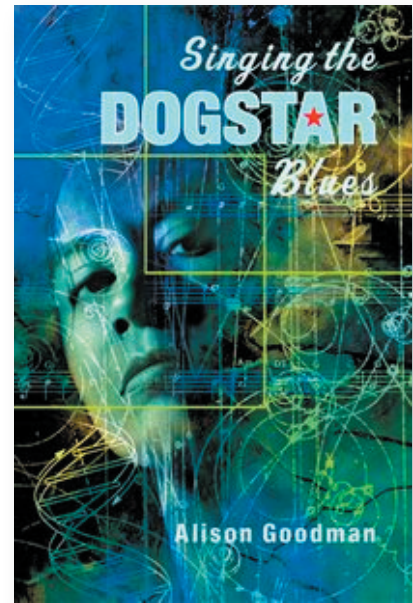


## TEACHER'S NOTES

*prepared by Nancy Mortimer*



*Singing the Dogstar Blues* by Alison Goodman is an innovative Young Adult text which is well-written and exciting yet challenging. From the beginning the reader is introduced into a very different world that is fascinating and full of action, suspense and conspiracies. Joss, the protagonist who tells the story, is a fiercely independent female student attending university and has been accepted into the prestigious Centre for Neo-Historical Studies, where students learn how to time-jump. The Chorians, an alien people, wish to exchange the technology they have in the field of time and space with the Centre's knowledge of time-travel. A deputation from Choria brings their chosen candidate, Mavkel, to pair with a suitable student at the Centre to do the course. Joss is chosen and the story unfolds through her eyes.

Written in a chatty style, this unusual, fast-paced science fiction thriller will attract a cross section of readers in the middle and senior years of school. It will also appeal to both sexes.

*Singing the Dogstar Blues* is a complex novel that will initiate much thought, classroom discussion and opportunities for looking at and exercising the craft of writing.

The intricacies of this novel are best dealt with by asking pertinent questions ...

### CHARACTERS

- Do a pen sketch of Joss, outlining her main attributes. Write about her background and parents, What is her relationship with her mother?
- Put yourself in Joss's place and write in your private diary how you feel about your mother.

- How did Joss come into being? What about other students at the university? What has this led to in students' relations with each other?
- Why is Joss special? Who and what is important to Joss? Give an account of her life and lifestyle. What strategies has she adopted to cope with her life?
- Describe Chorian characteristics – how they speak, communicate, how they display emotions, think and operate. Write about some of their customs and what is important to them. Relate how their society is structured.
- What does Mavkel look like? Describe his physical appearance, his behaviour and habits. Why was he almost an outcast in his own society? Why was he chosen as the one to come to earth?
- What is Joss's relationship with Mav?
- Explain the importance of: Joss's father, Louise, Lewis, Joss's mother, Hartpury, Refmol, Lenny.
- Do a pen-portrait of Camden-Stone. What is Joss's relationship with Camden-Stone? Why? Why is he so driven?
- Who was Daniel Sunawa-Harrod?

#### LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- Look at the way words are used in the novel. Comment. List words that are used unusually or that are acceptable only within the context of the story. Say what this use of language contributes to the overall effect of the story.
- How did Joss get into university?
- How do the students doing the course with Joss behave towards each other? Give some examples.
- How are partners chosen for time-jumping?
- Who are Chorians?
- Describe how Joss was chosen as Mavkel's partner. Why was the choosing of Joss so significant?
- What did the Chorians hope to gain from interacting with people on Earth? What did Earth get in return?
- What is the Dogstar?
- Where does the title of the book come from?
- Describe the sort of society Joss lives in. Would you like to live in it?
- How is society organised in Joss's world?
- How is society organised in Mavkel's world?

## PLOT

You have just read *Singing the Dogstar Blues*; your friend wants to know a good book to read. Briefly give an outline of the story, touching on the ingredients which make it a 'good read'.

## SETTING

- Where is the novel set? When is it set?
- What sort of world is the book set in?
- How does Joss's world work?
- The novel is set in the future with the ability to travel in time. What is involved in time-travelling? Write how this has a direct bearing on the story.
- What were Joss's living quarters like?
- How did Mavkel's differ? Why?
- What are some of the things that show this is a different world from ours? Make a list of these.

## STYLE

- *Singing the Dogstar Blues* is written in the first person. Look at the effect of this form. What are the advantages? Are there any disadvantages?
- Describe the style or voice used in the novel.
- How do we learn about Joss's background?
- Look at instances of graphic description in the story. Say what makes the passages you choose vivid.

## STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

- Look at the construction of the story – the way in which it is written. How does the opening, for example, grab the reader's attention?
- What are the elements of good writing?
- The book is arranged in chapters with headings. Comment on these.
- Determine what devices the author employs to make the story flow.

## MUSIC

- Music is extremely important in a lot of cultures. Look at the part music plays in the story.
- Write about the importance of Joss's 'harp' to her. What role does music play in Mavkel's world? What about in Joss's world?
- How important is music in our world? Write about how you feel about music.

- A lot of work has been done on how music can heal. Do some research on this and state some instances of this occurring.

#### HUMOUR

- How is humour introduced into the story?
- What are some of the ingredients that make the story amusing?

#### GENRE

- What category would this story fit into? Give reasons for your answer.

#### GENDER STUDIES

Many of the main characters are female.

- Look at what roles females play in the book where you might have expected the person in that particular job to be male. What is the effect of this on the overall novel?
- Look at the importance of Mavkel choosing a pronoun for himself once he gleans how our society operates.
- How does Joss explain sexual partners to Mavkel? What does it show you about this subject?

#### PHILOSOPHY

*The universe does not work to our time or convenience (page 56).*

- Discuss

*Everything you do has consequences.*

- Do you agree?
- What is Lenny's philosophy on life? Show how it influences Joss.
- What is Joss's philosophy?

#### TIME

Time is a fascinating subject.

- Reflect on it and say why you think it is so important.
- Look at the part time plays in the novel and write about its significance.
- What part does it play in our lives?
- Think of other books you have read which deal with time and list them, stating what part the concept of time played in them.

#### ENDING

What happens at the end of *Singing the Dogstar Blues*? How did you react?

## POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

There are numerous concepts arising from *Singing the Dogstar Blues* which can be used as springboards for class discussion: partners, pairing, contrasts, classes, conflicts, feelings, identity, elders, aliens, AIDS, independence, sharing, trust, fear, violence, drugs, control – are just some of these.

## AUTHOR'S MESSAGES

What are some of the messages Alison Goodman is able to get across to the reader through her writing?

## POINTS TO TALK AND WRITE ABOUT

- Chorian society is used to show us something about ourselves. *Discuss.*
- What is time-jumping all about? Write a piece of your own using this concept.
- Explain 'joining' within the context of the novel.
- What are some of the things that Mav has difficulty understanding in his new world?
- Write a critique of *Singing the Dogstar Blues* for the local paper, looking at what makes this a gripping story.
- Alison Goodman writes poignantly so that we are involved with the characters and we feel moved by what happens to them. Look at some instances when you felt for Mavkel, Joss or another character in the story. How was this achieved by the author?
- Explain what 'bloodlines' are. What is the significance of bloodlines for Mav and the Chorians? Are they important for Joss?
- Do some research on other peoples and state what importance bloodlines are in that society. Are they important in our society?
- Write about a day in Joss's life compared with your life.
- What do you consider are some advancements in Joss's world? What are some things that you would not like to have to contend with in your life?
- How does this novel make us think about our world and where we're going?