that later escalate or are resolved. Ask students to find examples—"hints"—at what might come later. Examples:
 - ♦ In chapter 2, Dieter said Sherry's like Persephone: "Both of them ended up in a desperate situation," and Sherry "went way over budget." Could that spell trouble?
 - ♦ In chapter 3, Smythe said he had first aid, but he didn't handle the white-haired lady correctly, and seemed to appear out of nowhere. Did that seem fishy to you?
 - ♦ In chapter 4, Zeke learned that Sherry was great at designing illusions, of "making you think something was happening that wasn't." Did that pique your interest?

2. Writers use similes to create images for readers by comparing one thing to another, often by using the word “like” or “as.” Some example from the novel are below.

ch. 1 *A kid with sausage-like blond curls was talking to me.*

ch. 10 *It was like having my rib cage played by a harpist.*

ch. 11 *I could hear the poster moving inside the tube...like a castanet.*

Ask students to complete the sentences below or encourage them to create their own, based on characters and situations from the novel.

- ◆ The lineup to the Death Drop was really long like _____.
- ◆ Smythe's voice is as whiney and annoying as _____.
- ◆ The fall down the elevator was terrifying! My stomach felt like _____.
- ◆ Zeke can really throw a baseball. His arm is as fast as _____.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts, Vocabulary

1. The Death Drop uses the imagery of Hell and Satan in their advertising and signage. The horror effects are *to die for* (ch. 1), and there is *devilishly good candy floss* (ch. 6). Ask students to imagine the thrill ride is not hell, but heaven. Write slogans and names for the ride, the signage in the lineup and entry, and for souvenirs, food and treats.
2. Challenge students to create anagrams from the words, *Persephone*, *pomegranate* and *Proserpina*. Can you make words that connect to images and themes from the novel?
 - ◆ Persephone: *sneer, horns, hero, her, she, seen*
 - ◆ Pomegranate: *manager, temper, anger, trap, gate, atop*
 - ◆ Proserpina: *propane, roar, props, paper.*
3. A Word Search puzzle follows on the next page. Ask students to find the 15 words in the puzzle, and then use each in a sentence relating to the plot or characters. For example,
 - ◆ Coach wants a *stellar* excuse from Zeke to explain why he is late to practice.
 - ◆ Sherry put a lot of smoke-and-mirror *illusions* in the Death Drop ride.
 - ◆ The *portrait* of *Persephone* shows her *sadness*.

Death Drop Word Search

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flames
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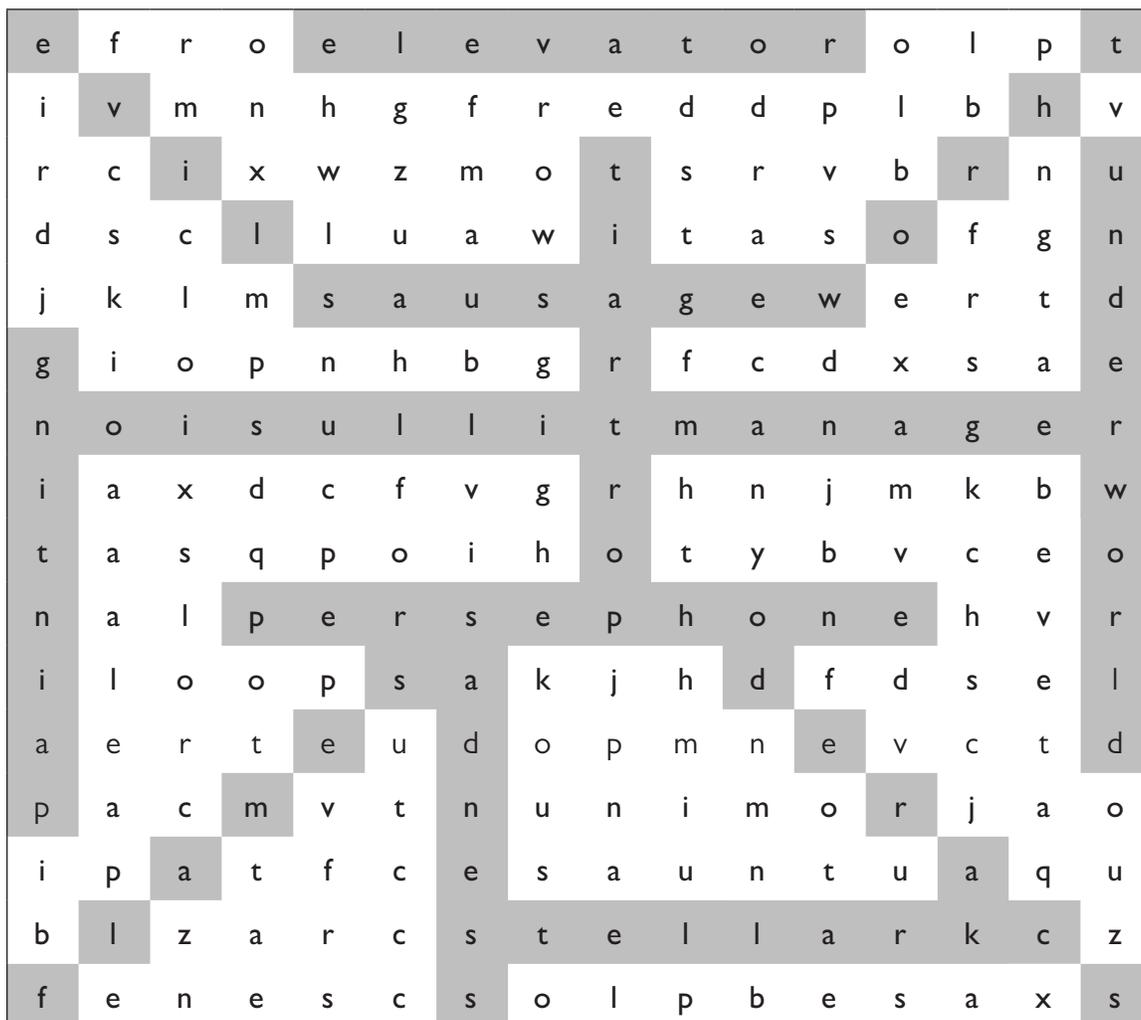
manager
painting
Persephone
portrait
sadness

sausage
scared
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throw
underworld

Death Drop Word Search (Answer Key)

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History, Mythology

The Death Drop thrill ride is based on a Greek myth about Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades, the king of the underworld. When Persephone eats seeds from a cursed pomegranate, she has to marry Hades and spend part of every year with him. When she is away from earth, winter comes; and when she returns, spring begins.

This can be an opportunity for students to work with a librarian to find kid-focused websites or books with the story of Persephone, Hades, Demeter and Hermes.

- Draw a family tree for Persephone showing her mother, father and siblings. What is special about her mother and father? What were their powers?
- After she was kidnapped, Hermes, her brother, made a deal with Hades. What was it?
- What does Demeter do at the end of each winter to welcome her daughter back?
- Connect the Ernest Hemingway quote (first page) to Persephone's experience. Why did Melanie Jackson choose this particular quote?

Art

1. Invite students to imagine and create the Death Drop thrill ride using media of their choice (collage, paint, etc.). Site three descriptions from the novel, such as these from chapter 1:
 - ♦ *The elevator was black...It had a huge blood-red pomegranate painted on one side.*
 - ♦ *To reach the elevator, you walked up the tower's curving, windowless corridors.*
 - ♦ *Flames leaped from the earth. Death Drop zoomed right into them.*
2. The little girl, Gracie (Blondie), sees Zeke as an angel. Create an illustration of Zeke as an angel against a backdrop of Death Drop imagery. How is the ride described? (i.e., with flames, puppet demons, hooded people, mannequins, smoke, pomegranates dripping red.)
3. Create artwork that captures the contrast of sunlight, representing Persephone's time on earth, and shadow, for when she's in the underworld. This is described in chapter 3, when Dieter and Zeke are looking at the painting. What do the sunshine and shadow symbolize?
4. Share a photo of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting of Proserpine (the Roman version of Persephone) from the Tate Museum. Ask, Can you see the sadness in her eyes? Students should note that she is holding a pomegranate, and there is contrast of light and shadow.

Geography

Invite students to find out more about Vancouver, BC, making connections to the novel.

- Point out locations mentioned in the novel on a map. Find photos online so you can see the locations too. (*False Creek, Burrard Inlet, mountains, skyscrapers.*)
- Vancouver has a famous amusement park called Playland. Find out what thrill rides are there, or have been there. Would you enjoy the *Drop Zone, Corkscrew, AtmosFear, Hellelevator* or the *The Beast*? Which reminds you most of the Death Drop, and why?

Orca Currents with Similar Themes

Students interested in stories that feature thrill rides and mysteries will want to read these titles, also by Melanie Jackson. These all take place in Vancouver, BC, and the terrific cliff-hangers at the end of each chapter will keep readers wanting more.

- *The Big Dip*: Joe and his friend Skip are enjoying the thrill of the Big Dip, a famous rollercoaster, until they learn the old man in front of them has been shot. When his sister is kidnapped, Joe is in a race against time to solve the puzzle.
- *Eye Sore*: The last thing Chaz wants is to spend his summer working on his father's Ferris wheel. When a crowd of angry protestors and a mysterious vandal threaten his father's dream and the family's livelihood, Chaz is forced to overcome his own fears to help out.
- *Fast Slide*: Clay has a summer job at Safari Splash, the new water park in town. It seems pretty boring to him until someone starts wandering about in a lynx costume and forty thousand dollars goes missing from the till.