



Alibi

Kristin Butcher

Reading level: 3.8

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Book Summary

Fifteen-year-old Christine is visiting her eccentric great aunt in historic Witcombe, where a pickpocket has been victimizing tourists. Aunt Maude owns an antique store and also runs the town's ghost walk, which gives Christine the opportunity to meet local characters and visitors, including a mysterious young man who seems to know far too much about the crimes. When the pickpocket targets Aunt Maude's store, Christine is determined to find out who is behind the thefts. Her search takes her through the nooks and crannies of the quaint town full of stories, and she unearths more than one surprise.

Author Biography

Kristin Butcher taught a variety of different subjects from primary school to high school before becoming an author. She credits her experience in the classroom with helping her understand children and teens better, and making her a whiz at Trivial Pursuit. Kristin has always had a wild imagination and can't imagine that she'll ever run out of ideas for stories. Kristin lives in Campbell River, British Columbia.

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

1. Simon told Christine, “The first law of magic is that things are not what they seem...The mind jumps to conclusions by the power of suggestion” (ch. 10). Invite students to make a mind map or timeline that follows Christine’s suspicions about who is committing the crimes, what she does to find clues, and how she finally learns who is behind the robberies. Begin with chapter 2, when Christine sees “the guy” who told everyone about the robberies and then disappeared.
2. In chapter 2, Aunt Maude tells the story of Greeley House. Simon Greeley built the house so it would be like a castle and he its king. Instead, it became a constant “reminder of the evils of greed.” Ask students to consider the crimes committed in the novel (breaking and entry, robbery, pick-pocketing, trespassing). For each, who committed the crime and who was affected? How did greed play a part in these crimes?
3. For a big-city kid who’s used to fast food outlets, big box stores, malls, rapid transit and highways, Witcombe is a unique peek into the past. Invite students to complete this activity.
 - ♦ Imagine you’ve spent a week in Witcombe and you’re giving directions to someone new to town. Point out three places that are important in the novel and describe why. *Here’s where...., This place is important because...*

Building Vocabulary

The following words were used in *Alibi*.

| | | | | |
|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| antique | eeire | imagination | pick pocket | spooky |
| condemned | founders | mansion | property | suspicious |
| crook | ghost walk | mystery | secret | thief |
| dilapidated | haunted | overgrown | skeleton key | thirteen |
| disappear | hiding | padlock | sneaky | vanished |

Ask students to use five or more of the words above in sentences or paragraphs that describe scenes from the novel. Ideas are below.

- *Christine suspected Simon was behind the robberies so she followed him to...*
- *Witcombe is a great place for a ghost walk because...*
- *If Simon Greeley could come back and see what his “castle” was like now, he’d be surprised because...*
- *I wonder if some of the things in the mansion could be sold in Aunt Maude’s shop...*

The Writer's Craft

1. Foreshadowing is a literary device where the writer hints to readers things that might happen later in the novel. In *Alibi*, examples could be early references to robberies, being watched, or people who quickly disappear. As a reading comprehension and writing exercise, ask students to complete the following:
 - ◆ Think of an example of foreshadowing used in the novel. Follow the plotline that has been foreshadowed through the story to see how it takes shape.
 - ◆ Did the use of foreshadowing make the novel more interesting to read? Where there was foreshadowing, did it make you want to find out more?
2. Kristin Butcher uses descriptive language to help the novel and its characters come alive for readers. One literary device she uses is alliteration. Ask students to record five examples as they read the novel. Some examples are below. Do they lend humor and fun to the novel?
 - ◆ Bursting bladder (ch. 8), correct conclusions (ch. 9), cushy carpeting (ch. 7), deep dive (ch.3), dusting duty (ch. 4), Miners' Museum (ch. 8), picking pockets (ch. 12), private property (ch. 4), scamper soundlessly (ch. 3), stone sill (ch. 3), and the Spence Sisters.
3. Students may be interested to find that many of the names in *Alibi* (Agatha, Esther, Fred, Hilary, Maude, Simon, Spence, Thatcher) are also characters in novels by Agatha Christie, the famous British author of mysteries. What images might these names bring to mind? (Britain, elderly people, someone old fashioned, afternoon tea, a quaint cottage, etc.) Ask students to shape a story of their own that takes place in a very different setting. How would you choose character names that are evocative for readers and fitting for the story?
4. There are many powerful examples of simile and metaphor in *Alibi*. Ask students to find examples in the novel. For each, what is being suggested that evokes a scene or image for readers? How does this descriptive language enrich our understanding of the text? Examples:
 - ◆ *I'm barely off the bus when she swallows me in a fierce bug.* (ch. 1)
 - ◆ *Witcombe is now eerie, and the group creeps forward in a nervous knot.* (ch. 2)
 - ◆ *The morning is swimming in sunshine.* (ch. 3)
 - ◆ *The condemned house is surrounded by a wrought-iron fence that's clearly intended to keep people out. But this guy went through it like a hot knife through butter.* (ch. 3)
 - ◆ *Cloaked in night shadows, the mansion was imposing and foreboding. Now, in the light of day, it's just tired and dilapidated.* (ch. 3)
 - ◆ *He sinks into a stalking position, every muscle poised for pursuit.* (ch. 5)

Connecting to the Curriculum

Social Studies

The town of Witcombe is very old fashioned and has “barely changed at all in 150 years” (ch. 1). For Christine, it’s like Witcombe has been in a “time bubble.” Ask students to complete the following research activity.

Find something that is very old in your school, neighborhood, community or city. Although we may at first think of buildings or statues, there are lots of other examples:

- Farm cooperatives, community boosters, Legions and service clubs
- School, store, library, hotel, community center or sports center
- Stories, songs, legends, superstitions, traditions, even playground songs and games!

Write and design a brochure that tells others about this topic. How long has it existed? When did it start, and why? What is one thing that is unique and interesting about it?

Language Arts

Use the following activity to engage students in the vocabulary used in the novel.

Arrange the class into pairs. Ask each pair to write two- or three-paragraph stories using all the nouns and adjectives below. When they’re finished, ask them to produce a second version where the adjectives are removed. Then, bring all the pair groups together, have them exchange their second versions, and see if the “new” pairs can arrange the adjectives in the same way as the writers.

Invite students to be creative, act silly and have fun with their stories. At the close of the activity, you may wish to have pairs read their stories aloud.

| ADJECTIVES | |
|------------|--------------|
| ancient | pitch |
| bewildered | plot |
| convincing | private |
| dank | rotting |
| dead | secret |
| eerie | trampled |
| foreboding | wrought-iron |

| NOUNS | |
|----------|-------------|
| air | mansion |
| bars | path |
| black | performance |
| entrance | property |
| house | quiet |
| knob | shadows |
| look | twist |

Art

1. Aunt Maude is excited to take tourists on a ghost walk to tell them all the old stories about Witcombe. She mentions Old Joe Miner, the legend of Wheaton's Bridge and the mystery of the abandoned mill. Ask students to imagine these are published stories. Invite them to design a book, comic or graphic novel cover for one or all of these stories. What would make potential readers want to pick up the book?
2. The gazebo in Witcombe was once the center of community activities. As Aunt Maude said, "It symbolized the unbroken circle of community that Wittier and Lancombe wanted Witcombe to become" (ch. 2). As a kinesthetic art project, invite students to create a multi-sensory "image" of the gazebo from 150 years ago. Encourage students to use fabrics, textures and smells to evoke the images of that time. Examples could be pine needles, wood chips, lace, confetti, etc. What clues does the novel provide?
3. Invite students to choose a scene from the novel that seems interesting to them and that they'd like to illustrate. Ask them to reflect on why this scene is interesting to them. Did it add to the sense of suspense, spookiness, mystery or intrigue? What made the image evocative or enticing? Examples are below.
 - ◆ *The gazebo was the center of things. That's why it was made round. It symbolized the unbroken circle of community. (ch. 2)*
 - ◆ *Cloaked in night shadows, the mansion was imposing and foreboding. (ch. 3)*
 - ◆ *Truth is, we rather enjoy confusing people. That's one of the reasons we dress alike. (ch. 6)*
 - ◆ *The first law of magic is that things are not what they seem. (ch. 10)*

Career and Personal Planning

Simon Greeley's father wants him to go to law school but Simon wants to go to a magicians' school instead. Students may be interested to know that many celebrities started as magicians: Steve Martin, Neil Patrick Harris, Adrien Brody, Arsenio Hall, Johnny Carson and even George W. Bush. As a research project, invite students to complete the following.

- Magicians use different techniques: table magic, performance magic and illusion. Name examples for each and where one could expect to see each used. Were any of these used in *Alibi*?
- Imagine the kind of traits or skills that someone who wanted to be a magician would need to develop and hone. Would these be desirable or undesirable? Some examples traits would be: Able to work alone for long periods of time, bored easily, disciplined, diligent, entertaining, impatient, intuitive, late often, methodical, observant, open to feedback from others, "people person", procrastinator.
- Research The Magic Circle, a British organization that advances the art of magic. How old is this group, and where is their headquarters? What is their motto? How does a magician become a member? What can a teenager do if they want to get started in magic?