

Teaching Resources

CREATIVE WRITING INSPIRED BY THE MAGIC OF NATURE
FOR AGES 9+

Inspire children to practise creative writing skills with one of the best storytellers writing today: Kiran Millwood Hargrave. The activities included are for use alongside *In the Shadow of the Wolf Queen*, the first book in Kiran's new Geomancer series. They are suitable for literacy or library sessions.

World-building inspired by Nature | The Magic of Trees
Objects from the Natural World | Creating Nature-Conscious Characters

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Introduction

About the Book

*In the lakes, the wolf queen sharpens her spear.
In the mountains, the ancient girl opens an eye.
In the forest, an orphan is summoned by the trees.
Our story has begun . . .*

Ysolda has lived her life in the shadow of the wolf queen's tyrannical rule but, safe in her forest haven, she has never truly felt its threat.

Until one day when a mysterious earthquake shakes the land and her older sister Hari vanishes in its wake.

Accompanied by her loyal sea hawk, Nara, Ysolda embarks on a desperate rescue mission. But when she is forced to strike a bargain with the wolf queen herself, she soon finds herself embroiled in a quest for a magic more powerful – and more dangerous – than she could ever have imagined . . .



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Theme 2 – Listening to the Trees

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Activity: Develop a character by describing the contents of their pockets.

Further Activities



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Theme 1: Creating a World

Extract 1:

It woke the world the way wind wakes air.

Where once things were still, now they stirred. The trees of Glaw Wood took up a lazy swaying, straining their roots as if to walk. The birds took off from the branches and made shapes like flung silk in the sky, and in the mulch of the cool, wet dirt the ants trailed determinedly away.

In the cold salt-and-dark water of the Tarath Seas the whales heaved their bodies from the waves, the sharks sank to the sea-bed, and the stingrays flew from the water, bodies like spinning blades. In the cloud-strewn Drakken Peaks, the earth-old rocks rippled like water and shook the snow from their summits. Beneath the tidal heave and pull of the hidden meridian, in the halls of the dead the spirits paced like caged tigers, rootless.

In a castle built of broken boats, a wolf queen sharpened her spear. In the hall that was once his fortress, a rebel lord buried his wife. In the mountains, an ancient girl opened her cobwebbed eye, and flexed her stone-clad fingers with sounds like dropped pebbles.

The earth music had begun, and they must make ready.

- Prologue

Discussion Questions:

- How does Kiran Millwood Hargrave use language to give a feeling of movement or change in the world she describes? Pick out key words or phrases.
- What sort of atmosphere is created in this extract? How?
- In what ways do you get the sense that the natural world is acting as a warning for what is to come? Make a list of ways in which the natural world is sending a message.
- What can we infer about each of the characters introduced here from their descriptions: a wolf queen, a rebel lord, an ancient girl?
- Can you make any predictions about what might happen to these characters?
- What do you think 'earth music' might be?
- What is your favourite example of descriptive language in this extract? Why?
- How do you feel as a reader having read this opening page?



Theme 1: Creating a World

Activity: A Mood Board for a Story

In an interview with *The Bookseller*, Kiran Millwood Hargrave spoke about her world-building for the Geomancer series.

The world-building is grounded in artefacts and place,” Hargrave tells me. A visit to the Welsh rainforest, a microclimate just south of Snowdonia, inspired the location. “It had the most amazing array of moss and fungi, trees that feel spindly and delicate for Wales. It all felt uncertain and mysterious, with a fine mist in the air. I knew that it was the perfect setting for a story.” She collected images of artefacts, including a ring that transforms into an astrolabe and, later, a golden torque from the British Museum’s Stonehenge exhibition. This became the visual for Seren the Wolf Queen, who rules from an extraordinary castle made of broken boats.

- Interview with *The Bookseller*, June 2023

1. Choose a real place as inspiration for a creative setting of your own. Like Kiran Millwood Hargrave, try to focus on a place with distinctive natural elements (i.e. an ‘amazing array of moss and fungi, trees that feel spindly and delicate.’). This might be a place in your local area, or a place you’ve visited on holiday, or even a place that you feel a special connection to through seeing photographs.
2. Create a mood board to help you to visualise the setting for your story in your imagination. Start by cutting out and collecting pictures (you can cut out pictures from magazines, newspapers, travel brochures, postcards, photos, patterned paper or greetings cards.) Use Activity Sheet 1 to organise your pictures to ensure that you get a good balance of ideas.
3. Think about the atmosphere different pictures create and how you want your fictional world to look and feel. Are there any colours you associate with your story? What season is your story set in? What are the feelings and emotions you want to evoke?

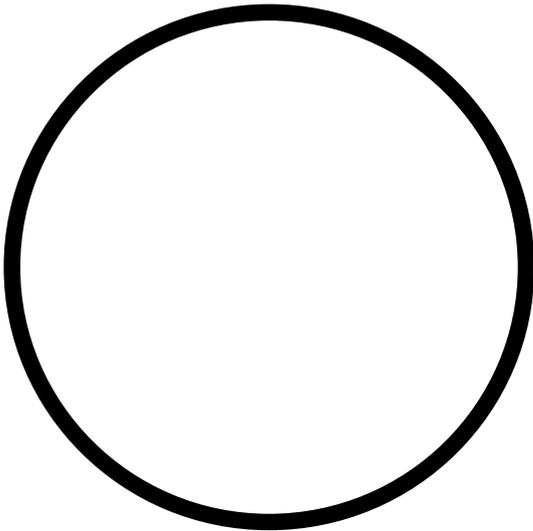
When you feel you’ve got enough images, arrange them together to make your mood board. Stick them down on a large sheet of A3 cardboard. Share your mood boards with your classmates.



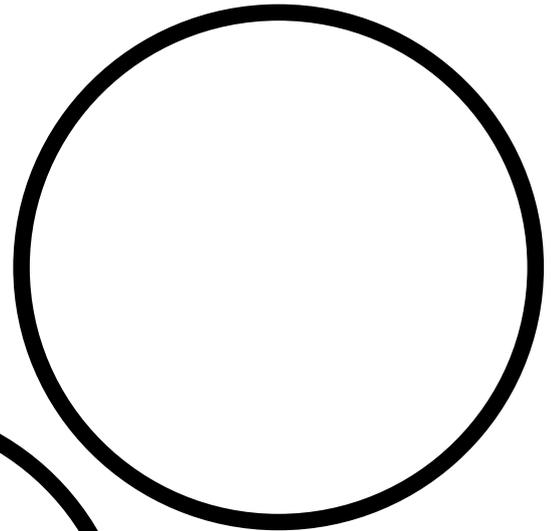
Theme 1: Creating a World

Activity Sheet 1

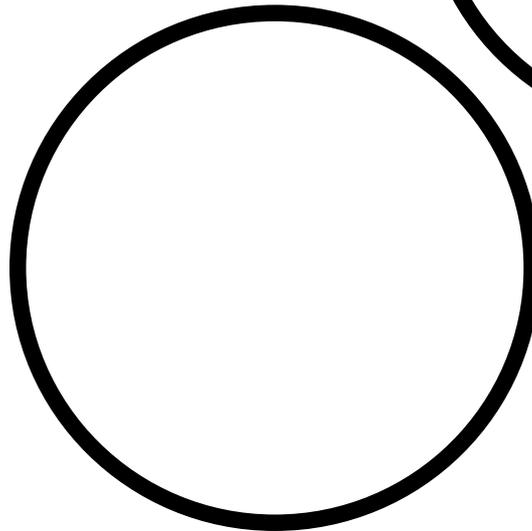
TREES/PLANTS



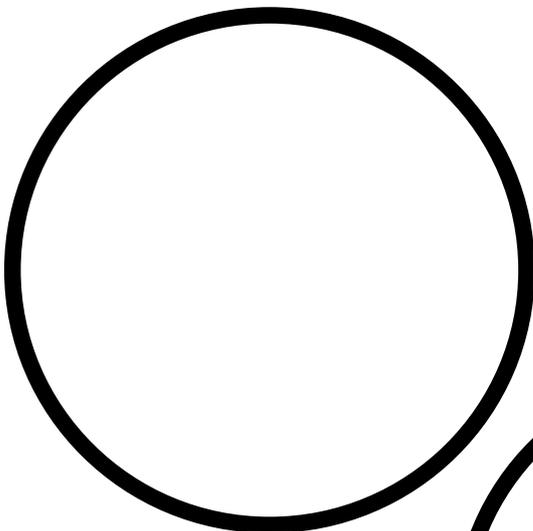
ARTEFACTS/MAPS



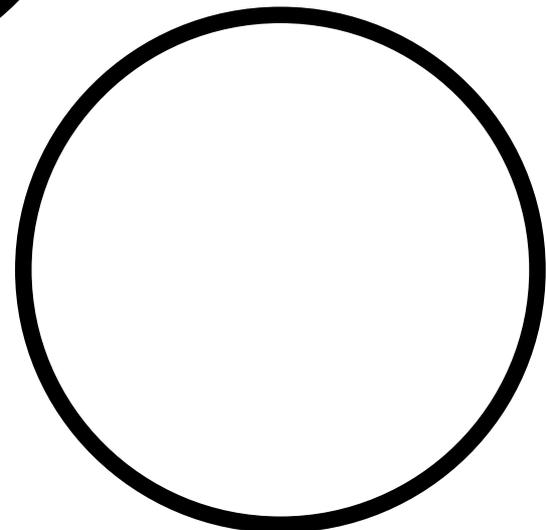
PEOPLE



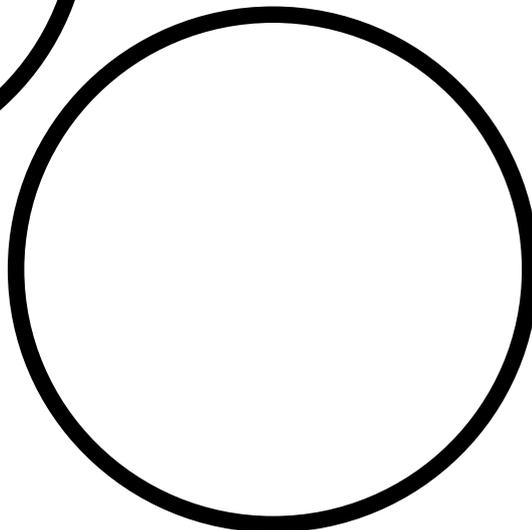
WEATHER



ANIMALS



PLACES



SCAN ME

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Theme 2: The Language of Trees

Extract 2:

The hawk snapped her beak as she glided past, cuffing Ysolda's cheek lightly with her speckled feathers, but obeyed. She knew not to make a fuss when Ysolda was attempting to listen.

Ysolda closed her eye again and pressed the amulet tighter to her chest. She tried to block out Nara's huffy chitter, the sparrow's continued panic, and focused on the forest again, straining to hear the water below her, the trees sharing space and eras and passing knowledge between them like blood. Hari said it was all there, all the time.

They're not speaking words. You can put our words to what they say – 'follow', 'down', 'here' – but they don't reach for what is actually meant. It's instinct that truly passes through you when you're listening, a feeling. Words aren't enough, like 'hunger', like 'love'. They fall short. You don't have to be special to hear: you only have to listen.

It was easy for her to say, with her milk-white skin and bronze eyes. Ysolda knew better than to judge by appearances, but if anyone were asked to imagine what a special person who could hear trees looked like, they would think of someone like Hari. So when her sister said listening could be learned, Ysolda didn't really believe her.

Crunch. Crunch.

- Chapter 1

Discussion Questions:

- What is the setting of the story? And what role does the setting play in the story?
- Who is Nara? What is Ysolda's relationship with Nara? Pick out evidence from the text.
- What does Ysolda press 'tighter to her chest'? Why?
- Ysolda is trying to listen. What is she trying to listen to?
- If trees do not speak 'our words', how is it possible to understand what they say?
- How does Kiran Millwood Hargrave share the sights and sounds of the forest? Pick out key words and descriptive phrases.
- Who is Hari? What is 'easy' for Hari, according to Ysolda?
- How would you describe the atmosphere created by Kiran Millwood Hargrave in the opening chapter of the story?
- What do you learn about Ysolda from this extract? How would you describe her, her hopes, dreams, and fears?



Theme 2: The Language of Trees

Activity: Tree Poems

1. Like Ysolda in Chapter One, practise the art of listening to the trees. You might imagine that you are in Glaw Wood, or you could even choose a tree of your own – either in your garden, a local green space, or your school grounds.

Use activity sheet 2 to note down the different ‘feelings’ that pass through you as you sit and listen. If you prefer to draw or create collages to show your experience, then this might be a good way to record the ‘instinct that truly passes through you when you’re listening.’

2. Use poetic language to describe a tree of your choice; it can be one in your garden, in a local park or green space, or even in your school grounds. Find out what type of tree it is – i.e. is it an Alder like the Elder Alder, a Birch, a Rowan, an Oak or another type of tree? Use the prompts below to help you describe your tree. Make a note of any words and ideas as they come to you.

- Are there any elements of the tree that stand out to you? Draw them.
- What colours can you see?
- Can you think of any adjectives to describe the tree?
- What about some expressive verbs to describe the way it moves?
- What might you compare its movement to?
- How would you describe the appearance and texture of the tree?
- What does it remind you of?
- What do the tree’s branches resemble?
- Can you think of any similes or metaphors to describe the tree?

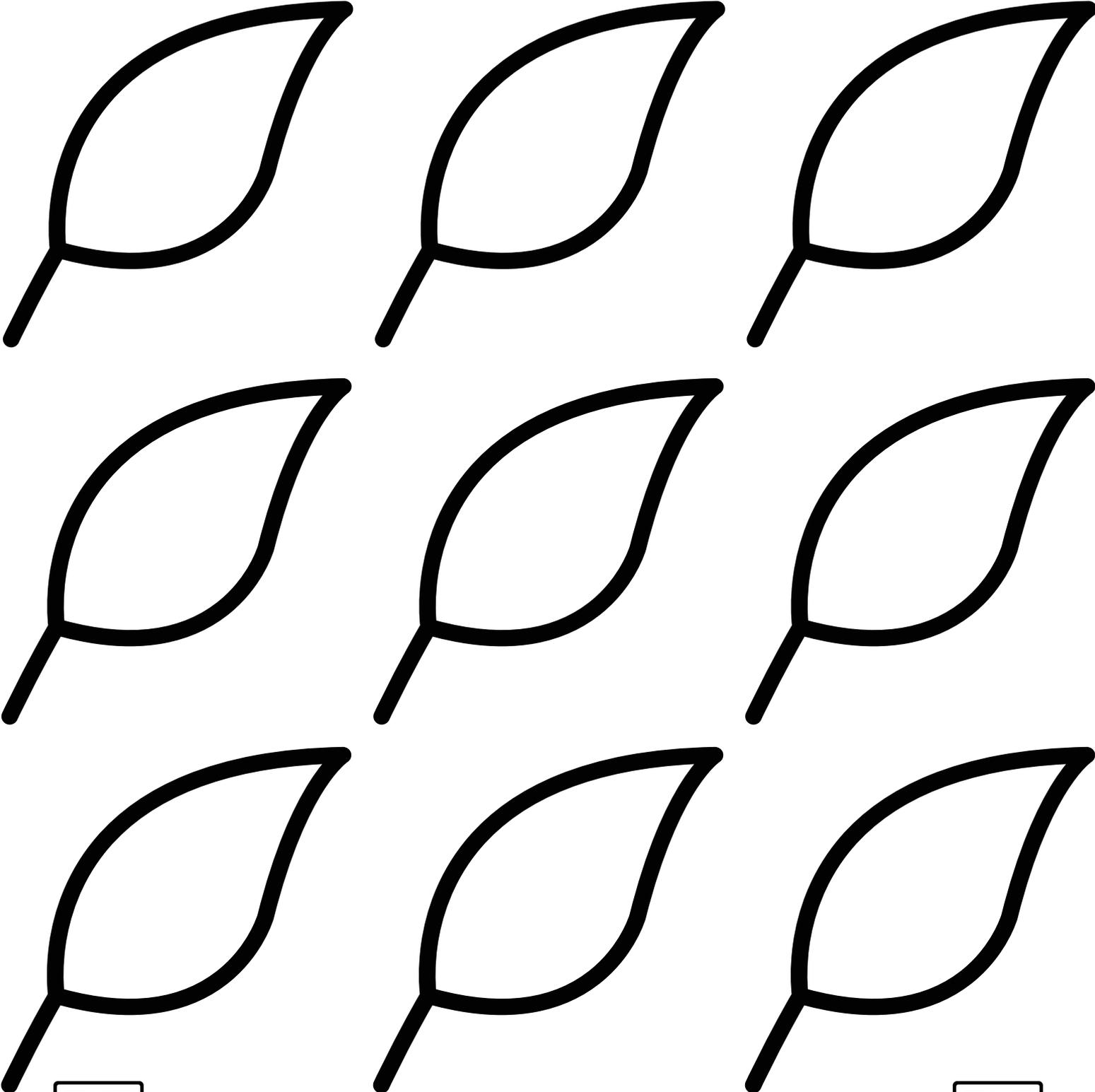
You could also think about time periods it has lived through and what emotions it evokes in you. Try to be as creative as you can and expand your ideas using poetic language. For example, Kiran Millwood Hargreave describes the trees taking up ‘**lazy swaying, straining their roots as if to walk**’; while in Chapter One, Ysolda sits ‘beneath **the deep copper fire** of the Elder Alder.’

3. Use your notes to write a poem about your tree. Don’t worry too much about structure or rhyme, focus on using descriptive language to create a strong image for the reader. You can write about the tree in third person, or you could write from the point of view of the tree itself. You could even write your poem in the shape of your chosen tree to create a shape poem.



Theme 2: The Language of Trees

Activity Sheet 2



SCAN ME

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SCAN ME

Theme 3: Inside Ysolda's Pockets

Extract 3:

Ysolda felt in her pocket for the amber amulet. Perhaps this was the moment, as she was poised on the edge of a perilous journey, that the alder would deign to talk to her. She felt her obsidian blade in its protective rabbit skin, but no amulet. She checked her other pocket, and came up with only rosehips.

Kneeling, Ysolda emptied her pockets, peering through the darkness at the objects laid before her. Obsidian blade, slingshot, striking flint, gut thread she had been using to play with Sorrell that morning. Flakes of bark from her shoulder plate, that Nara had chipped away and Ysolda had absent-mindedly kept. Her heart began to thud in her ears, and she upturned the calfskin pouch on her belt. More rosehips, some hawthorn leaves, a moss-wrapped shrew's skull she'd liked for its pristine whiteness, now coated in the filth of the bog. But no amber amulet.

'Roots,' she hissed, frantic now, patting down her clothes, checking and rechecking her neck, her wrists, unbuckling her borrowed boots to check even her ankles. When had she last held it? Here, earlier. Could she have lost it in the bog?

But no, there was later, wasn't there? When she'd held it in her hand by the edge of the Rhyg, held it out to show—

'That beast!'

The stranger, the girl. She'd shown it to her, and now it was gone. Ysolda had already been certain she was a thief, and now Hari's amulet was missing. That creature had taken it. Faintly, Ysolda remembered the girl helping her up, brushing against her side. In her dazed state, Ysolda hadn't noticed the lift but now it was obvious. Her jaw ached as she clenched her teeth. What a fool she was, for showing a known enemy their most precious possession.

- Chapter 7

Discussion Questions:

- What does Ysolda 'hope' will happen when she searches in her pockets?
- How does Ysolda feel when she can't find the amulet? How do you know?
- What does the amulet mean to Ysolda? Why?
- How do the objects in Ysolda's pockets show Ysolda's connection to the natural world around her?
- Which object of Ysolda's are you most intrigued by? Why?
- If you could ask Ysolda some questions about her objects, what would you ask?
- Why does Ysolda's 'heart [begin] to thud in her ears'?
- Who does Ysolda believe has taken the amulet?
- How does Ysolda feel about the thief? How can you tell? Pick out key words and phrases.



Theme 3: Inside Ysolda's Pockets

Activity: Empty your Characters Pockets

Objects can play a fundamental role in a story. They can reveal something about a character or help to move the story along.

1. Ysolda has several different objects inside her pockets. For each object, write a description or definition, its potential uses, and what the object tells you about Ysolda's character. Use Activity Sheet 3 to help you record your ideas. You might also want to include a sketch of each object.

2. Imagine a character of your own; one who is as nature-conscious and comfortable in the wild outdoors as Ysolda. Complete this exercise again but for your own character. Create a list of at least three objects that would be in your character's pockets. What would each of these objects reveal about your character? How would they show your character's connection to the natural world?

3. Ysolda's most treasured object, the amber amulet, is missing. The amulet is crucial to her; not only does it represent her close relationship with her sister, but it also serves as the key to her being able to listen to the trees in the forest.

Which object would be missing from your character's pockets? Why? What impact would this have on your character? Try to describe this important object in the style of Kiran Millwood Hargrave on pages 57–58 (shown on Activity Sheet 4). Use the writing frame on Activity Sheet 4 to help you.



Theme 3: Inside Ysolda's Pockets

Activity Sheet 3:

OBJECT	DESCRIPTION/ DEFINITION	USES	WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT YSOLDA
Obsidian blade			
Slingshot			
Striking flint			
Gut thread			
Flakes of bark			
Rosehips			
Hawthorn leaves			
Shrew's skull			
Amber amulet (missing)			



Theme 3: Inside Ysolda's Pockets

Extract 4:

That amulet is like a key to time, holding the past in its depths. It was formed from the first trees of our forest and contains all its wisdom – all its histories, all its futures. It's like holding a piece of starlight: ancient and vital. It must never leave the forest – it is its heartbeat, its pulse.

- Chapter 7

Use this writing frame to help:

*That **[insert object]** is like a key to ,
..... . It was formed from
..... and contains
It's like holding It must never
..... – it is*



Further Activities:

- Use musical instruments, objects, and your singing voices to create the 'earth music' described in 'Wakening' on pages 1–2 of the book. Experiment with the tone and atmosphere of your piece. How can you convey the power of the music? What feelings are you trying to evoke in your listeners?
- Look at the map at the start of the book. Can you track Ysolda's route in the story? Create a map for a world from your own imagination.
- Consider Ysolda's relationship with Nara, her loyal sea hawk-friend. What animal-friend would you choose as a companion for an adventure?
- In Chapter 4, Ysolda's home is destroyed by an earthquake. Describe the natural processes that occur in the build-up to an earthquake by creating an infographic with diagrams and descriptions. You might want to use a recent, real-life example.
- Plot Ysolda's emotions throughout the book on an emotions graph. At any significant points on the graph, record important events that take place or have an impact on Ysolda's feelings.
- In Chapter 7 we learn that: 'each of the villagers had a twin tree, a seed from the Elder Alder planted the day they were born.' Sketch what you imagine your own twin tree would look like. Design the Ogham symbol that would be carved into its trunk.
- Create an inventory of the different types of trees that stand in your garden or local green space (e.g. Alder, Birch, Oak, Rowan, Ash, Sycamore, Beech). Note down any important facts that you find about each tree – for example, what they need to grow and thrive. Which trees are endangered and where? Why? What can we do to protect our trees?
- Collect some fallen leaves on a local walk and use them to create a piece of artwork inspired by the book. Try out a variety of colours, materials (e.g. crayons, oil pastels, coloured pencils), and surfaces (e.g. tracing paper, wax paper, tin foil). Explore the structure of the leaves while you are creating your collage. Can you identify the trees that the leaves have fallen from?
- Consider how the book is a celebration of the natural world and a reminder of the natural world's power. As you read, find examples of both.
- Imagine you are a costume designer for a film or stage production of the book. Choose a scene and a character and design a costume using modern materials for that character. You might choose the Wolf Queen herself, when Ysolda sees her for the first time in Chapter 14. Label your designs with Kiran Millwood Hargrave's descriptions. You could even act out your chosen scene with a group of classmates!
- Create a Relationships Map to show the different connections and relationships between characters in the story. Which relationships are positive and which are negative? Which relationships are built on love? Why is the theme of love so important in the book?
- The three books of the Geomancer trilogy will draw on themes of nature– mainly trees, rocks and fungi. Write a title for the second and third books in the Geomancer series along with a list of predictions for what might happen. If you could create a nature-led series of three books, what would you base each one around?

