Disappearing Act
James Moloney

Book Summary
Intriguing, deeply romantic and suspenseful, Disappearing Act is perfect for young fans of The Illusionist and The Prestige

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes
Disappearing Act is an excellent resource for Years 5, 6 and 7 English, Literacy and Language and could be used to achieve the following National Curriculum aims:

- ACELA 1797
- ACELA 1512
- ACELT 1609
- ACELT 1610
- ACELT 1612
- ACELT 1798
- ACELY 1699
- ACELY 1702
- ACELY 1704
- ACELY 1707
- ACELA 1518
- ACELT 1516
- ACELT 1618
- ACELT 1800
- ACELY 1714
- ACELY 1717

Approropriate Ages:
12+
Disappearing Act
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• Family Legacy
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Introduction

Matt Cooper is twelve, and spends quite a bit of his time honing his magic skills and tricks. He doesn't realise that his great-grandfather, Mattheus Coperneau, was a professional magician whose career came to a disastrous end when a trick he performed backfired spectacularly.

What neither Matt nor Mattheus realise is that there's an even older story behind the failure of Matheus's 'disappearing trick' and a tragic romance is at the bottom of it all.

In 1889, Joachim Tannislaus is a young scientist with a stellar career in front of him and half the girls in the small principality of Montilagus pursuing him. But Joachim loves Princess Agneta, who is also studying at the university.

When he and Agneta are caught in an embrace, he is thrown into prison to perish, but Agneta gives him a dose of the potion they have been working on in secret, little knowing that the elixir has given him the possibility of eternal life.

When Matt and his family return to Montilagus to clear his great-grandfather's name, Matt discovers that there's more to magic than meets the eye.

About the Author

James Moloney is one of Australia's most respected and awarded children's book authors. All but two of his books have been shortlisted for or won CBC awards, and he's also been awarded Family Awards for Children's Literature, Children's Peace Literature Awards, Multicultural Children's Literature Awards and had titles selected for inclusion in the International Youth Library in Munich. He lives in Brisbane.

For more insights into his life and work you can check out his website:

Author Inspiration
Author to add a paragraph here.

Notes on Themes and Curriculum Topics

Pre-Reading Strategies

The following strategies use prediction and confirmation to help students connect the text with their prior ideas as well as engage with the new knowledge and information they will gain from the work. Prediction and confirmation strategies encourage students to become stronger self-guided readers and to seek help as they need.

Activities: The novel is called Disappearing Act and the cover features the outline of a magician on the cover with the words NOW YOU SEE ME ... NOW YOU DON'T

Interestingly, the words NOW YOU DON'T are upside down. What happens to the cover when you turn it around?

What do you think this tells the reader about the novel before they begin? Give reasons for your explanation. After completing the first read of the novel confirm the accuracy of the predictions using a compare and contrast chart (see black line masters one).

Literacy and Language

Third Person Narrative

The use of third person narrative is to allow the reader to see and understand more of the context of the story than the protagonist. The third-person narrative provides the author with the greatest flexibility when building the story as they can incorporate ideas, information and back story that the protagonist may not have access to. One of the challenges of third person narration is to get the reader to identify with and feel as connected to the protagonist as they would if the story was being told in first person narration.

Activity: Choose one section of the narrative and rewrite it in the first person from the point of view of the protagonist. For example have Catine tell the story in her voice, but Matt is still the protagonist of the story. Using a think, pair, share strategy, identify the ways the narrative has changed and how this changes the interpretation of the narrative.

Activity: Choose one section of the narrative and rewrite it in the first person from the point of view where another character is telling the story for the protagonist. For example have Catine tell the story in her voice, but Matt is still the protagonist of the story. Using a think, pair, share strategy, identify the ways the narrative has changed and how this changes the interpretation of the narrative.

Third Person Narrative – Alternate

Disappearing Act covers several time periods in order to tell the whole story. The most efficient way of doing this is to change the perspective of the narrator.

Activity: In small groups discuss other ways that James Moloney could have given the reader the necessary backstory without changing the narrative point of view. for example, the story of Mattheus Cooperneau could have been told as a diary entry that Matt and his family had translated.

This would have changed the narrative perspective to first person, which can be more intimate for the reader and allowed them to engage with Mattheus more fully. First person narrative would also limit the amount of unbiased social and political context that can be told which may have influenced the reader's
opinions of the current rulers of Montilagus. If the reader was biased against the rulers then they may not have accepted Catine and her friendship with Matt as easily as they do in the current version of the story.

**Archetype**

*Archetype* refers to a character or concept that represents an idea that has been used repeatedly. By using archetypal characters in the novel, Moloney has connected the reader to existing ideas and conventions enabling the reader to draw deeper conclusion about the characters and to predict what may happen in the novel.

The character of Mattheus Cooperneau is the archetype of the *beteguiered hero* who was foiled before completing his quest must hand it over to another, in this case, Matt. The Maestro is the archetype of the *villain*, an evil character who will use threats, mayhem and bribery to achieve their goals.

**Activity:** Choose two characters from the novel and describe the archetype they represent. Analyse how this archetype adds additional meaning and clues for a reader.

Traditional archetypes that are found in the novel include:

- **The villain** (evil character who battles against the hero and causes chaos)
- **The trickster** (cons, cheats or thieves from other characters)
- **The faithful companion** (offers support to the protagonist/hero)
- **The shrew** (female character who does not confirm to the social norms)

**Climax**

*Climax* is the turning point in the story. Once a story reaches the climax the ending is inevitable, that is no alternative endings can be considered as an acceptable outcome. A **dramatic high point** usually precedes the climax. The climax of *Disappearing Act* occurs once Matt ‘finds’ the Royal Sceptre. At this point it is evident to the reader that Mattheus Cooperneau’s reputation will be restored and that the royal family will be safe and secure in their position in Montilagus.

**Activity:** Working in small groups, imagine an alternative climax for the story. Brainstorm possible changes and identify what the new climax and dramatic high point would be. After completing the brainstorming activity, students organise their ideas into a series of narrative steps (see below). Using the steps, students create, edit and publish their alternate ending for the text.

The villain (evil character who battles against the hero and causes chaos)

For example:

- Olivar Delano storms the castle before Matt and Catine complete their experiment to find the sceptre
- Helvar creates a diversion while Matt and Catine secretly complete the search for the sceptre
- Olivar Delano eventually thwarts Helvar’s diversion and enters the great hall, ready to claim the throne and oust the Mahling family.
- As Olivar Delano enters the great hall, Matt reveals the sceptre
- Catine stands in front of Olivar with the sceptre in her hand and saves the Mahling family.

**Exposition**

*Exposition* is the disruption of the flow story by the author. This disruption usually occurs when the author wants to provide the reader with additional information and/or explanation.

For example:

- ‘Matt had been mucking around with Hayden since they were wearing nappies, which was hardly surprising when they lived on the same street. They had been to the beach with each other’s families, and still went for there for a bit of boogie boarding. Although Hayden was fourteen and Matty was still a few months short, they were in the same year at school. But friends or not, Matt didn’t want to give Hayden the book.’ (p 2)

The exposition above enables Moloney to provide the reader with an insight into Matt and Hayden’s friendship without having to write an entire chapter.

Hayden’s friendship without having to write an entire chapter.

‘Matt never did find out whether the Maestro was arrested, as Helvar suggested, The Coopers heard nothing from Genardi/Khallinar ever again. But that is jumping ahead too quickly, for the days after the sceptre returned to Montilagus were very exciting.’ (p 175)

In the example above, the exposition allows Moloney to close a thread in the story, the relationship between Matt (Hero) and the Maestro (Villian) that is outside the timeframe of the story.

**Activity:** Identify 2 – 4 other examples of exposition in the text and evaluate why Moloney chose to use exposition in that instance and how it helps to support the readers understanding of the text.

**Imagery and Precise Language**

*Imagery* allows the reader to visualise what the author has written in the text. Imagery and precise language work together to create a more in-depth image for the reader. This use of language is more engaging and sophisticated than using generalised language.

For example:

- ‘He stood with one hand clutching his chest an, the other stretched out towards them. On his face was a look of utter despair.’ (p 8)

The above sentence is an example of Imagery that allows the reader to visualise the character’s moment of despair.

**Activity:** Decide on a section of the text which displays Imagery and Precise Language. Write how imagery and precise language work together to create a more in-depth image for the reader.

*For example:*

- ‘He stood with one hand clutching his chest an, the other stretched out towards them. On his face was a look of utter despair.’ (p 8)
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Matt watched as the arguments were lobbed back and forth like a ball at a tennis match, all the time thinking, 'There hasn’t been one word about whether I should go, just about who should pay. He hoped it would stay that way.' (p. 89)

The imagery used in the two examples above create strong visual images for the reader. The old man’s hand is clutched to his chest rather than held or on. The arguments are lobbed back and forth like a ball at a tennis match rather than they argued. The way language is used in these two examples also create a sense of movement.

Activity: Choose three examples of imagery and precise language. Evaluate the language used and how it helps to create a detailed image for the reader.

Choose another three examples of imagery and precise language. Rewrite the examples so they are more general. Compare and contrast the differences in the two examples. Evaluate which language is more appealing to you as a reader and give reasons why.

Working individually, students list all the images in the book that have been most powerful in their student’s lives that are too strange to be real.

For example, Joachim and Volmer are both described by their blonde hair and Volmer and Helvar are recognized as looking like each other in the photograph found by Mattheus Cooperneau. The disappearance and subsequent reappearance of the scepter is never fully explained, but the reader can deduce that Joachim/Volmer/Helvar was present at both Mattheus Cooperneau’s performance and Matt Cooperneau. The disappearance and subsequent reappearance of the scepter is never fully explained, but the reader can deduce that Joachim/Volmer/Helvar was present at both Mattheus Cooperneau’s performance and Matt Cooperneau’s performance then he could have hidden and then brought back the scepter.

Activity: As a class, discuss why James Moloney may have chosen magic realism as a device in the text.

Discussion Point: In small groups discuss stories and events that have happened in the student’s lives that are too strange to be real.

Magic Realism

Magic realism weaves elements of magic into a realistic setting. The character of Joachim and the use of alchemy is an example of magic realism in Disappearing Act. While it is never explicitly explained to the reader how the character of Joachim survived when near death, there are clues throughout that can lead the reader to believe that Joachim survived by taking a magical elixir, created by Joachim and Princess Agneta, and is still alive today.

For example, Joachim and Volmer are both described by their blonde hair and Volmer and Helvar are recognized as looking like each other in the photograph found by Mattheus Cooperneau. The disappearance and subsequent reappearance of the scepter is never fully explained, but the reader can deduce that Joachim/Volmer/Helvar was present at both Mattheus Cooperneau’s performance and Matt Cooperneau’s performance then he could have hidden and then brought back the scepter.

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Themes

Family Legacy

As the story progresses, the legacy of family and preserving a positive family legacy becomes a strong theme. Matt Cooper and his grandfather want to restore the reputation of Mattheus Cooperneau, Catine wants to protect the legacy of her family by stopping Olivar Delano from taking over the throne of Montilagus:

The crisis is getting worse. Olivar Delano arrives in Montilagus tomorrow and if the people all gather at the station to welcome him, he might be proclaimed the new Prince by tomorrow afternoon. He has powerful men behind him. All they care about are the riches they can squeeze out of the country. It will be awful for Montilagus.’ (pp 148 – 149)

Activity: Rewrite, edit and publish the story of Joachim and Princess Agneta as if it is a fairytale. After publishing the story, reflect on how a change in genre effects the element of magical realism. For example, is the magical more acceptable in a fairytale than in realistic fiction?

Activity: Write a short response to the statement.

The family legacy I would like to leave behind is...

Identity

An important theme in Disappearing Act is the exploration of identity. Matt and Catine are discovering a true sense of self as they move from youth into young adulthood.

Matt began to look forward to Saturdays in the way he had when they meant a game of footy or long hours challenging himself in the surf with Hayden. What got him edgy with excitement now though was magic. (p. 58)

The example above shows Matt’s values and attitudes changing as he develops a strong sense of self. When Matt was younger, he enjoyed sport and activities with his peers. As Matt becomes older he is enjoying an activity that he has chosen for himself and that he is excelling in personally. Magic is starting to become a potential vocation for Matt.

Discussion Point: As a class discuss the ways that magic and the mundane have been juxtaposed in the text.

Activity: Describe the importance of one family legacy in the text as a tool for keeping the narrative moving.

Activity: Write a short response to the statement.

The family legacy I would like to leave behind is...

Write a short response to the statement.

Compare and contrast the differences in the two examples. Evaluate which language is more appealing to you as a reader and give reasons why.

Working individually, students list all the images in the book that have been most powerful in their student’s lives that are too strange to be real.

The family legacy I would like to leave behind is...
Persecution

Persecution and the fear that results from persecution, are powerful tools for controlling and manipulating people and communities. Mattheus Cooperneau is the character who is most obviously persecuted in the novel, losing his liberty, his reputation and ultimately his family. Joachim is persecuted for his belief in science over alchemy as is Princess Agneta, both of whom are eventually persecuted for their love for each other (Joachim in jail and Agneta forced into marriage). Catine and her family face persecution due to the loss of power associated with the sceptre. Even the people of Montilagus suffer from persecution through the banning of magic in their country.

Activity:
- As a whole class brainstorm the different kinds of persecution that each of the characters faces in the text:
- Annotate each of these examples with a quote from the text
- Divide the class into small groups and provide each group with one or two of the examples of persecution identified in the brainstorming task
- In the small groups, identify other examples of the same kind of persecution, in fact or fiction, for example:

Cooperneau is persecuted for his scientific beliefs
- Galileo was sentenced to house arrest for publishing a paper that stated the earth revolved around the sun
- Rhazes was beaten with his own manuscript, causing him to go blind, for translating and introducing the medical works of Hippocrates and Galen, amongst others, to the Arabic world
- Servetus discovered pulmono circulation, he was arrested, tortured and he and his public research was burnt at the stake

Magic is banned in Montilagus
- Dancing banned in the movie Footloose

Joachim and Princess Agneta are persecuted because they fell in love with each other
- Romeo and Juliet
- St Valentine married non-Christian couples in secret as they were persecuted by the church

Activity: Create a multi-media presentation about the persecution that has been investigated and how this persecution has been represented over time
### Compare and Contrast for Reading Strategies

#### Predictions about the text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter title</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
<th>Post-reading</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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#### Summary of the text

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#### How are the predictions and summary similar?

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#### How are the predictions and summary different?

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# Structured Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
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<td>Key quotes</td>
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## Compare and Contrast Chart

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<th>Topic Two</th>
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<tr>
<td>How are they alike?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How are they different?</td>
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Character Trait Chart

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About the Author of the Notes

Rachel Ford began her professional career as teacher after completing a double degree in Arts and Teaching. Rachel also has a Master of Education and is currently studying a Master of Business Administration. Rachel has worked as a publisher in Melbourne and Sydney. She currently lives in Sydney where she works as a freelance writer and publisher.