

BLOOMSBURY

Teachers' Guide for *Velvet* by Mary Hooper



In Brief

Young Velvet is plucked from the drudgery of a job in a steam laundry by Madame Savoya, one of Victorian London's most fashionable mediums, who raises Velvet to the status of lady's maid, dresses her in fine clothes and even hints that Velvet might have spiritual powers. It seems like a dream come true, especially when Velvet begins to believe that Madame's handsome assistant, George, might return her youthful love. However, as Madame begins to drag Velvet further into her schemes, Velvet slowly realises that Madame's business isn't all that it seems...

Part coming-of-age story, part historical detective story, *Velvet* is the powerful novel of a brave young woman's blossoming awareness of the eternal truth that not all is gold that glitters, from one of Britain's most successful authors for young adults.

In Detail

One night after Kitty's mother dies, Kitty runs away from her brutal, drunken father, who chases her. During his pursuit he falls into a canal and screams for help. Kitty ignores his pleas.. Plagued by guilt, Kitty assumes her father is dead and, to give herself a fresh start, changes her name to Velvet and finds work in a steam laundry.

Velvet is a good worker and is quickly promoted to dealing with more delicate clothes. One of her special clients, an exotic, beautiful and successful spiritualist called Madame Savoya, asks if Velvet would like to leave the laundry and join her household.

It is a huge break for Velvet. She receives food, clothes and shelter – and she gets to work with Madame's handsome assistant George, with whom she falls swiftly in love.

On the streets near Madame's house, Velvet encounters Charlie, who adored her when they were children and who is now training to be a policeman. He still likes her, but he's hardly as thrilling as George.

As she attends more séances, Velvet begins to fear that Madame isn't everything she appears. And we, the readers, are privy to several private sittings in which Madame and George persuade wealthy clients to hand over great sums of money, jewellery and property.

One of Madame's clients, incredibly, is Velvet's father, who escaped death in the canal and subsequently made a fortune gambling. From Velvet, Madame learns secrets about her father which she uses to persuade him that she really is in communication with the spirits. From Velvet's father, Madame learns secrets about Velvet which she uses to put Velvet's own mind at rest – partially, at least – about this medium's authenticity.

Even so, Velvet knows that some of what Madame is doing is wrong. For instance, Velvet is forced to assist at her mistress's fraudulent séances, and to steal a baby from one of Britain's most notorious baby farmers, which Madame then claims to have materialised from the spirit world. Velvet, shocked by what she sees at the baby farm, goes to Charlie and the police.

Believing that she needs to tell her beloved George about her suspicions so that he too can escape from Madame, Velvet nearly seals her own doom because it turns out that George is Madame's husband, and that they are two of Britain's most notorious confidence tricksters. Now that Velvet has uncovered the truth, George must act to silence her. The stage is set for a final confrontation between truth and falsehood...

About Mary Hooper

After leaving school without qualifications, Mary Hooper worked as a window dresser and then in an office. She read a short story, thought she could do better and sat down to type . . .

She has now been writing successful young adult fiction, both contemporary and historical, for more than twenty years. *Fallen Grace* was nominated for the 2011 Carnegie Medal and *At the Sign of the Sugared Plum* was selected as part of the 2010 Booked Up scheme. Visit **www.maryhooper.co.uk**

Discussion

1. "'Rules is rules," she said. 'You know that. If anyone makes a habit of fainting then they're deemed incapable of carrying out a proper day's work'." (pg. 2)

Are these reasonable working conditions? Who is to blame for them if they're not? Is Mrs Sloane a bad person?

2. 'And besides, she was a quick and intelligent girl who could read and write well.' (pg. 4)

Is it fair that Velvet escapes just because she is intelligent or lucky enough to have had some education? What would have happened to her if she was less clever?

3. 'Lizzie and Velvet were glad to walk together, therefore, and usually spent the time chatting about young men they knew (or hoped to know), the current story being serialised in the paper, the misdemeanours of younger members of the royal family, or whether it was quite the done thing for young ladies to wear bloomers on bicycles.' (pg. 18)

What do you think about gossip? How useful is it to Lizzie and Velvet? Is it different today?

4. ' "So your name's Velvet now?"

Velvet nodded.

"I think Kitty's a nice name," Lizzie said.' (pg. 22)

'Kitty would never have experienced such things.' (pg. 84)

Why do you think Kitty changed her name to Velvet? What assumptions do you make about her character as a result? Who would choose the name Jane? Who would choose the name Melody? Who would choose the names Hermione, Roshanna, Madison or Mavis? How random are names in real life? How random are they in books?

5. ' "But you know last year, when the century changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth?

Lizzie nodded.

"Didn't that make you feel just a little bit giddy and excited, as if anything could happen? As if you might become anyone you wanted?"

Lizzie looked at her in astonishment. "I don't know what you mean," she said.' (pg. 26-7)

Do dates really mean anything? Is a new year different from any other date? Or does it just make people think differently? And if it does make people think differently, does that make it important? Velvet and Lizzie clearly expect different things from life. How important are these expectations in shaping their futures?

6. 'Velvet, stroking a length of green cashmere or touching her cheek to a silvery gossamer shawl, found great satisfaction in lavishing care on them. They made a pleasant change from the shapeless smocks, drab linens and cheap wool garments which had been her everyday wear for years.' (pg. 32)

How important are clothes in this story? Think of the character's name, and where she starts, and how she rises in the world. Madame is fashionable – is that a good thing? Velvet likes nice clothes, and has an excellent dress sense (pg. 81) – is that a good thing? How do clothes play a part in Velvet's hopes and dreams?

7. ' "As long as they can afford it, of course," George added. "We're at the top end of the market and Madame's time is very valuable." ' (pg. 74)

At what point did you realise that Madame was a fake? Do you believe that spiritualism might be possible? What does Madame do that is wrong? Are public séances wrong? Is it worse that she tries to work on individuals? In her circumstances, what would be OK? What is the difference between a fraudulent medium and someone who makes their living as an astrologer today? Where does Madame cross the line?

8. Was there any point at which you believed George or hoped he would get together with Velvet? Why, or why not?

9. ' "Lizzie and I were very good friends," Velvet said.' (pg. 113)

Why do Madame and George want Velvet to have no friends?

10. How did the cover of the book affect your expectations? Did it prejudice your view of any of the characters? Did it make you look for certain things? Did the story turn out as you expected?

11. 'Plus, she felt herself to be in love, and this above all else made her happy with her life.' (pg. 115)

What is the difference between feeling yourself to be in love and being in love? What is Mary Hooper saying? Do your feelings count if they're focused on a baddy?

12. ' "I was a children's entertainer, you know. You don't find many of them around, do you?"

George put his fingers to his lips to silence Mr Grey, but not before he and Madame had exchanged a secret look of utter astonishment.' (pg. 130)

At what point in this story did you think Mr Grey was Velvet's father? How much doubt did you have before he explained that another corpse had been wrongly identified as his?

13. ' "Horried, she realised that it was George." ' (pg. 174)

When you read this did you think that it might be Madame who was kissing George? Why?

14. ' "We'll serve dishes of ice cream at séances," she said gaily, "for we must be à la mode!

Mediums are terribly fashionable now, but it's only the youngest and most beautiful who'll thrive." ' (pg. 191)

Is it always young and beautiful people who are fashionable? What do you think about this?

15. ' "But what a shame that a gift like yours has to be treated in such a way." ' (pg. 205)

Velvet is saddened that Madame must think in terms of business. Imagine for a moment that Madame was telling the truth about her gift, and so were the other mediums – Madame would still have to compete for business. Would this have been unfortunate? Is there any difference between that and the way artists today have to think in a businesslike way to pay the rent? What is the difference between a medium and a stage magician like Derren Brown? Or someone like Derek Acorah who says he speaks to ghosts?

16. 'Velvet continued to lead the approbation, but could not stop thinking about the first questioner . . . it had already occurred to her that she might not want to find out the truth about Madame.' (pg. 210)

Is Velvet stupid for not realising that Madame is a con (and that George is in on it)? How far does she deceive herself? Why does she deceive herself?

17. ' "Please, it's not that I tried to deceive you." ' (pg. 228)

How bad is what Velvet did? Did she do right when she thought she let her father die? Is she right to feel guilty about it? Is she right to feel guilty about deceiving Madame?

19. Rank the book's characters in terms of how much wrong they do. Think of intention and results. Is this a helpful way of looking at the book?

20. When did you know that Charlie and Velvet would end up together?

21. Mary Hooper includes a note on employment prospects for women at the turn of the century at the back of the book. They were pretty bleak. What do you think Madame should have done in order to earn a living? Do you think Velvet will go on to get a job, or will she be a housewife?

Further Reading

Revolution by Jennifer Donnelly

The Explosionist by Jenny Davidson

At the House of the Magician by Mary Hooper

Fallen Grace by Mary Hooper

My So-Called Afterlife by Tamsyn Murray

Montacute House by Lucy Jago

Other Books by Mary Hooper

Historical:

Fallen Grace

The Betrayal

By Royal Command

At the House of the Magician

The Extraordinary Life and Times of Eliza Rose

Petals in the Ashes

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum

Contemporary:

Zara

Chelsea and Astra

Amy

Holly

Megan 1-3