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English 112B

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A Face Like Glass

By Frances Hardinge

AUTHOR OF COSTA BOOK OF THE YEAR *THE LIE TREE*
FRANCES HARDINGE



A
FACE
LIKE
GLASS



Image from franceshardinge.com

After growing up in Kent, England, she took her love of darker stories and studied at Oxford University. Even in her own biography she uses elusive and charming self-descriptors, claiming to perhaps be made of entirely velvet. Other works by Hardinge include *Fly Trap* and *Cuckoo Song*.

- *A Face Like Glass* is her 5th novel.
- It was long listed for the Carnegie Medal and was voted one of the top 100 UKYA novels.

Summary

Growing up in the twisty, turny and mysterious tunnels of Cheesemaker Grandible, Neverfell could not tell you anything about the first five years of her life. In *A Face Like Glass* she discovers that amidst a world of beings who have to learn their 'Faces', she has one that smoothly changes from one emotion to the next, showing her each and every thought. The city Caverna is underground, and the aboveground is known to be dangerous, as even five minutes too long in the light could burn you up, and the skilled artisans below must keep their crafts from those above. At only twelve years old, Neverfell quickly falls into the political schemes and traps of the Court, but her yearning for something she can not remember keeps her pushing forward. Through new alliances and learning that not everything is as it seems, Neverfell and her ever-expressive face, show the people of Caverna that there is more to life than the fake sky painted above them.

Quotes

“The idea hit Neverfell like a fist...It was a good idea, a brilliant idea, perhaps the best she had ever had, better than the mangle-cheese-turner. But it seemed unfair that it should have occurred to her now, just when she was enjoying the thought of Master Grandible being pleased with her. She deserved to feel that happiness a little longer. But no, now she had the idea and the idea had her. She gnawed her fingers, and the idea gnawed her, and she knew she was going to do what it wanted,” (Hardinge 34).

This reveals a lot about the main character, Neverfell. She has an extremely active imagination and thought process, but since her whole life has been spent in the cheese tunnels, it has left her naive and always trying to achieve her Master's approval. Neverfell is not a tragic main character, she has an understanding that she too deserves good things in her life, even if so

much of it has been spent with Master Grandible and the cheese. Above all, Neverfell is extremely loyal to the people she cares about, and just the general well-being of others. This is sometimes to a fault, which throughout the novel does cause issues for her.

“Left-Eye Grand Steward always did things for reasons, and Right-Eye could usually even remember what they were, but they made no sense to him. It was like trying to decipher pictures scrawled by a madman...It was as if the two halves of his mind were drifting further apart with time, and losing any ability to understand each other. Nowadays, on the rare occasions when both were awake, it felt as if there were two people crammed into his skull, and his left hand sometimes made strange gestures without explanation,” (Hardinge 164).

Given that the Grand Stewardess is the all-mighty being that controls all of Caverna, this is foreshadowing for just how broken a seemingly perfect system actually is. The ruler himself can not keep himself straight, and is so old that only one half of him can be awake at all times. This also allows for further treachery and division within the court, which ends up aiding Neverfell when she wins the favor of Left-Eye. This also serves as a parallel for Neverfell, who struggles with the half of herself that she can not seem to reach, and the part of her that is left a little ambiguous due to her childhood hidden away without contact. In differing manners, being out of touch serves Neverfell to see the world clearly, but jades the Grand Stewardess, making him insecure and never trusting anyone wholly. This fighting with their half-selves eventually serves in Neverfell’s favor and the Grand Stewardess’ demise.

“Everything will be fine. Trust yourself. The handwriting was her own,” (Hardinge 436).

After an entire 400 pages of being unsure and self-doubting after realizing how different she was from others in Caverna, this is the climax for Neverfell, and the person who ends up saving her is herself. Even with her lost memory from her childhood and her more recently lost

memory in this part of the novel, for the first time Neverfell does not require memory to trust her success. Allowing herself to trust herself fully completes her character arc of a child requiring the approval of others, especially those she admires, to knowing she has the approval of herself. This final act of courage allows her to successfully defeat those trying to keep secrets from the people of Caverna, and allow all of them to escape to the overworld.

Why Should Teens Read this Book?

This book is fit for readers in late elementary school onward, though the writing may start to be more digestible in middle school. I myself struggled a bit to keep up with the whimsical wordplay and varying use of proper nouns. Teens should read this book to expose them to fanatical writing that isn't as streamlined as what they might be used to. More so, I think the world-building and alternate universe can bring in readers who find themselves bored with books. This novel can also be encouraging for students that have a scattered sense of self, and learn the power they can draw from not knowing everything about themselves yet.

How it Fits Into *Adolescents and the Search for Meaning* chapters

1. Identity, Struggle and Decisions

- a. Neverfell is full of all three of these things, and she is able to grow from being unsure of herself within these aspects to a well-rounded character that uses her past mistakes to become better.

2. Courage and Survival

- a. Neverfell does not know it, but she has been in survival mode since she was 5. Before in the cheese tunnels, Grandible protected her, but once she escapes it takes her own courage to keep her alive.

3. Myth

- a. A bit of Myth, given the making of Caverna and its position on the flip-side of the land that we walk on. A lot of the plot is also based off an alternate reality in this underworld, where things like wine that makes you hear music is made.

In the Classroom

For teaching the book, I would start presenting to the class with zero emotion before trying to act out a Face shift like described in the book. When doing this, I would challenge the students to remain with a singular look on their face, and have them discuss the difficulty of this, and implore them to describe some of the Faces they most often use. For an activity, I would try to tap into the imagery of the book and describe one of the delicacies that the artisans make in the novel, whether that be a cheese, wine, or oil. Then, I would encourage students to discuss their own delicacies they could make and what special properties they would have. For a longer project, the students would have to add art to their descriptions, and make a model or drawing of their own delicacy or one from the novel.

Quantitative

Lexile: 920L

AR: 6.6, 12+ years, 23 points

Readability: Ages 12+

Qualitative

The story is in first-person point of view with minimal perspective shifts, though there are some gaps in knowledge due to the narrator's memory loss. The fanatical world building and whimsical language can be a bit hard to get into at first, and may confuse the reader when first beginning the novel. With time, Hardinge does well in weaving in the mystical aspects of the novel to become key plot points, aiding readers in what their use is, and helping them understand

the world of the characters. The setting being in an underground alternate universe can also prove difficult to follow at first, but intense imagery and description aid the reader, especially when read through the first person point of view.