

THE TWELVE

SCHOOLS/TEACHING PACK

The Twelve is a young adult novel about standing stones, timeslips, and the power of friendship – with illustrations and cover artwork by Tom de Freston.

The book also explores our relationship with both nature and storytelling woven through with elements of folklore, myth, and the power of place. It draws on many of the author, Liz Hyder's favourite stories from when she was young and is also influenced by her love of astronomy, folklore, and wildlife.

Set on the wild Welsh coast on the eve of winter solstice at the turn of the millennium, *The Twelve* tells the tale of Kit, a 15-year-old girl, whose younger sister Libby, vanishes on the stroke of midnight. The world rewrites itself, leaving Kit to navigate a reality where her sister has never even existed.

But then Kit meets Story, a local boy who remembers Libby perfectly – even when her own mother doesn't. Kit and Story team up and together they embark on a perilous journey fraught with dangers beyond their wildest imagination, crossing a world steeped in ancient folklore. The pair must uncover the secret of the Twelve and rescue Libby before Time itself vanishes...



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

THE BOOK COVER

We often start with the cover when we chose a book and this one is created from artwork by artist and writer Tom de Freston.

Exercise. Look closely at the cover, turn it over and look at the back too, then answer the following questions:

- What does the cover say to you?
- Why do you think the artist chose those colours?
- What title would you have given it based on the cover alone?
- What might you expect the book to be about just from the cover?
- What do you know about standing stones and stone circles? What were they for? How might they be used in a story?

Exercise. Create a mind map of the themes you think were in the book based on the cover. After reading the novel, pick out the key themes that you found.



THEMES IN THE TWELVE

- Responsibility - both personal and collective
- Our relationship with wildlife and nature
- Friendship and love
- The importance and power of storytelling
- Time



RESPONSIBILITY

Kit reluctantly accompanies Libby to the white tower at Manorbier after her younger sister is told of a prophecy promising a glimpse of the future if they are at the top of the tower by midnight on the solstice. When Libby goes missing, Kit feels as though it is her responsibility – maybe if she had tried harder to stop Libby, the disappearance would never have happened.

What are the consequences of Kit feeling responsible for Libby?

She is determined to find out what has happened and fix it, bringing Libby back home. *The Twelve* also explores the idea of collective and individual responsibility for our environment. The Watcher decides to make time unravel in order to bring about change and restore the pristine world that was around before industrialisation.

Why do you think The Watcher challenges Kit and Story to imagine a world without humans?

To try and convert them to his way of thinking, to press the reset button and start again.



WILDLIFE AND NATURE

Both Kit and Story have a passion for wildlife and our natural environment. Kit loves birds in particular but is also interested in other wildlife and in geology. Story loves the wildlife in his local area but is also fascinated by the night sky, so much so that he's even named himself after one of his space heroes. The Twelve each represent a wild animal too, a predator in some shape or form.

What is the name of Story's space hero and who is he?

He's a real person! Story Musgrave was the most academically qualified man to ever go into space. He led the space walk to fix the Hubble Space Telescope, enabling us to see back into the very distant past for the first time.

Kit is excited to find a hagstone on the beach in Tenby.

What role do hagstones play in the book?

Both Kit and Story have hagstones and when Kit looks through the hole in hers, she sees Nia for her real self as one of The Twelve.

Did you know?

A hagstone is also known as a scrying stone or an adder stone. It has a naturally occurring hole through it and such stones were believed to have magical properties. These might include the ability to heal a snake bite or see through the disguise of a witch by seeing their real self when looking through the hole.

Each of the Twelve has an animal self.

Exercise. If you were one of the Twelve, what would your animal self be and why?

Write down as much detail as possible. For example, if you were a bear, would you be a big bear or a small one? A bold one or a shy one? What would you be able to do in your animal form that you can't as a person?

Discuss your animal selves and include qualities we associate with different animals.

For example, a fox is seen as cunning and a snake as untrustworthy.

Where do these ideas come from?

What have young people done in recent years about the climate crisis? Discuss.

Greta Thunberg is a great example but so is Vanessa Nakate and young naturalists like Bird Girl aka Mya-Rose Craig and Dara McAnulty. They and so many others campaign for change but also massively help to raise awareness of climate issues.



THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP

Kit and Story become friends as the events of the book unfold but it tips into something deeper towards the end of the book.

Why do you think their friendship becomes so strong as the book progresses?

Kit and Story have shared interests – in wildlife and the world around them – but it is also circumstance that brings them together, time itself is in peril and they are the only ones who can rescue Libby and save the world.

Kit makes two decisions at the end of the book as a consequence of her friendship with Story – what are they and how do you think Story helps with these decisions?

Kit decides to tell her Mum about her bullying and also makes the decision that she wants to be a naturalist. Her friendship with Story gives her confidence in herself, encouraging her to speak up and tell someone else about the bullying she has endured.

What has Kit been subjected to at school and how has she handled it up until now?

She's being bullied by a group of girls, led by Jemima, and she has kept it secret from everyone, even her mum and sister.

What advice would you give Kit if she was your friend?

How do children behave towards each other? What do you think is the best way to stop a bully?

STORYTELLING

Stories are one of the key themes in *The Twelve* – each of the Twelve comes out of old stories told by our ancestors around the fireside. They are otherworldly, almost mythical creatures that take human shape but have an animal self within.

Why do you think there are twelve watchers in total? What might that number signify?

How important are stories to you? What was the first book you remember reading or that was read to you?



Illustrations are scattered throughout the book. Discuss how the illustrations made you feel. Did they help you visualise the world of the book?

Which were your favourite illustrations and why?



TIME

The Twelve is set just before the Millennium. What was different about life then?

How has the internet and the creation of smartphones changed our attitudes?

Sadly, it's not possible to travel in time – as far as we know! But if you could step back in time through a stone circle, where would you go to and why?

LONGER WRITING EXERCISES

EXERCISE ONE – Visualisation

The Twelve is set on the coast at winter. Close your eyes and imagine how it feels to be on a beach in the dead of winter. Think about your senses, focusing on one at a time. Open your eyes and write a list of descriptive words from the following bullet points.

- What does it **sound** like? Is the wind whistling? Are birds crying? Are waves crashing?
- What does it **feel** like? Is it cold upon your skin? Are your feet sinking into wet sand or are there pebbles that are slippery and hard underfoot? Does it feel wild or tamed? Do you feel happy to be there or sad?
- What does it **smell** like? Is the tide in or out? Can you smell seaweed or salt water? Is it fresh and clean or is there a rotten fish or bird nearby?
- What does it **look** like? Is it an enclosed bay with steep cliffs or a long sandy beach that winds its way into the distance? Are there rocks on the beach? Is there any driftwood or seaweed? Are there any islands out at sea or any boats floating on the water?



Congratulations! You've created a word bank! You can use this for the next exercise, but you can also use it as a basis to write a short atmospheric poem or even a haiku.



EXERCISE TWO – Creating an immersive story

The Twelve is told by Kit, in first person and in present tense. Look back at the words you chose in the first exercise. Now you're going to write your own first person piece using guided writing. Try and use as many of the words from your word bank as you can.

Imagine you're back on the beach. You are on your own. No-one else is around. You walk along the beach, kicking at the odd stone, but one of them catches your eye. You bend down and pick it up. It has a hole right through it – a hagstone! What does the stone look like? Describe how it feels in your hand – is it heavy or strangely light? What colour is it? Go into as much detail as you can. You lift it up and look through the hole, along the coast...

Something is different. What it is? It could be a figure or animal that wasn't there before. It could be that you're looking into an entirely different world or even seeing someone who is no longer with us. You decide!

The stone turns hot in your hand as you look through it. You let it fall to the ground. Are you scared or intrigued? Do you want to look through it again or not?

Make a decision about the stone. You either leave it where it is or you pick it up again. If you pick it up, do you look through it again or do you throw into the sea? If you leave it there, do you regret it later or does it turn up again – perhaps under your pillow that same night?

Congratulations! You've got a short story, but you've also got the beginning of a really interesting longer piece.

Now, look back at what you've written and redraft it. Focus on really bringing it alive to us, the reader. Use as much immersive language as you can. Make us feel like we're on that beach with you, looking through the hagstone as you do, experiencing all that you can see and feel.

Next time you're at the beach, why don't you look for a lucky hagstone too?



EXERCISE THREE – a speech for the future

This is a non-fiction writing exercise. Your challenge is to write a speech to persuade people to look after the environment.

- How can you get across the importance of protecting our future?
- What key points do you want to include and why?
- Discuss persuasive language and how best to use it.
- Powerful speeches are often fairly short. Why do you think that is?
- Think about structure. How will you hook people in? How will you end your speech?

Draft your speech.

Look back at what you've written and revise it, making it as clear and powerful as possible. Read the speech out loud to yourself. This will help clarify which lines might need editing or redrafting. Make sure you have enough pauses for breath in your speech!

Congratulations! You have written a speech for the future!

*(Teaching pack written by Liz Hyder
and Polly Shepherd, 2024)*

