



# Silas and the Winterbottoms

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Teachers' Notes

## Introduction

Stephen M. Giles is 38 and lives near the beach in Sydney. He has worked as a film classifier and a market researcher but these days he spends most of his time wandering around his imagination – which is where he met the Winterbottoms.

*Silas and the Winterbottoms* is a fabulous gothic tale of three young cousins who are summoned by their evil Uncle Silas to spend the summer with him at Sommerset – his grand gothic estate perched on a mysterious island surrounded by an alligator-infested swamp.

Silas Winterbottom is dying. It is his intention to select an heir from among his nieces and nephew. The Winterbottom children have very different backgrounds but each of them have motive for accepting Silas' invitation.

One of the Winterbottoms believes Uncle Silas is a murderer; two of them will do anything to win his favour and his fortune ... but only one will be chosen.

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## Curriculum Links

English: Reading, Writing, Comprehension

Creative and Performing Arts: Drama, Drawing, Painting, Music

Science and Technology: Living Things, Using Technology

Mathematics: Mapping

## Learning Outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- read a text independently and in groups
- respond to themes and issues in a text
- draw on a range of skills and strategies to read and comprehend a text
- analyse techniques used by authors to create certain effects and use language creatively
- devise, act and rehearse drama for performance to an audience.

## Before You Read

Look at the title and front cover picture of the novel. Work in pairs and write a short paragraph suggesting what the story may be about. Read out your group's ideas to the rest of the class.

## Read the Book

Read *Silas and the Winterbottoms* as directed by your teacher in one of the following ways:

- as a whole class
- in small reading groups
- individually.

Stop every now and then to re-evaluate where you think the story may be heading. Discuss your ideas with a friend as well as parts of the story you like and why.



## After You Read

Use the following questions to promote discussion of the book. Discuss these questions as a class or write the answers down.

1. How did Adele Fester-Winterbottom's family find themselves in financial ruin?
2. What did Adele, Isabella and Milo Winterbottom receive in the mail?
3. How was Isabella Winterbottom helping to pay the rent?
4. How did Milo Winterbottom's parents die? Why was it Silas' fault?
5. Why did Milo accept his Uncle's invitation to visit Sommerset?
6. What happened to Moses' son?
7. Why did Silas want Adele to spy on her cousins?
8. What was Silas' crocodile Thorn allergic to?
9. What happened when Adele pulled out the book *The Complete History of String Volume 2* from the shelf?
10. How did Milo injure himself?
11. How did Silas trick Isabella into telling the truth about stealing?
12. What was the real reason Silas invited the children to Sommerset?
13. What was Mrs Hammer's role in saving the children?
14. What was in the rusted copper box buried in the garden?
15. What do you think Dr Mangrove planned to do with Silas' ashes?

## Activities

### Adjective Fun

On page 9 Silas is described as a 'tight-fisted, black-hearted, evil-minded scoundrel'.

Make up some more hyphenated descriptions of Silas.

### Letter Writing

The three cousins received a letter inviting them to Sommerset House. Rewrite this letter, designing it to look old-fashioned and slightly scary!

### The Winterbottom Cousins

Rule up 3 columns and write the headings Adele, Milo and Isabella. Under each name, list words or phrases that describe the 3 children.



## Let the Music Play

Milo's grandfather 'Maestro' is a conductor. Work with a partner and have a competition to list as many instruments of the orchestra as you can. Try and group the instruments into sections – woodwind, brass, string, or percussion.

## Cartoon Fun

Using the clues and descriptions you have read, sketch 2 character caricatures from the following list – Silas Winterbottom, Rosemary Winterbottom, Thorn, Dr Mangrove. Use black and white as the main colours for your sketches.

## Sommerset House

Paint a picture of Sommerset House. Use pp46–47 to help you. Display the paintings around the classroom. If you have access to construction materials, work in pairs to build a 3D model of Sommerset House.

## Green Fingers

Milo Winterbottom loves flowers and plants. Work in small groups and have a competition to see who can list the names of the most flowers or plants. Sketch pictures of some of these flowers and plants and circle your favourites.

## Circle Meeting – Does Money Bring Happiness?

As a class, sit in a large circle on the floor or on chairs. Your topic for discussion is 'Money brings you happiness'. The first time around the circle say 'Yes' if you agree with the topic or 'No' if you disagree. Next time around give a short reason for your answer. Continue around the circle adding interesting facts and points or debating other's ideas. You may pass at any time and there are no wrong answers.

## Secret Passageway Map

There are many secret passageways and corridors in Sommerset House. Draw your own map or floorplan of the secret entrance leading into the library or the hidden passageways under the house. Label the different rooms or doorways.



## Science Time

Silas had plutonium and uranium at Sommerset House. Use books or the Internet to find out as much as you can about the use and dangers of these chemical elements. Discuss why Silas needed them.

## Explanation

Write a couple of paragraphs outlining what you would do with Sommerset if you were chosen as the heir.

## Peace

Adele finds peace when she is among books. Milo loves flowers. Write a poem or short paragraph about what brings you peace.

## Isabella's Embarrassment

Reread the section of the story where Isabella has an incident with some horse manure (pp112–116). Write a recount of the events leading up to this, as well as what actually happened that day. Make your version as entertaining as possible.

## What's in a Name?

Think about the surname 'Winterbottom'. Why do you think the author chose this name. What are some other descriptive character names in this book?

## Drama Time

Work in groups of 4–6 students. Rehearse then act out the investigation scene after the elevator crashes (from p160). You may like to bring in some props and costumes for your performance.

## Fears and Phobias

Milo is afraid of heights. Research the official name for the fear of heights. Find out the names for other fears or phobias.

## Research Project – Reptile Study

Sommerset House is home to scary alligators and a menacing pet crocodile. Use books and the Internet to research alligators and crocodiles. Find out the similarities and differences, habitats, food and diet and any other interesting facts. Include illustrations and pictures. Present your project as a poster or Powerpoint display.

## Crazy Inventions

Dr Mangrove's invention is called the Soul Chamber (p227). Draw and label your own version of the Soul Chamber.

