Goblin Secrets
By William Alexander

With a sure hand, William Alexander here creates a wholly convincing world of mechanized soldiers, chicken-legged grandmothers, sentient rivers, and goblin actors. In that uncertain landscape, young Rownie learns the mysterious craft of masking to search for both his brother and his own story, unaware that the solution to these searches may be the salvation of his city. Alexander’s world is one of possessiveness—and true love—brilliantly revealing our own selves by holding up our masks.

—Citation by the Judges of the 2012 National Book Award—

About the Book

Rownie, the youngest in Graba the witchworker’s household of stray children, escapes and goes looking for his missing brother. Along the way he falls in with a troupe of theatrical goblins and learns the secret origins of masks. Now Graba’s birds are hunting him in the Southside of Zombay, the Lord Mayor’s guards are searching for him in Northside, and the River between them is getting angry. The city needs saving—and only the goblins know how.

Prereading Activities

Before reading Goblin Secrets, review different types of genres, including fantasy, fables, fairy tales, and folklore. Have students work with a partner or group to research the different types of genres and write a summary explaining the elements of each. What elements are found in each genre style? For example, what are the characteristics of a fable? Hold a class discussion allowing students to share their findings with the rest of the class. List popular movies from all different types of genres, and allow each group to try to classify the movies into their correct category.
Before reading the novel, have students research the author William Alexander and write a short objective summary of his life. Without giving personal opinions or judgments, provide important details from his life that may have led him to write the novel *Goblin Secrets*. Use the following questions as a guide: What are some of his accomplishments? What did he study in school? Where does he live now? What is his profession? What are his interests? Among the many sources available such as Simon and Schuster’s website, you can also go to the author’s official website: [http://willalex.net/](http://willalex.net/).

**Discussion Questions**

Please use examples from the text to support your answers.

1. Describe Rownie’s personality and physical traits in Act I of the novel. How do the other grubs in Graba’s house treat Rownie? What does his relationship with the grubs show you about his personality?

2. How is Graba like a grandmother to the children in her house? How is she different? How does she treat Rownie?

3. Analyze the impact of the repetition of words and phrases throughout the novel. Find words that are repeated and consider why the author repeats these particular words. How does the author’s word choices support the tone of the story? What does his choice of words reveal about Zombay?

4. Why do you think the author chose to name the town “Zombay”? What does the name indicate about the setting? What effect does the setting have on the plot in the story?

5. What genre do you think the story belongs to? Why?

6. Why do you think the author chose to write in this genre?

7. The author chose to structure the text in a play format. How does this impact the overall story?

8. In the beginning of the story, Rownie tries to hide from Graba’s grubs that are chasing him. How does the author’s choice of words, and the situations Rownie finds himself in, add suspense to the novel? What impact does this have on the rising action?

9. Sometimes the author wants the reader to read between the lines and make inferences. The author indicates that Vass, Blotches, and Stubble sometimes sound like Graba. What is the author implying? How do you know?

10. The author uses sensory imagery throughout the novel to bring the reader deeper into the story. Give specific examples of sensory imagery in Act II, Scene III, including smell, taste, touch, sight, and sound.
11. What does it mean to be a changeling? Do you think it is a good thing? Why or why not?

12. What is the theme of *Goblin Secrets*? How does the author develop this theme throughout the course of the text?

13. Flashbacks are interruptions in the story when a character returns to an earlier time. Give examples of how flashbacks are incorporated into *Goblin Secrets*. Why does the author use this literary technique?

14. Rownie’s personality starts to change in Act II and Act III. How does he grow up and develop over the course of the novel? How does his personal growth advance the plot towards a resolution?

15. Personification, the literary technique of bringing inanimate objects to life, is woven throughout the novel. For example, the fox mask comes alive and portrays a sly and quick-witted individual. Evaluate more examples of how the author uses personification, and why it is important to the story.

16. Consider the author’s use of onomatopoeia—using words to mimic the sounds associated with an object or action that it refers to. Alexander uses onomatopoeia when he writes, “Rownie’s teeth clacked together. Thomas and Essa gave squawks of protest from inside.” How does onomatopoeia enhance the story? Find other examples of it throughout the story and evaluate how it improves the scenes described.

17. Objectively summarize the story. Create a time line to chart the plot and important details crucial to the story line. Present the summary in chronological order.

18. What is Thomas and Semele’s relationship with Rownie like? How does meeting the troupe shape Rownie’s personality throughout the novel?

19. When Rownie finally finds Rowan, Rowan has been changed. What happened to him? How does this contribute to the story’s plot development?

20. Why do you think Rowan’s “change” transforms Rownie?

21. What impact does the Mayor have on the story? What is his purpose?

22. How would the story be different if it was told from Rowan’s point of view? What about Thomas’s point of view?

23. How is the mood at the beginning of the story different from the mood at the end of the story? Does the novel end with a positive or negative resolution?

24. Make a prediction about what would happen next in the story. Do you think Rownie will stay with the troupe? Why or why not?
**Postreading Activities**

1. Have students research Alexander Jannson Mystical Artwork. Students should analyze Alexander Jannson’s artwork and compare and contrast his artwork to the novel *Goblin Secrets*. Based on what they read in *Goblin Secrets* and what they viewed in a piece of modern artwork by Alexander Jannson, have students write an essay objectively summarizing a few common elements. Remind students to use textual evidence to support their answer.

2. William Alexander has many different kinds of masks on his website, [www.goblinsecrets.com](http://www.goblinsecrets.com), available for students to download and illustrate. Have students pick a mask and decorate it. Then write a summary explaining what factors influenced their decision to represent the character or mask they created.

3. Acting and theater are at the heart of *Goblin Secrets*. Ask students to split into groups and to pick a scene from the book that they think would make a good skit. Have them write a script and perform a brief scene for the class.

This guide was written by Michelle Carson, Reading Teacher, Reading Endorsed, Palm Beach Central High School.

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About the Book

The last day of Kaile's life does not start well.

It's Inspection Day at the family bakery, and between her mother's temper, her little brother's antics, and her job serving breakfast to the demanding citizens of Zombay, she could use a break. Then a goblin theatre troupe offers to put on a play for the customers. Kaile treasures the gift they give her—an innocuous little flute made of bone—and plays its haunting song without hesitation. That's when her life officially ends, and her adventures begin.

Set alongside the National Book Award-winning *Goblin Secrets*, *Ghoulish Song* weaves a story of music and mystery through the charmed, cursed world of Zombay.

Prereading Activities

Guide the class in analyzing a popular lullaby or nursery rhyme. It may be helpful to use an overhead projector, wipe board, or Smart Board, so student responses can be recorded in a chart or diagram format. Have students answer some of the following questions: What is the rhythm of the song? What are the lyrics? Does the lullaby teach a lesson or moral? What is the tone? What is the theme? What is the background information for the song? Where and when did it originate? After students have participated in this guided discussion, have students work with a partner to evaluate another popular lullaby or nursery rhyme and answer the same questions.

Hold a class discussion to find out if students have ever felt their parents were too hard on them. How did it make them feel? What responsibilities at home seem unfair? What parental expectations are overwhelming? How would they feel if one day they were not considered part of the family anymore?
**Discussion Questions**

Please use examples from the text to support your answers.

1. Foreshadowing is a literary device in which the author hints what may happen later in the story. How does the first line of the novel foreshadow what may happen later on in the plot? What do you think the novel might be about?

2. What was Kaile’s relationship with her grandfather like? What instrument did her grandfather give Kaile and what did she do with it? What eventually became of the instrument?

3. Although *Ghoulish Song* is not a sequel to *Goblin Secrets*, both novels are set in the town of Zombay. In addition to the setting, what other similarities can be found in *Ghoulish Song* and *Goblin Secrets*? How are the characters, cultures, and society the same in both novels?

4. How does the setting influence the plot in the story? Analyze how the setting shapes the characters and the plot of the novel.

5. The Fourth Verse shows a parallel plot from *Goblin Secrets*. What scenario in the Fourth Verse was also a part of the plot from *Goblin Secrets*? What is the overall impact of the parallel plots on the novel *Ghoulish Song*?

6. Kaile made a song for her mom. What does the song signify about their relationship? How does she feel about her mom? Use quotations from the text to support you answer.

7. What is meant by the sentence, “She wondered why Mother had sent for old Chicken Legs”? Who does the author mean by “Chicken Legs”? How do you know? What literary device is the author using?

8. Why does Kaile allow the goblin troupe to perform? What are the consequences of her decision?

9. How does Kaile respond to her family’s reaction about losing her shadow? How does Kaile respond at her own funeral?

10. How does Kaile’s mom’s reaction to Kaile’s funeral add to the drama of the story? What does being a ghoul mean?

11. The names of Mother and Father are not given in the story. What is most likely the reason the author chose not to give them names?

12. What does Kaile name her shadow? Why do you think she does this?

13. How does the author show the conversation between Shade and Kaile? What textual element did the author use to portray Shade’s voice? Why did he choose to structure the dialogue this way?
14. What is the most likely reason the author chose to organize the text in song format?

15. How does the structure of each novel, *Goblin Secrets* and *Ghoulish Song*, contribute to the overall effect of its style?

16. What is Kaile’s flute made of? From whom did the Goblin get it?

17. What happens to Shade and Kaile after meeting Fidlam? How does meeting Fidlam advance the plot?

18. Who is Luce Strumgut? Who is Cymbat? How are Luce Strumgut’s and Cymbat’s reactions to Kaile different? How are their reactions to Shade different?

19. Explain what literary devices are used in “Counting Song” in Verse Nine. Provide the literary device and definition along with an example from the text to support your answer.

20. How are superstitions woven into the story? What impact do the superstitions have on the major characters?

21. What is so special about the flute? How does background knowledge of the flute help Kaile to progress towards a resolution?

22. Who is the Reliquarian? How does the Reliquarian add to the tone of the novel?

23. Analyze how the Fourteenth Verse contributes to the development of the theme of the novel. What is the theme? How do you know? Use specific quotes and phrases from the Fourteenth Verse to support your analysis.

24. How will a new nameday for Kaile help her to move forward? How does Snotfish’s wave from under the table portray that Kaile has found closure?

**Postreading Activities**

After reading the novel, put the students in groups of four. Have the students pick one of the songs from the novel and create a rhythm or beat to it. Refresh students’ memory by having the class hum or sing popular lullabies or nursery rhyme tunes. Students can create their own rhythm or use one from a popular lullaby or nursery rhyme. Compare and contrast the experience of reading the song versus hearing the song. Compare and contrast different tunes to the same song or lyrics. How does it change?

In groups of three or four, guide the students to write out a script in a screenplay format, reenacting a scene from *Ghoulish Song*. Each student in the group must have a part in the production. Ensure roles are provided to each member of the group. The roles don’t necessarily have to be vocal, they can also be part of the background of the production. Then have the students act out their scripts in front of the class.
This guide was written by Michelle Carson, Reading Teacher, Reading Endorsed, Palm Beach Central High School.

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