Shine Mountain

by Julie Hunt

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Recommended for readers aged 9 – 13 years

Summary

On his deathbed, Ellie's pop reveals a secret - a magical button-box. It's a musical instrument from the Gleam country - a land far from Spit Farm and the mountains, with talking goats, sweet grass and corn that grows so high you fell it with an axe.

But the button-box's magic is sinister. When Ellie plays it, flowers bloom and crops spring up overnight - but soon the farm is cursed by drought and her beloved Oma is gravely ill.

To save her Oma and discover the truth about her own identity, Ellie must embark on a dangerous journey to the Gleam country - the only place where the evil button-box can be destroyed.

Shine Mountain is accomplished folkloric-style storytelling, with extremely strong, well-formed characters, masterful pacing and a voice that is compelling and highly accessible.

The use from the outset of exotic language and concepts ('the washpool', 'the shine moth') creates a sense that the reader is entering a slightly magical and mysterious world but one not entirely unfamiliar to our own. Tension becomes apparent with the news that people are gathering at Ellie's farm because 'they didn't know how long it was going to take'.

The 'it' is quickly revealed to be 'Pop's death' and the reaction of the protagonist (who tells the tale in a clear, simple but distinctive first person, past tense, voice) tells us much about her character and her immediate world.

Use in the curriculum

Shine Mountain fits well into the Australian Curriculum, English, Years 5-7. Rich in imagery and personification, it provides opportunities for the use of metalanguage to discuss genre, sentence and word types as students explore a fantasy/quest text, written in a folkloric style with some invented language. Selected passages can be used as templates from which students can create their own texts using these devices.

The novel invites comparisons with modern fantasy narratives (novel, film, TV and comic genres) and traditional folktales and quest mythology. Students can also compare the author's previous novel, *Song for a Scarlet Runner*, and graphic novel, *Kidglovz*.
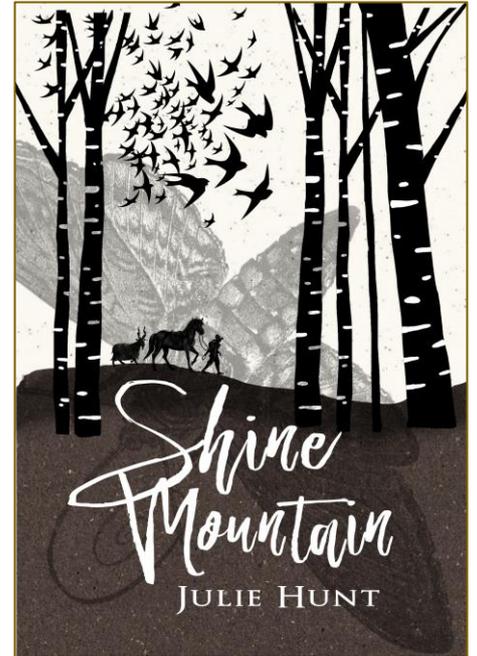
Themes

- family secrets
- courage
- journeying
- magical powers
- animal guides
- the quest

Discussion questions

1. (a) Before reading the book, consider its cover design – font, colour, perspective and images. What sort of story do you think this will be? Will what happens be realistic or slightly mystical? What in the cover makes you feel this way?

   (b) Consider the map at the beginning of the novel. Does this reinforce or change your idea about the story to come? What clues to the story does the map give?

2. (a) Have students research the term *folktale* and make a list of features common to these stories.

   (b) Read the first three chapters of *Shine Mountain* and decide whether you think this story contains the elements of *folktale*. In your answer make sure you include specific examples from the chapters.

3. 'There was once a herd of fabulous goats. They were tall and strong and they lived in the Gleam country west of the Palisades' [p. 31]. The story of Gola and Gabe is called a *frame story* because it is a story within a story. Why do you think the author might have wanted to include a *frame story* in *Shine Mountain* and how does this story interact with the main one as the novel progresses?

4. Build a personality portrait of key characters such as Ellie, Meridian, Luca, Harland. Write the characters' names on a piece of paper and list their characteristics underneath, using examples of scenes from the text. After completing the list decide whether each of these characters are good or evil and give reasons for why you think this.

5. 'You've changed…You're no bigger, but you've grown somehow.' [p. 272]

   (a) How do Ellie's attitudes toward family and home change through the course of the novel?

   (b) Can you think of any other ways that Ellie changes by the time she returns to Spit Farm?

   (c) Who do you think changes more in the story, Ellie or Luca?

6. The *monomyth* is a literary theory that states that a huge percentage of stories from around the world fit one simple pattern: a hero ventures from a normal world to a supernatural region where they encounter fabulous forces, have a decisive victory and return to their world with new powers or wealth. The films in the 'Stars Wars' series, for instance, fit this pattern. Do you think *Shine Mountain* fits the monomyth pattern? Gives examples from the story to illustrate your answer.

7. Read the scene where the button-box and Harland are destroyed on pages 260-261 and pick out key verbs, adverbs and adjectives that you think heighten the sense of drama in this scene.

8. Introduce the concept of symbolism as a device where an author uses an object to represent an abstract concept (i.e. anger, greed, happiness). What abstract concepts might the button-box in *Shine Mountain* represent?

9. (a) In groups or as a class, build lists or maps of the special language used in this novel. How have words been created or used in a special way?

(b) Create your own fictional world: give it a meaningful name; draw and label a map of your world.

(c) Imagine a story that will take place in your world: list the names and roles of main characters and 'magical' objects; summarise a plot and graph it.

(d) Write a small section of your imagined story in 2 or 3 paragraphs.

The author's inspiration

'After the success of my first novel, *Song for a Scarlet Runner*, I thought I'd like to try a book for slightly older readers, an adventure set in a remote mountain region about a girl who comes from somewhere even more remote, a world beyond her own.

'I was reading about Appalachian folklore and came across the belief in a beetle that makes a ticking noise in the wall when somebody is about to die. This gave me the idea for the shine moth, a creature who arrives at the time of death. I began wondering about the place where such a creature would come from, not a next-world place but somewhere that's real, or real to some people, and I came up with the Gleam country, the land that my character, Ellie, thinks only exists in stories. It's a marvellous dream-like place but something has gone wrong there; the country is cursed and only Ellie can fix it.

'I was working on the book in hot summer. Months without rain made me think of the American dustbowl and I put a drought in the story. With the drought came a rain-maker, a boy who's part of a travelling medicine show. His name is Luca and he has the dangerous ability to attract lightning.'

Julie Hunt

The author

Julie Hunt loves poetry, storytelling and traditional folktales. Her debut novel, *Song for a Scarlet Runner*, won the inaugural Readings Children's Book Prize, was short-listed for a number of national awards and was selected as an Australian representative in the international White Ravens catalogue. Her graphic novel *KidGlovz* (illustrated by Dale Newman) won the 2016 Queensland Literary Award. She also writes books for younger readers. Her picture book, *The Coat* (illustrated by Ron Brooks), won the 2013 CBCA Picture Book of the Year. Julie lives on a farm in southern Tasmania and works in a library.