

## ***Mortal Engines***

### **Themes:**

War and violence; progress; consumerism and the class system; the appropriation of history; the destruction of the planet; living with disfigurement; love, ethics and mercy.

### **Summary:**

London is a beast on wheels: a future city like you've never known before. After the apocalyptic Sixty Minute War, the world's surviving cities turned predator - chasing and feeding on smaller towns. Now London is hunting. But something deadly is hiding on board. And we don't mean the scarred, angry girl with the knife... Set in a blasted future of moving cities, stalking robotic hunters and apocalyptic weapons, *Mortal Engines* is one of the defining children's books of the past two decades.

### **Did you know?**

Philip Reeve originally worked as an illustrator, doing cartoons for the *Horrible Histories* and *Murderous Maths* series. His other books include *Railhead*, *Larklight* and *Here Lies Arthur*, for which he won the Carnegie Medal.

*Mortal Engines* won the 2002 Nestle Smarties Gold Award, while the fourth book in the sequence, *A Darkling Plain*, won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. Philip Reeve has also written a trio of prequel novels, the *Fever Crumb Trilogy*, set before the *Mortal Engines* books, but intended to be read after them.

*Mortal Engines* is now a major film directed by Christian Rivers and co-written by Peter Jackson of *Lord of the Rings* fame.

*Mortal Engines* was partly inspired by the road-building movement of the 1990s, when the countryside was swallowed up by cities and towns. Philip Reeve is also inspired by Charles Dickens, who clearly influences his vivid characters and dramatic use of landscapes.

### **Ideas for using this book in your classroom:**

#### **Remnants:**

One of the most exciting things in *Mortal Engines* is seeing our own 21<sup>st</sup> century world in archaeological terms – fragments and remnants reclaimed in the far-distant future that has formed 'in the long millennia since the Sixty Minute War'. Insignificant things have been twisted into great mysteries, like a 'seedy', while significant things are altogether lost.

Read pages 1-7 and 22-23, and ask your pupils to think about their homes, school and local area. What might survive, thousands of years from now? How might historians and archaeologists interpret the remnants? How might they make mistakes, or splice the new and old together to create things like Quirkemas?

This exercise is an ideal starting-point for a piece of creative writing, and also a good one to try if your class hasn't read the whole book.

#### **Hero or villain?**

*Mortal Engines* often reads like a *Biggles* or *Boy's Own* adventure launched into a broken future full of moral complexity. Tom Natsworthy dreams of being a hero, but a key message

of the book is that heroism isn't half as straightforward as it seems. So-called heroes do terrible things, and even villains sometimes have noble motives.

Ask your pupils to read pages 29, 51 and 236-239, plus the closing page. How do Tom's daydreams of being a hero contrast with the reality? What's it like to have to choose a side? What do Tom's actions cost him?

Ask your pupils to think about how they define heroism. Do they think there are moments in the book where characters show true heroism? What are those moments?

Read and discuss the book's last paragraph. How does it subvert conventions of a traditional adventure story?

### **Moving cities and wild ideas**

In the traction cities, Philip Reeve has brought alive one of the craziest notions you could possibly imagine: a future London on wheels.

Ask the children to do an exercise where they imagine the future in the wildest possible terms. They could work alone or in groups, and then splice their ideas together to create a whole imagined world.

You could then use the resulting creation over a number of lessons as a basis for story-writing sessions, art classes and science/geography lessons.

### **Municipal Darwinism:**

*Mortal Engines* takes place in a town-eat-town world where cities eat each other to obtain resources. Ask the children to think about this. What are the main tenets of Municipal Darwinism? How does it mirror Darwin's notions of survival of the fittest? What are its pros and cons? Where might it eventually lead?

What happens if towns endlessly overpower each other and consume each other for resources? Can they easily create more resources, trade, share ideas or collaborate while they are doing this? Think also about the class system within London. How does the need to endlessly move and consume create inequality?

Ask your pupils to discuss whether they are on the side of the Traction Cities or with the Anti-Traction League, and present their arguments for this.

Useful extracts to read include pages 140 and 162, about Tunbridge Wheels, and the description of a dead city on page 90. Read Anna Fang's description of Shan Guo on page 230, and Crome's vision for the future on page 298: 'London will never stop moving. Movement is life. When we have devoured the last wandering city and demolished the last static settlement we will begin digging. ...'

### **Resources:**

What resources does a traction city need to keep moving and functioning? Where can it obtain them? How might it all work? Ask your pupils to draw their own maps or plans of the Great Hunting Ground and of a traction city's tiers and levels. Where might a city like London obtain resources? How could it use and distribute these? (Think about the Turd Tanks!)

Can the children think of different ways to organise London's population and its resources – both human and material? What are the pros and cons of their ideas?

Ask your pupils to imagine and draw or describe their town as a traction city. What would they keep, what would they throw out and what would they add? How might their city's society be structured? What would *they* be or do in this new world? They can be as imaginative as they like!

### **Descriptive writing:**

Explore how Philip Reeve uses description to bring the story alive. Look particularly at his use of the senses – hearing, sight, smell, touch and taste – and how he creates mood and tension by describing the reactions of characters, as on page 99: 'There was an edge of panic in her voice that Tom hadn't heard before... Suddenly he felt very frightened', or the effect of Shrike's voice on Evadne Twix on page 60.

Some good scenes to look at are chapter 15, the appearance of Anna Fang (chapter 9), the death of Shrike (chapter 22), the firing of MEDUSA (chapter 23) and pages 300-301.

Talk about the descriptive techniques that Philip Reeve uses, and then ask the children to write a short descriptive piece based on part of the story, or on an idea of their own.

### **Historians vs Engineers:**

Compare the Historians and the Engineers. What is different about them? Why do the Historians seek to protect and make sense of the past, while the Engineers seek to move ever forward? What does history teach us about the consequences of violence?

Talk about the different value-systems of the Historians and Engineers. Think about the way the Engineers ascribe value based on the utility/function of a thing, while the Historians value it simply for being what it is. How do their values shape their attitudes to consumption and violence?

Some good extracts to read are pages 154, about the Stalkers, who will become 'perfect workers... in future everybody who dies on the lower tiers will be resurrected, and we won't need living people at all, except as supervisors', and the Historians' comments on the destruction of the Shield-Wall on pages 222-223: 'Shan Guo is a great and ancient culture, Anti-Traction League or no Anti-Traction League. Batmukh Gompa can't be blown up...!'

Ask the children to split into Guilds to discuss a contentious issue of your choice. One side will be Historians and the other will be Engineers. What arguments do they bring?

How does Philip Reeve describe the Engineers? Can the children think of other factions in history that they remind us of?

### **Feelings: weakness or strength?**

Explore the way that different characters in the book experience feelings and emotions. In particular, think about Tom and Katherine's focus on embracing their feelings, and Hester's rejection of her emotions. Ask the children to think about the passage where she talks about wanting to be like a Stalker (p198), and the suffering she feels later in the book where she

cries for the first time (p316). While Tom repeatedly chooses the course of mercy, Hester repeatedly chooses vengeance. Who do the children think is the stronger character? Why?

At various junctures in the book, characters are faced with the choice of sacrificing lives in order to save other lives. Anna Fang talks about this on page 215, when she acknowledges how she sank Marseilles: 'If I had not, it would have attacked the Hundred Islands, killing or enslaving hundreds more people than I drowned with my little bomb.' Katherine returns to this theme on page 309: 'Father was standing right beside the thing, and even when she told herself that he was *not* her father any more and tried to weigh his life against the thousands about to die in Batmunkh Gompa, she still could not bring herself to harm him.'

Talk about the ethical choices that the characters face at this point. If you wish, you could discuss it in the context of the Trolley Problem – an ethical dilemma about whether it is justified to sacrifice a life in order to save more lives.

What do your pupils think about Katherine's decision to sacrifice herself in order to save Hester?

### **Violence and ethics**

*Mortal Engines* is set in a world destroyed and rebuilt by violence, and caught in an endless cycle of more violence. What does the story have to say about violence? Is it acceptable? Is it necessary? What are the causes of violence? What is the outcome of violence? Is all violence the same? For example, is vengeance different from standing up to tyranny? How does violence rebound upon those who use it?

Useful pages to read are pages 236-237, 247 and the last stand of the Historians in chapter 32, as well as page 312.

Think about Tom and Katherine's rejection of violence. Page 305: 'He tried not to think about Pewsey and Gench, burning inside their burning gondola, but every time he closed his eyes he saw their screaming faces, as if the black zeroes of their open mouths were etched for ever on to his eyeballs... It would be better to be dead himself than to sit here watching Top Tier burn and know that it was all his fault.'

Katherine, page 267: 'If we meet a bigger city and get eaten ourselves... well, even that would be better than being murderers.'

Do your pupils agree with Tom and Katherine?

Pages 257-258 contains a highly ambiguous passage: 'Tom watched her. He felt tight and sick and trembly from the grief and rage inside him, and knew that this was how Hester must feel, how she had always felt, ever since Valentine killed her parents. It was a terrible feeling, and he could only think of one way to cure it.' Explore the passage. What action does Tom take in order to cure this feeling? How do the children interpret it?

Ask the children to analyse the story's message in conjunction with these famous quotes from Martin Luther King:

*'As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. (1956)*

*'Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies*

*toughness in a descending spiral of destruction ... The chain reaction of evil - hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars - must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.* ' (1963)

### **Disfigurement:**

In the new film of *Mortal Engines*, the sanitisation of Hester's disfigurement has caused a lot of controversy. According to an article at [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz), one fan has started a petition for Hester's scar to be restored. "Disfigured characters are rare in Hollywood," Anna Blaushild wrote in her petition to Universal Studios and Jackson. "Disfigured female characters are rarer. And in both cases, they are almost always villains. Hester Shaw is important representation for people with scars and disfigurements, and her journey is important to them."

What do the children think about Hester's scar and its relation to her emotional world? How do her outer and her inner landscapes relate? How does she make readers feel? Look at pages 28-29, 198, 228 and 319.

According to the same article at [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz), Philip Reeve has stated that "Women warriors are a bit of a cliché in Science Fiction and Fantasy, and they tend to be very glamorous or at least good looking... But it struck me that people who live by their wits in wastelands tend not to be that glamorous or good looking, and who cares about beautiful people anyway? ... So I decided right from the start to make Hester ugly, and I liked the idea that the hero would slowly fall in love with her anyway, which is far more interesting than having two gorgeous people seeing each other across a crowded room and falling in love."

Ask the children to consider this and talk about how *Mortal Engines* subverts the convention of a beautiful heroine meeting a good-looking hero. Is it important to them? Does Hester's scar change the impact of the story?

If you wish you can find the whole article here and discuss it as a group:  
<https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/100111468/Mortal-Engines-Fans-want-to-know-why-books-heavily-scarred-lead-is-now-flawless>

### **Monsters:**

*Mortal Engines* is a book full of monsters, from Shrike to Mayor Crome, the evil Engineer Vambrace and even Hester Shaw. Who do your pupils think is the most frightening monster in the book? How would they create the ultimate story-monster?

What is it like for Hester to look and feel monstrous? Read pages 198 and 319. Explore appearances and the difference between the way different characters in the story look and the way they behave. What are Shrike's motivations on pages 194-195?

Ask the children to write Shrike's story based on what they know about him.