

# THE BOOK OF SECRETS

Alex Dunne

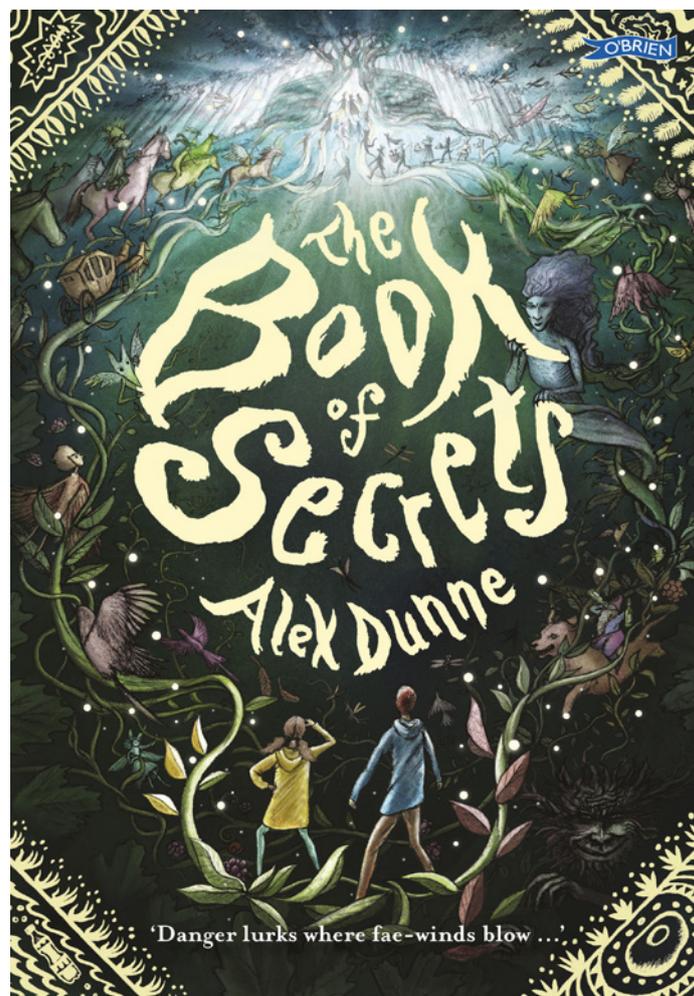
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## Themes

- Family relationships
- Friendship
- Grief
- Loss
- Independence
- Courage
- Resilience

**Summary** Cat and her friends are preparing for Halloween night in Clonbridge. While they are planning their routes for trick-or-treating, a troop of fairies and supernatural creatures are also making plans for their annual Revels at Ráth Glas, a ringfort outside Clonbridge. These fairy folk enjoy mischief and chaos and have a tendency to steal human children and swap them with fairies or Stocks. As Cat and her granny have the gift of Sight, they're aware that something special is happening in the town this Halloween. And when two young children disappear, it becomes Cat's responsibility to find the fairies' secret fort and attempt to bargain with the Queen of the Fairies to get the children back, all before dawn breaks.

**Judges' Comments** This fast-paced story inspired by Irish myth and folklore brilliantly intertwines the real and the magical. Eleven-year-old Cat Donnelly has the Sight, like others in her family before her, and so is particularly open to all things supernatural. Set around Halloween, when the Trooping Fairies descend on the small town of Clonbridge, this is an exciting adventure with just the right level of creepiness – dark, but not too dark. There's a real urgency to the writing, sweeping readers along through an original and imaginative tale of magic in contemporary Ireland.



## About the Author

Alex Dunne is an Irish author living in Canada. She spends her time thinking up magical tales for children, teens and adults and drinking far too much tea. Alex has a BA in English and History from the University of Limerick and an MA in Literature and Publishing from NUI Galway. She is a co-founder of *Silver Apples* magazine, an online literary journal dedicated to showcasing the best of Irish and international writing. *The Book of Secrets* is her first published novel. You can follow Alex on Twitter and Instagram @alexdunnewrites

# QUESTIONS

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. From looking at the illustrations on the cover, what do you think the story will be about? What is happening to the people and creatures on the cover?
2. From the blurb and the illustrations, what genre do you think this book is?
3. The line ‘Danger lurks where fae-winds blow’ is on the front cover: have you heard this word ‘fae’ before? What do you think it means?
4. The blurb refers to ‘the small town of Clonbridge’ – do you think this is a real town or an imaginary town in Ireland?

## AS YOU READ

### Prologue–Chapter 3

1. Why do you think the author chose a magpie as the Pooka’s companion? (Hint: What does a single magpie symbolise, according to the rhyme?)
2. What do you think of Cat’s reaction when her mother asks her to bring Mikey trick-or-treating: is Cat being kind and understanding, or is she being selfish?
3. What impression do you get of the twin sisters, Jess and Sarah, from these opening chapters? What adjectives would you use to describe them? Why would you choose these particular adjectives?
4. Why do you think Shane struggles to be friends with Cat and struggles to be around people?
5. Has the author given any hints about why the magpie waits outside Cat’s house and watches her?
6. What is the purpose of putting iron, bread and salt at each entrance to Cat’s house?

### Chapters 4–8

1. What are the main differences between Cat’s mother – Laura – and Cat’s Granny Mary? What is the main reason for their differences?
2. In her dream, Cat’s granny begins to tell her the story of the Children of Lir. Are you familiar with this story? What is it about? Why is the story different in Cat’s dream?
3. The changeling mimics Cat’s voice, saying, ‘*Why are you always such a pain, Mikey? Why can’t you be fun and sweet like Jenny?*’ Are the changeling and the Pooka punishing Cat for her attitude towards Mikey? Or why do you think they chose to take Mikey away?

4. Think about how much Cat relied on her Granny Mary. Then, think about the effect Granny’s absence has on Cat. What emotions is Cat feeling while her granny is in hospital and the real Mikey is lost?

### Chapters 8–12

1. ‘Why are you here, Shane? You tell me to leave you alone, but you come knocking on my door. What do you want?’ Do you think Shane misses Cat? What tells us that he may miss the friendship they once had?
2. The Clurichaun tells Cat to offer an exchange of ‘something of great value’ to the fairy queen. What do you think she might offer?
3. Shane tells Cat that his mam ‘won’t even notice I’m gone’. What impression does this give the reader about Shane’s home life?
4. Cat receives guidance in her dreams: who do you think she is receiving this help and guidance from?

### Chapters 13–18

1. In Chapter 13, Cat and Shane suddenly forget why they are in a field. They feel ‘peaceful and content’. What is happening to them and is this connected to the riddle?
2. The Merrow tells Cat that ‘I swam the seas back when the *Tuatha Dé Danann* themselves roamed this land’. Have you heard of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*? If not, who do you think they might be?
3. The ghost-girl gifts Cat a stone with a hole in the centre. Has this type of stone already been mentioned in the story? Where and by whom?
4. In the ringfort, the book provides a detailed description of the fairies. Is this description different to your idea of fairies? If so, how is it different?
5. Nancy tells Cat and Shane, ‘I don’t think I could leave even if I wanted to.’ Why do you think Nancy feels this way?

### Chapter 19–Epilogue

1. Cat offers her Book of Secrets to the queen, who responds, ‘You offer me your very identity.’ Why does the queen refer to the book as Cat’s ‘very identity’?
2. ‘Somehow, she thought it would upset Granny more to know that Nancy had been trapped with the fairies for so long.’ Do you think Cat made the right decision to not tell her granny about Nancy?
3. Who is speaking in the epilogue? Why do you think the author decided to end the book with this creature speaking?

## AFTER YOU HAVE READ

1. How important is Granny Mary to the story? How does she help prepare Cat to deal with her gift of the Sight?
2. How does the relationship between Cat and Mikey change over the course of the story? What is the cause of this change?
3. What would you consider the main themes of the story? (Suggestions: friendship; family relationships; grief; independence; courage.)
4. Throughout the book, Cat's granny is able to communicate with her even though she is in hospital. She offers advice and reminds Cat of important information in dangerous situations. Does the book explain how this communication is possible? What explanation can you provide?
5. There are many references to Irish folklore and mythological figures in the book. Why do you think the author wanted to include elements of Irish folklore and mythology in this story?
6. How does the book create a connection between nature and the supernatural?
7. The book focuses a lot on sibling relationships. How does the author show the reader that Shane and Cat have great love for their younger siblings?
8. Think about the pace of the plot: do you think the story moves fast or slow, or do you think the plot is paced just right?

## ACTIVITIES

- The book draws upon elements of Irish folklore and mythology. An extract from Cat's Book of Secrets is included with brief information on the supernatural beings, creatures and landmarks found in the story. Research to find more information on these elements of folklore and mythological beings:
  - Sídh
  - Pooka
  - Banshee
  - Dullahan
  - Merrow
  - Ringforts/Fairy forts
  - Tuatha Dé Danann
- Follow-up activity: ask your family and people in your local area if they have heard of any of these creatures or if they know about ringforts.
- The book also frequently mentions hawthorn trees: try to find out if hawthorn trees are significant in Irish folklore.
- Write a short story based in your local area where reality and fantasy come together: you could create a story using creatures and figures from Irish folklore and myth or create a story with original fantasy beings. How would they interact with the people in your local area?
- Choose a scene with detailed descriptions of the setting and create an accompanying illustration for this scene. (Suggestion: the Green Rath fort in Cullane Wood with the Trooping Fairies.)
- Choose one of the creatures mentioned in the book (Merrow, Pooka, Banshee, Dullahan) and illustrate them based on the descriptions in the book.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- Read more about the author, Alex Dunne, on her website: <https://www.alexdunnewrites.com/>
- The cover illustrations are by Shona Shirley Macdonald – check out her other work on her website: <https://shonashirleymacdonald.com/>
- If you enjoyed this book and like Irish-based fantasy stories, you could read:
  - The Artemis Fowl series by Eoin Colfer
  - *The Storm Keeper's Island* by Catherine Doyle
  - *Savage Her Reply* by Deirdre Sullivan (YA)
  - *The Lost Girl King* by Catherine Doyle
- You might also like some of the books recommended on Children's Books Ireland's Folklore, Myth, Legend recommended reading list: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/folklore-myth-legend>