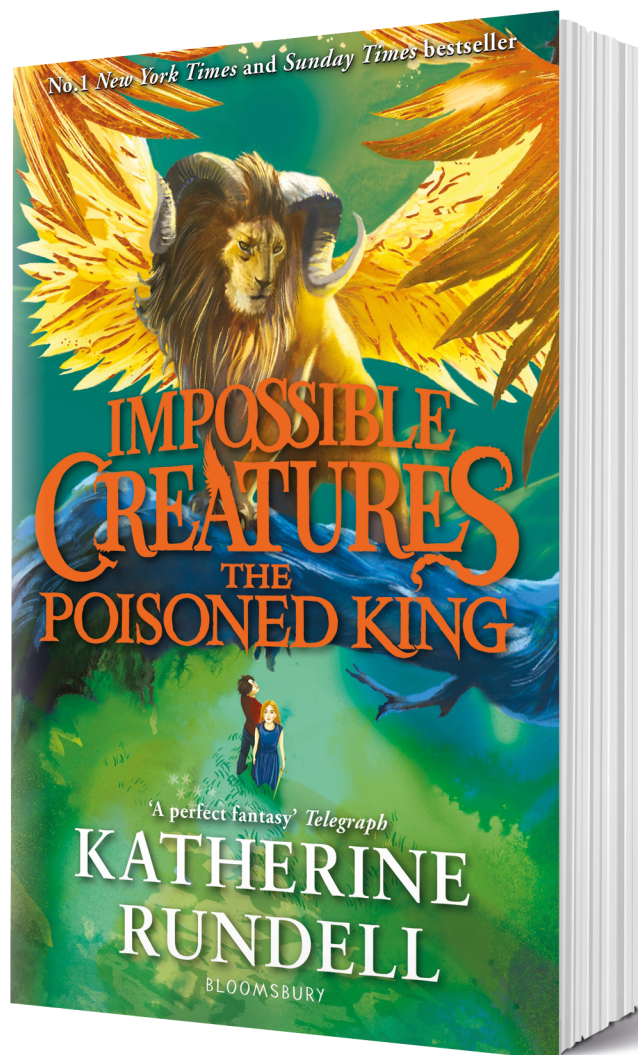


IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES THE POISONED KING

KATHERINE RUNDELL

ABOUT THE BOOK



Return to the magic of the Archipelago ...
***The Poisoned King* is the dazzling second book in Katherine Rundell's epic and bestselling Impossible Creatures series.**

When Christopher Forrester is unexpectedly woken by a miniature dragon chewing on his face, his heart leaps for joy. For months he's dreamed of returning to the Archipelago – the secret islands where all the creatures of myth still live. But he did not know it would involve a rescue mission on the back of a sphinx, or a plan to enter a dragon's lair. Nor did he imagine it would involve a girl with a flock of birds at her side, a new-hatched chick in her pocket and a ravenous hunger for justice ...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Rundell is a multi-million-bestselling author whose novels for children have won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Blue Peter Book Award and the Costa Children's Book Award, among many others. *Impossible Creatures* was Waterstones Book of the Year 2023, and in 2024 Katherine was named the British Book Awards Author of the Year and *Impossible Creatures* won the Children's Fiction Book of the Year. She is a Quondam Fellow of All Souls College and a Fellow of St Catherine's College, Oxford, where she works on Renaissance literature. Her books for adults include *Super-Infinite*, winner of the Baillie Gifford Prize. Very occasionally she goes climbing across the rooftops of Oxford, late at night.

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Teaching resources suitable for ages 9+

Explore themes of: ✓ Mythical creatures ✓ Friendship ✓ Freedom ✓ Revenge ✓ Justice

Subject Checklist: ✓ English ✓ PSHE ✓ Citizenship

The activities included here are suitable for the classroom or library sessions.

CONTENTS

FOCUS ONE – PRINCESS ANYA

Activities: Label a diagram to show how people see Anya and how she feels inside.

Objectives: Make inferences about a character from details stated and implied.

FOCUS TWO – JUSTICE VERSUS REVENGE

Activities: Discuss the difference between justice and revenge.

Objectives: Begin to explore the underlying themes of the novel; express thoughts and justify opinions clearly.

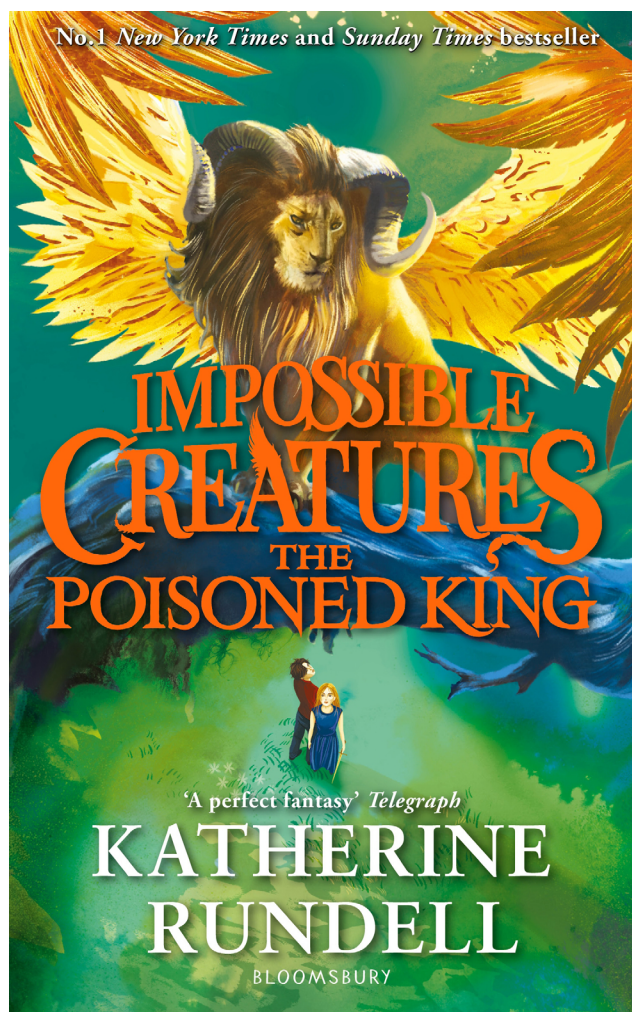
FURTHER ACTIVITY IDEAS

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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES



Book Cover Discussion Questions:

- What do you like about the front cover? How does it draw you in?
- What do you notice about the creature at the top of the cover? Do you think it is friendly or unfriendly? Why?
- What colours has the cover designer chosen to use for the front cover? What do you think these colours might suggest about the setting or themes of the novel?
- Can you make any inferences about the main characters in the novel based on the front cover?
- What does the title *The Poisoned King* make you wonder?
- Can you predict what might happen in the story?



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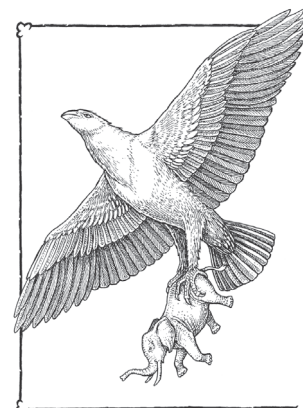
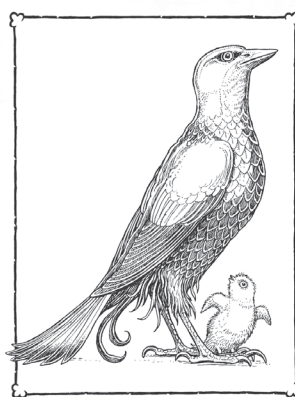
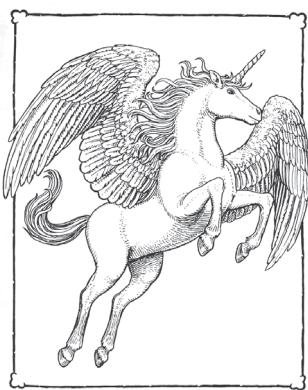
EPIGRAPH PROMPT

An epigraph is a short quotation or saying at the beginning of a book. Have a read of the two epigraphs at the start *The Poisoned King*. What do you think these epigraphs might suggest about the characters, plot and themes of the story?

BLURB PROMPTS

One of the creatures pictured below has a very close relationship with a main character in the story. Which one do you think it might be? Read the blurb on the back of the book to give you a clue!

The novel is set on 'the secret islands where all the creatures of myth still live'. The creatures pictured below all feature in the novel. Can you match each creature with the statement you think describes it?



This creature is capable of extraordinary and lasting love. Its regard is hard-won, but once gained, it is gained for life.

This is a hybrid creature that moves in herds. When not in flight, it is happiest in the ocean.

When it grows old, this creature builds a small bonfire and catches fire. From the ashes rises a new, young, creature.

This enormous creature was first found in Persia. Its wings can grow as long as fifteen metres.

Turn to the back of the book and read *The Guardian's Bestiary* to find the answers!

If you've read Book One in the Impossible Creatures series, which mythical creatures in *The Guardian's Bestiary* do you recognise and which ones do you think are new to the series?

Which creatures are you most looking forward to meeting in the story?

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FOCUS ONE: PRINCESS ANYA

Read this extract from pages 33–34

What had been ‘done about it’, despite Anya’s furious fight, was that she and her father had been forced to leave the forest and move to the castle.

‘It might not be that bad,’ her father had said.

It was worse. Here she was trained in the things that they said a princess must be trained in: diplomacy, dance, deportment, etiquette, historiography, cartography, geography. She grew to loathe anything that ended in ‘-ography’.

At first she fought. When the mistress came for her etiquette classes, she found that her young charge had climbed out of the window. When Anya was required to talk to heads of state, she flushed violently up to her forehead and stared at the floor. But eventually, they won.

‘They’ll never let us go back to the forest,’ Gallia said, ‘until you prove that you can do it.’

So Anya became, gradually, a perfect princess. She walked so that it looked like she was gliding. She danced waltzes, and spent an hour a day sitting at her backboard to perfect her posture, her feet pointed and crossed at the ankle. She was drilled in charm by a professor from Lithia. She learned the twenty-one official smiles and the five approved laughs: delighted, amused, polite, warning and repressive. She was taught sentences to repeat: How kind of you to come. Have you travelled far? Isn’t it beautiful weather?

The King was pleased but he did not let her return to the forest. ‘She’s an asset to us now,’ he said. ‘She must stay.’

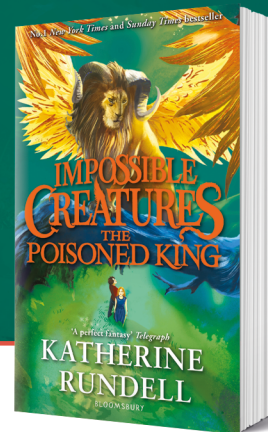
When Anya thought ahead to her life as an adult, she saw a long tunnel of processions and handshaking and waving. Then she would turn away, and kiss Gallia particularly violently. There had to be a way out, but she could not see it.

Everywhere she went, she was watched – by governesses, advisors, councillors, waiting staff. She was not a person here; she was the future, to be moulded, surveilled. She met almost no other children; the cooks’ boys and the scribes’ girls were forbidden to play with her. The castle was vast, but the eyes on her made it feel small.

She missed her father like a daily ache; he was here in the castle, but was kept so busy he could barely escape to find her for half an hour a day. When he could, he brought her gifts: a phoenix feather, biscuits to share with the gaganas, and once, three precious stalks of their rascovnic. ‘Keep them safe, Anya.’

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Would you like to live in Argen Castle like Anya? Why or why not?
2. How is Anya's life in the castle different to her life in the forest?
3. Can you define the words 'etiquette', 'asset' and 'surveilled'?
4. Why do you think Anya's grandfather, the King, wants her to live in the castle?
5. What is your impression of the King from the story so far?
6. What does Anya see when she looks ahead to her life as an adult? How do you think this makes her feel?
What kind of future do you think Anya would prefer? What might she hope for and dream of?



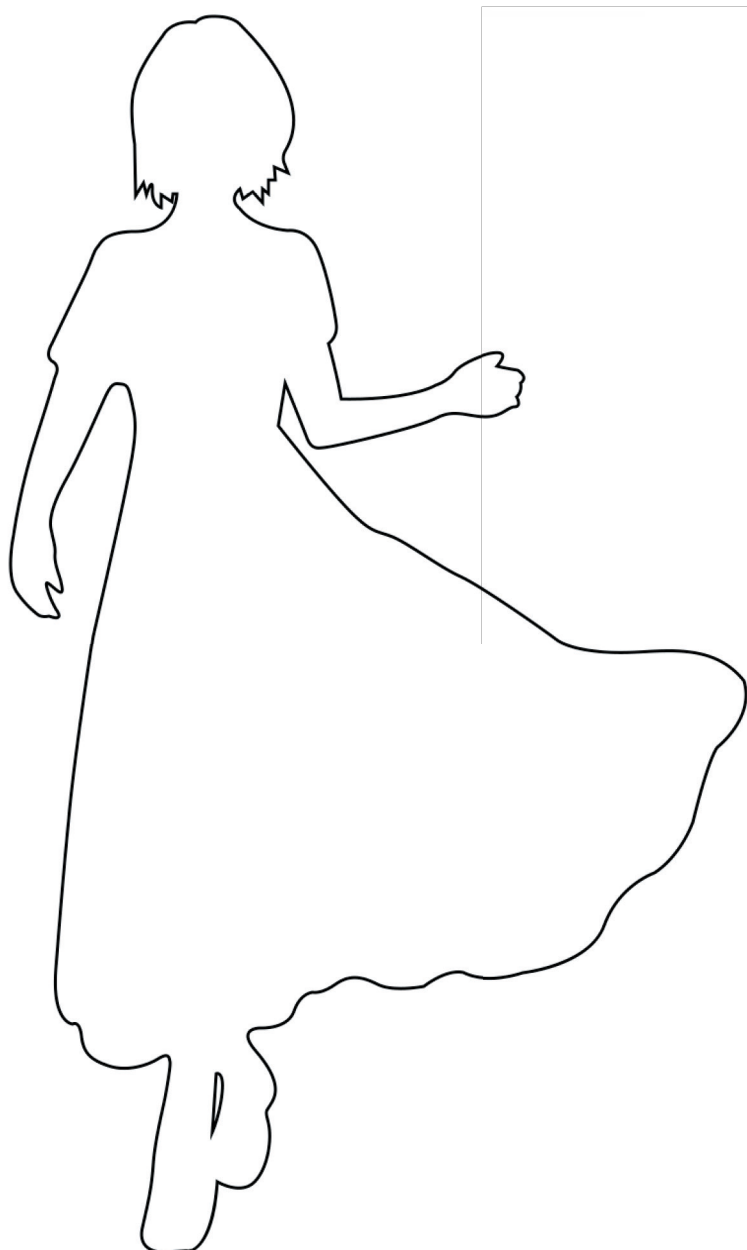
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ACTIVITY! PRINCESS ANYA

What do you think visitors to the castle see when they look at Anya? Around the outside of the image below, write down words to describe how Anya appears to outsiders. Use the extract to give you ideas. Now, think about how Anya feels on the inside. Write down as many words as you can to describe Anya's feelings and emotions inside the image below.



Q. Do you think Anya is a stereotypical princess? How is she similar or different to princesses in other stories you have read, seen or heard?

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FOCUS TWO: JUSTICE VERSUS REVENGE

Read this extract from page 105

The sphinx bent her head and lapped from the pool.

Now you.

Anya knelt on the stones, scooped up the water in her hand and drank; for minutes she knelt there. Soon her stomach was tight as a drum from the water, but still there was the burning in her throat.

'I'm still so thirsty,' said Anya. 'The water doesn't help.'

Naravirala nodded her great head. 'Then it is not thirst for water. It is thirst for something else.'

'For what?'

'For truth, I imagine. For justice.' She looked harder at Anya: at the dark rings under her eyes, and the shine within them. 'For something more than that too. Something darker. Take care, child, that you do not burn through your own heart, and leave yourself with nothing but a scorched scar to rely on.'

Anya wiped her mouth and looked the sphinx straight in her huge tawny eyes. 'I won't,' she said.

But the sphinx's words had helped her understand. She knew what it was, that burning in her body.

It was a thirst for revenge.

I have to kill my uncle.

It was the only way to avenge her grandfather, to save her father, to protect her own life. She could not, would not, live in a world in which Claude Argen lived too.

She had no weapons, she was dressed in torn and bloodied silk, she had a baby bird in her dress, and she was a child. None of it mattered. She raised her wrist, and Gallia flew to land on it. The bird, looking at the beloved girl's face, shivered. There was love, and longing, and death in it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Can you define the word 'justice'? What do you think of when you hear the word justice?
2. When Naravirala looks harder at Anya, what does she see?
3. What do you think Naravirala means when she says, 'Take care, child, that you do not burn through your own heart'?
4. What impact do Naravirala's words have on Anya?
5. What does it mean to seek 'revenge'? Can you think of any other stories in which a character has sought revenge on another character?
6. How do you think Anya feels at the end of this extract?

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ACTIVITY! JUSTICE VERSUS REVENGE

Justice and revenge are themes that run through the novel. With a partner, sort the words below into those you would associate with revenge and those you would associate with justice.

Accountability

Retaliation

Truth

Fairness

Anger

Vengeance

Balance

Prevention

Payback

Can you think of any more words you would associate with either justice or revenge? How would you describe the difference between justice and revenge?

Discuss the scenarios below. For each scenario, think about what justice might look like, what revenge might look like and what the consequences of each might be.

Someone steals your favourite water bottle from your bag at school.	A friend borrows your earbuds and breaks them.
A classmate bashes into you in the corridor and you fall over.	During a football match, a member of the opposite team fouls you on purpose and you get injured.

- Why do you think someone might seek revenge rather than justice?
- What do you think justice might look like for Anya and what might revenge look like? What might the consequences of each be, for Anya and for others?
- If you could speak to Anya at this point in the story, what do you think you might say to her?

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FURTHER ACTIVITY IDEAS

1. What do you think Anya's father means when he says, 'worship gold, and you'll never feel you have enough of it' (page 141)? Do you agree? With your class, draw a line on the floor with 'strongly agree' at one end and 'strongly disagree' at the other. For each of the following statements, stand somewhere on the line according to how strongly you agree or disagree: Money is important; Money makes you happy; You can never have enough money. Then, write a list of things you think are more important than money. Do you think Anya and Christopher would agree? What might they add to this list? What about Claude?
2. How does this quote from page 148 make you feel: 'It was the ruin of something terrifying, wild and magnificent. They had been thousands of years alive. They had been titans'? How does Christopher react to the discovery of the dragons? Christopher is a Guardian of the Archipelago. What might it mean to be a Guardian of life on Earth?
3. On page 186, Christopher begins making the antidote to the poison. Write your own recipe for a magical potion. What powers will your potion bestow? Perhaps it could be an antidote to greed or grant the power to talk to animals?
4. On page 191, Anya meets a chimaera with three heads. What kind of personality or character does each head have? Invent your own chimaera and write a conversation between the heads! Can you give them each a different voice and personality?
5. On page 239, Christopher reflects on Anya's character and what her friendship means to him. Put yourself in Anya's shoes and write about Christopher. What do you like and admire about Christopher? How do you feel when you are with him?
6. As a class, hot seat Claude. What were his motivations? What might his back story be? Does he feel any remorse?
7. At the end of the novel, Dousha is ruled by a representative parliament rather than a monarch. How are these two systems different? What are the pros and cons of each system? Which would you prefer to live under?
8. One of the epigraphs at the start of the book is a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Find a plot summary of *Hamlet*. How do you think Katherine Rundell may have been inspired by *Hamlet*?
9. Themes that run through the novel include: friendship, love, justice, revenge, greed, power, nature, freedom and bravery. Create a diamond nine with the theme you think is most important in the novel at the top and the one you think is the least important at the bottom. Compare with a partner, justifying your choices.
10. The next adventure in the Impossible Creatures series will be out in autumn 2026. Can you predict what might happen in this story?

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Guardian's Bestiary illustrations © Tomislav Tomić

