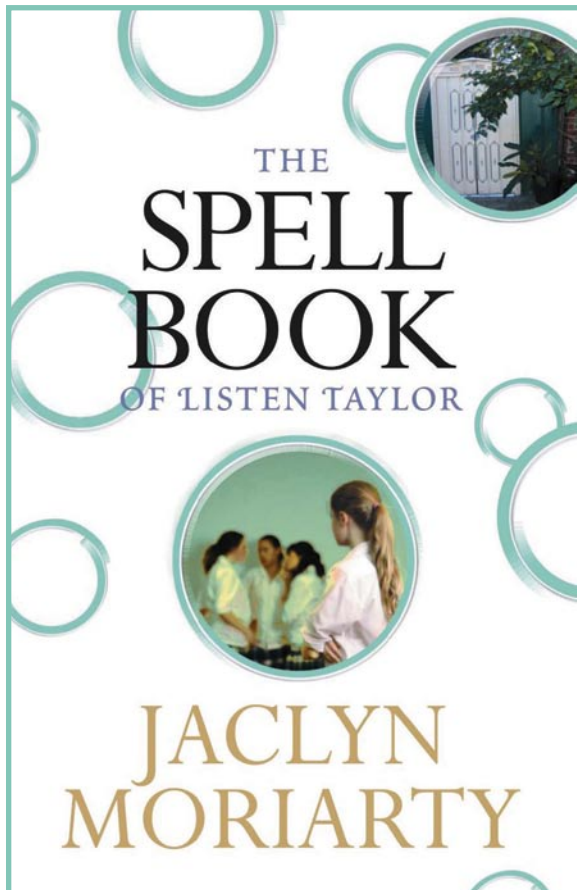


The Spell Book of Listen Taylor

and the secrets of the Family Zing

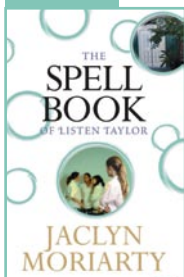
Jaclyn Moriarty

Teachers' Notes



This book is rich in themes, and the possibilities for questions, tasks and activities are numerous. Teachers are encouraged to build on and adapt the following suggestions, using them as stepping-stones to their own ideas.





SYNOPSIS

Listen Taylor has just started Year Seven. She and her dad have moved into an apartment with a woman named Marbie Zing. Listen has found a mysterious spell book (including a Spell to Make a Vacuum Cleaner Break). And her friends are about to break her heart.

Cath Murphy, primary school teacher, is feeling awkward, quirky, wicked and extremely blonde. As her mother likes to say, all meetings with new people, even locksmiths or seven-year-olds, can make you a little afraid. Cath has just met a very tall man with a talent for rhymes and a wishful look in his eye. And she's about to meet a girl named Cassie Zing.

The Zing family live in a curious world of Intrusions, Distractions and state-of-the-art surveillance equipment. Every Friday night they gather in their garden shed and discuss their Family Secret. Listen and Cath don't know it yet, but they're about to get entangled with that Secret.

Based on Jaclyn Moriarty's popular novel for adults, *I have a Bed Made of Buttermilk Pancakes*, this is the story of what happens when you meet a Zing.

CHARACTERS

ONE

Construct a family-tree showing Zing Family members and the relationships they have with, or to, other major characters in the book. Before drawing the tree, make a list of all character names, stating briefly who they are.

For example:

Listen Taylor – a girl in Year Seven.

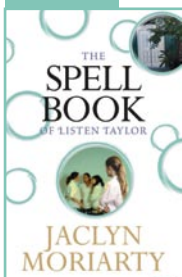
Nathaniel Taylor – Listen's father.

Maude Sausalito – (also known as Grandma Zing), married to David Zing.

Donna Turnbull – a school friend of Listen's

TWO

Pick your five favourite characters and write a paragraph about each one, making sure you include as much physical description as possible, as well as details of their nature and relationships, their value/importance to the story, why you like or dislike them, and anything else you wish to say about them.



RELATIONSHIPS

ONE

Romantic triangles. What is a 'romantic triangle'? There are effectively three of these in the story, and a potential/fantasy one.

- List these, naming the people who make up each triangle, how and why they came into being, and what happens to them all in the end.
- Name and describe any other romantic triangles among famous people, past or present.

TWO

Fidelity & Infidelity. What do these two words mean?

- Name all the characters in the story that belong to one or the other category.
- Is there any justification for infidelity? Explain your answer.

THREE

Fancy & Radcliffe. We first meet this couple on p12. What feeling do you get about their relationship from these first pages?

- How are your impressions of this relationship substantiated as the story progresses?
- What finally happens to them? How and why does this happen?

FOUR

Nathaniel & Marbie. How would you characterise this relationship?

- Why does Marbie have an affair with another man?
- At the end of the story do you see Nathaniel as an understanding partner?

FIVE

Maude & David. We first meet this couple as grandparents. They seem to be the stereotype of loving and elderly people who are very involved with their family. As the story progresses we meet the young Maude Sausalito and then the young David Zing. Discuss how their relationship develops and changes, giving examples and explanations.

SIX

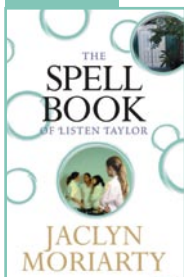
Cath, Warren & Breanna. How and why do Cath and Warren become a 'couple'?

- How does Cath rationalise her relationship with Warren, in the light of his married status? What do you think about it?

SEVEN

Marbie & the Aeronautical Engineer. How did this couple come together and why? Why do you think Marbie was attracted to this man?

- What were the negative attributes, if any, that Marbie found about this man? Do we ever find out his name?

**EIGHT**

Listen & Nathaniel. How close is this father–daughter relationship? Give examples and explanations.

- What happened to Listen’s mother? Does Nathaniel really understand his daughter? Explain.

NINE

Listen & Marbie. Describe the relationship enjoyed by Marbie and Listen.

- Do you think Marbie has a better understanding of Listen’s feelings and needs than her father does? Give examples and explanations.

TEN

Cassie & Her Parents. Describe and discuss the differences you detect in the relationship Fancy and Radcliffe have with Cassie. Explain how her relationships with her parents affects Cassie

ELEVEN

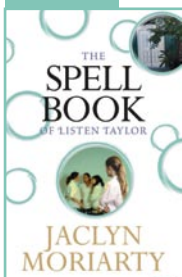
The Zing Family. What are the differences between a functional family and a dysfunctional family?

- Into which category, and why, would you put the Zing family?

TWELVE

Relationships & Friendship. Listen thinks constantly about the nature of her relationships with ‘friends’.

- Firstly, her school friends – initially Listen is part of a group that began in primary school. What happens to Listen’s relationship with this group? Do you understand why? How justified do you think her friends were in their treatment of Listen? Do their reasons make sense to you? If so, why?
- Listen’s outside-school friends – how would you describe Listen’s relationship with this group? What makes it different? Why do you think this is so?
- What about Listen – what does she believe are the reasons for the status of her relationships and why does she think this? Is it possible that Listen’s school friends’ behaviour could be described as bullying?



FAMILY

ONE

Listen believes that the Zing Family represent the ultimate, perfect family. She imagines that she is somehow lacking some important characteristics, or ignorant of some secret knowledge, because she is not a member of a traditional, nuclear family.

- Do you think that she and Nathaniel did have a family?
- How has the nature of 'the family' changed and evolved in recent years?
- What sort of 'secret knowledge' might a traditional family have? What kind of 'secret knowledge' does Listen have as a result of her own upbringing?

TWO

Marbie is frustrated by the aeronautical engineer's questions about the Zing Family Secret, and wants to explain to him that the Secret is too 'private' and 'fragile' to be subject to the 'public' sphere of rules and the law. What would you say is the difference between the 'family sphere' and the 'public domain'? When do you think these two spheres intersect? How much supervision do you think the public domain should have over family life? Is it an invasion of privacy when the public intrudes on family life? If so, when might such an invasion of privacy be justified?

THE SPELL BOOK

ONE

Listen Taylor finds the Spell Book in a box in her new home. Its spells are very detailed and its instructions are quite strict. Why do you think Listen decides to do the Spells and obey the Book's instructions?

- If you had found the Spell Book, would you have acted as Listen does? Why or why not?

TWO

The Spell Book slowly comes to have influence over Listen's life, affecting the way she relates to the people around her. How do you think the Book changes her life? Are the changes positive or negative?

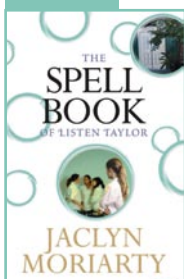
THREE

At the same time, the Spell Book seems to have an impact on the lives of those around Listen. Create a table listing each of the spells, how, and for whom, they seem to work, and the significance of the spell for that character.

- Do you think the spells actually worked or that the related events were coincidences?
- What do you think the reader is supposed to believe, and how important is that belief?

FOUR

Write your own book of spells. Think about the changes you might like to make to your own life and at the end of your book of spells add an appendix, in which you give detailed explanations of how and why you devised each spell. As a guideline, refer to Part 23 of the story.



THE WHALE AND THE SEAHORSE

ONE

The spells contained in Listen's Spell Book are apparently trivial and harmless in nature. They include spells to make people catch taxis, and involve such things as walking backwards or peeling potatoes. How do you think the spells compare with the impact or harm they have? What do you think Jaclyn Moriarty is saying about the way in which small, harmless actions can have enormous impact?

TWO

Marbie ends her relationship with the aeronautical engineer 'because of a piece of chocolate cake' and Fancy wonders if a 'purple sock' is too flimsy and small to mean something so 'immense' as an affair. Do you think Marbie and Fancy are using these images as symbols for more important issues? Are there other instances in the novel of characters choosing to identify trivial matters as the source of their troubles?

THREE

Listen's friends ostracise her early in their first year of high school. Do you think Listen's suffering is small and harmless compared to adult suffering because it takes place in the schoolyard? Do you think the suffering of the schoolyard is trivialised or made too much of?

FOUR

In groups, make a list of times when the small steps of an individual have had a big impact on social history. Do you think the individuals involved wondered whether their actions would have far-reaching consequences?

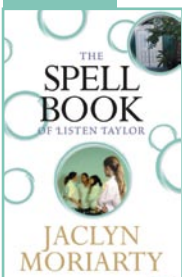
- When does a collection of small things become something huge? List examples.
- Has there been a time in your life when a trivial thing has actually turned out to be far more important? Is there a time when you should stop worrying about trivial things and focus instead on what really matters?

SECRETS, SUBTERFUGE & SPYING

ONE

The Zing family has one very big secret, but the family members and other characters each have personal secrets too.

- What is the Zing Family Secret?
- List some of the secrets kept by Marbie, Fancy, Cath and Listen.



TWO

Secrets can be powerful, dangerous, necessary, exciting and harmless. They can have unexpected repercussions both for the people who know the secret and those who do not. The Zing Family Secret has had a practical impact on the lives of the Zing family members and on Cath, but it has also had more insidious psychological effects on their characters.

- How do you think the Zing Family Secret affected the psychological development of Fancy and Marbie (who know the Secret) and Cath and Cassie (who do not)?
- Listen imagines she could win her friends back if only she knew the Zing Family Secret. Do you think Listen is right about this? How might Listen be confused about the nature of friendship?
- Warren and Cath have kept a secret from Breanna but later Breanna says that she sensed the truth. Cath had believed that her secret could not hurt Breanna unless Breanna actually knew it. Do you think this is true?
- When can a secret be a powerful weapon? Are there times when you have learned a secret and wished you did not know it?

THREE

Do you believe the Zing Family violated Cath's privacy? How and why?

- If you believe the Zing Family violated Cath's privacy, did they have any justification for doing so? Give reasons.

FOUR

The Zing family have gathered a huge collection of information about Cath Murphy. At the same time, the Zing family have been collecting ideas for ways in which they can make Cath's life better, and more fun, or ways in which they send her life/career in various unexpected directions (including directions in which she herself is not at all interested).

- Imagine that somebody has been compiling a file of information about you from your childhood through to the current time, including your favourite sports, foods, friends, worries, photos of yourself from unusual angles, and recurring dreams and nightmares. Create a sample of what that file might look like. Would the file reveal your true character to a stranger?
- Imagine they have also been creating a file of ways to make your life better and more fun, including lists of gifts, holidays, adventures, creative ways to cheer you up when you've been down, and unusual job possibilities. Create a sample of that file, including imaginative ways in which this person might get the gifts and job possibilities to you without you realising that anything unusual is happening.

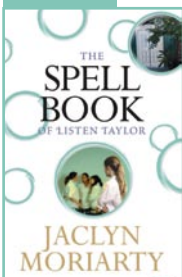
FIVE

If you were going to find out everything you could about an individual, without them knowing, how would you go about it?

- What steps could you take that were clearly illegal? What steps might be legal but immoral? What could you do that was both legal and moral? Do we have laws of privacy in Australia? Find out what these are.
- When would it be ethically acceptable to gather this information about an individual?

SIX

As spy networks go, how sophisticated would you describe the one set up by the Zing Family? Give details.

**SEVEN**

How do secrets and rights to privacy intersect? When should you be able to protect your own secrets as a part of your right to privacy?

- Do you think famous people are less entitled to privacy? In what ways do they have their privacy invaded?

EIGHT

Is young people's privacy infringed more than adult privacy? Has your own privacy been infringed? Do you think it's important to be able to keep secrets?

EDUCATION**ONE**

Notes for teachers/school. Fancy writes lots of notes to Cassie's teacher, for one reason or another. Are they all really necessary, or do you think there is an ulterior reason for them?

TWO

Teachers. The new school year features at the beginning of the book: Cassie is starting Year 2, and Listen is going to start secondary school. At the start of a new school year, or when one goes to a new school, students are introduced to new teachers.

- Discuss some of the memorable teachers you have come across during your school life. Why have they left an impression – good or bad?
- Discuss the effects on students when they experience teacher changes during the school year.
- How do you think personalities affect the teaching methods used by teachers?

THREE

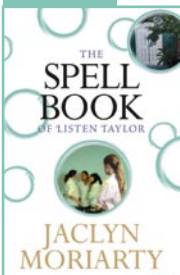
School. What is it like to begin at a new school? What are differences between starting at a new school when you are young, when you are older or after the school year has begun?

- Do you believe there are different schools to suit different students? If so, give examples and explanations.

FOUR

Parental interest. How involved should your parents be in your schoolwork and school life? Give reasons and explanations.

- Show and discuss how the various members of the Zing family show their interest, or otherwise, in Listen's and Cassie's lives at school.



FATE & PESSIMISM

ONE

On p14 we are introduced to the following sentence, which floats around Marbie's head: 'It was a decision she would regret for the rest of her life'. This crops up again later in the story. Each time it occurs, Marbie fantasises different scenarios that she relates to this sentence.

- What does this sentence and the accompanying scenarios tell us about Marbie's outlook on life, especially her own?
- How do you think the attitude behind this sentence influences Marbie's behaviour and its outcomes?

TWO

What do you understand by the term 'fate'?

THREE

What do you understand by the term 'pessimism'?

FOUR

How do the terms 'fate' and 'pessimism' apply to the scenarios fantasised by Marbie, when she thinks of the sentence, 'It was a decision she would regret for the rest of her life'?

GAMES & CHILDHOOD

ONE

Cassie keeps playing a game with herself where she repeats a certain word or phrase five hundred times.

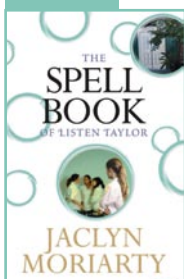
- Cath shows some concern for Cassie's word game. What concerns her? What does Radcliffe think about these concerns?
- Find out about and describe obsessive compulsive disorder. Do you think Cassie has this problem? Why or why not?

TWO

What other games are played in the book? Do you think some members of the Zing family see their Secret as a game?

THREE

The adults in the book often behave in childish or child-like ways. How often do you see adults in the real world behaving like children? When might it be a positive thing for adults to be child-like, and when is it a mistake? What impact do you think it has on children when adults behave in this way?



CHANGE

ONE

On p54 Fancy remembers a warning: 'Never imagine you can change someone, for people NEVER CHANGE'.

- What prompted Fancy to remember this warning?
- Does Fancy believe that this is so? What are her reasons?

TWO

What is meant by 'a leopard never changes his spots'?

THREE

Describe and discuss changes that have occurred, if any, and why, in people that you know, or even in yourself.

DISAPPOINTMENT

To some extent, every character experiences disappointment in their life. Some are larger and more devastating than others, but each character must learn to deal with their disappointment in their own way.

ONE

Both Listen and Cassie endure disappointments in the story. Detail and discuss some of their disappointments, and the realisation that these things happen in life.

TWO

Outline some of the disappointments experienced by the adult characters in the story.

THREE

Do you think it is more or less difficult for a child to deal with disappointment than an adult?

FOUR

What disappointments have you experienced and how did you deal with them?

BETRAYAL & BLAME

ONE

Several people in the book are betrayed: for example, Listen is betrayed by her school friends, Cath is betrayed by Warren (and participates in his betrayal of Breanna), and is also, in a sense, betrayed by the Zing family. Outline all the examples of betrayal in the book, including imagined betrayals.

TWO

Those who betray others often find ways to justify their behaviour, or to avoid blame.

- How do Listen's school friends explain their betrayal of her?
- How does Cath find ways to excuse herself for having an affair? Are there any parallels between Cath's justifications for her affair and Maude's justifications for hers? What about parallels between Cath's justifications for her affair and the Zing family's justifications for spying on her?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

ONE

Authors put a lot of thought into naming their characters, just as parents do. Why do you think Jaclyn Moriarty chose such unusual names for her characters?

- What significance do the names have in terms of what they tell us about the characters and their roles in the novel?

TWO

How do you think a person gets a nickname? Give some examples.

THREE

What about your name – how/why did you acquire it? Does it have a meaning? Are you satisfied with it? Why or why not? What would you rather be called and why?

VOCABULARY

ONE

Jaclyn Moriarty introduces some interesting words and for the most unusual ones provides definitions. For example: clinophobia and alektorophobia. Find out the origin and history of the unusual words, and put them into a sentence that clearly demonstrates their meaning.

TWO

Go through the book and list some words that you wouldn't normally use. Find their meanings and list their synonyms (especially the words that you would normally use in their place), and then put the words used by the author into sentences that clearly illustrates their meaning. For example: gumption, mystique, assiduously.

ADAGES

There are numerous references to adages throughout the text. For example, on p18, 'big fish in little ponds and little fish in big ponds'.

ONE

List as many adages that you can find in the text, and give an explanation for each one.

TWO

Make up a list, together with explanations, of other adages you have come across in the past.