

Title: The Firebird Mystery: A Jack Mason Adventure	Author: Darrell Pitt	Recommended Age: Year 5-8
About the author: Darrell Pitt began his lifelong appreciation of Victorian literature when he read Sherlock Holmes stories as a child, quickly moving on to H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. This early reading led to a love of comics, science fiction and all things geeky. Darrell is now married with one daughter. He lives in Melbourne.		
Synopsis: The son of circus performers, Jack Mason is plucked from Sunnyside Orphanage and deposited into a world of mystery and adventure at the home of detective Ignatius Doyle. Almost immediately they are plunged into a new case. The Firebird Mystery is the first in a series of Jack Mason Adventures and is set in an alternative past where historical figures and events are blended with futuristic inventions. When Scarlet Bell arrives at Doyle’s office in search of her missing father, Doyle and Jack must face Doyle’s nemesis Professor M in order to save London. The story is full of action, humour and interwoven with historical figures and events. As a reader, we find ourselves heeding Doyle’s advice to hone our skills of observation in order to solve the crime. Not everything is as it appears to be. Sometimes the answer is right under your nose.		

BEFORE READING

1. Research the writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. What did he write? Which character was he famous for?
2. Pitt draws on tradition of detective stories. Research or read Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories or Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*. Research more about the tradition of the detective story and, as a group, make a list of the features of the genre.

WHILE READING

1. **The Firebird Mystery** is set in the past but it is a past that is not historically accurate. Make a list of objects and events that fit with the period of history described in the book as we know it and those things that are fantasy or more futuristic. What major historical events are referred to in the novel (e.g. The Great War)? Why do you think Pitt chooses to do this?

2. 'They were all inhabitants – some would say *inmates* – of Sunnyside Orphanage, surely one of the most inappropriately named organisations in all London.' What does this statement tell us about Pitt's word choice? For example, consider the differences between 'inhabitants' and 'inmates'.
3. Which period in time would you place the story in? Do a little detective work using the research from the previous question, combined with logic to determine the setting.
4. What qualities make a good detective? Does Jack have them?
5. Ignatius Doyle declares 'The games afoot'. Where does the expression come from and what does it mean?
6. On page 15, Jack makes reference to C.S Lewis' novel **Alice in Wonderland**. Find the reference and explain what it tells us.
7. In Chapter 4, Doyle gives Jack a number of objects that he may need. Take note of where Jack uses these throughout the novel. Imagine if he didn't have one of those items when he needed it, what ordinary item could he have used in its place?
8. Identify which of the following lines is a metaphor and which is a simile. Explain what they mean?
 - 'He felt as if he were in a foreign land with someone asking him for directions.' P.31
 - 'Jack was beginning to feel like a loose cog.' P.35
 - 'a seed of doubt has been planted.' P.15
 - 'the pacts drawn up before the Great War were built on a house of cards.' P.86
 - 'like a pair of eyes peering out from under a cap' P.99
9. What is an airship? Do some research about airships. Why don't we see as many of them today?
10. Illustrate the **Lion's Mane** or design your own airship. Think about what features might be included for a character like Ignatius Doyle or Jack. Include a written explanation of your plan.
11. Research some of the names that Pitt uses in his story, such as Douglas Milverton. What is his inspiration for these characters? Why do you think Pitt makes these connections?
12. What is the Darwinist League? Doyle makes reference to some things that the Darwinist league are responsible for, such as bigger cows, taller wheat and fish that breathe in air. Jack sees these as unbelievable creations. Can you think of some things that are accepted today that might have been considered magic back then?
13. Many of the places that Doyle, Jack and Scarlet visit in London are real places. Create a map of the places they go and include references to what happens in the novel at each place on your map. You might find an online map to help you.
14. The mystery in the novel begins when a 'lost' painting is discovered in Joseph Bell's house. Find out whether the story is real. How do you think paintings become 'lost'? Investigate and report back to the class.

15. 'Jack looked up into the sky and watched the stars. He saw them linked by barbed wire and he imagined himself snared, legs caught on blazing embers, stuck fast in the night.' P.88 Why does Jack imagine this?
16. Consider the significance of the name of the airships, such as *Jeanne d'Arc*, **Brittania** and **Lion's Mane**.
17. Doyle says that even Professor M's 'nom de plume...is spoken in a whisper.' What is a nom de plume? Create your own nom de plume. Put them up on the board and see if you can guess who each one is.
18. How is fog imagery used in the novel?
19. What indications are there that this is not the end of the story for Jack?

AFTER READING

Character

Jack Mason

1. Jack is not an ordinary boy. What skills does Jack have that set him apart from other boys in the orphanage?
2. What possessions does Jack find comforting and why?
3. How does the author demonstrate Jack's connection to his late parents?
4. What makes Jack an unlikely hero in **The Firebird Mystery**?

Ignatius Doyle

1. Imagine you are the person from the orphanage who places children for adoption. How and why would you argue that Ignatius and Jack are perfect for each other? What advice does Mr Doyle give Jack when he arrives at the detective's house that is also useful advice for us as we read the story?
2. Ignatius Doyle reminds Jack of a hawk. Why do you think this is so? What other animals could reflect human characteristics in relation to the other characters in *The Firebird Mystery*?

Scarlet Bell

1. What evidence is there that Scarlet Bell is an independent and strong young woman?
2. Scarlet is an advocate of the Suffragette movement. Do some research and find out what suffragettes stood for. Split your class into two groups and argue for or against the suffragette cause.
3. Compare Scarlet Bell and Lucy Harker. What are their similarities and differences?

Lucy Harker

1. What do we learn about Lucy Harker from Mr Doyle's initial observations? What is unusual about the things he observes?
2. Is Lucy Harker responsible for her destiny or could you also blame others? If so, who?

- Lucy Harker's fate is left open. Why do you think the writer does this?

Professor M

- What is a nemesis? Can you think of other examples of nemesis' in films or fiction? Try matching up the following heroes with their nemesis. Do you also know what stories they come from? Create your own Nemesis and Hero.

Batman	Megatron
Harry Potter	The Riddler
Optimus Prime	The Green Goblin
Ash	Voldemort
Spiderman	Gary

- What aspects of Professor M make him mysterious?

Style and Structure

- On Page 4, the use of a series of dots before the word 'above' is called an ellipsis. What does the ellipsis do for the reader in this case?
- How does the use of listing on Page 15, when Jack arrives at Doyle's apartment, help to create the setting?
- What do detective stories have in common? Identify three features of a detection story that are also evident in **The Firebird Mystery**. Use those three features to create your own detective story.
- Throughout the story, Doyle refers to past cases by making reference to combinations of obscure objects such as 'a sketch by Rembrandt, a South American shrunken head and a baby elephant'. Find other examples in the novel.
- Look back at the end of each chapter. How does Pitt use the ending of chapters to develop the story?
- On page 126, reread the paragraph from 'Footsteps echoed from the hallway...widows on one side, doors on the other.' How does sentence structure and punctuation help to create atmosphere in this passage?
- What does Pitt do to create tension in the novel? On page 252, reread the passage from 'The last chime faded away...' to 'A whistle shrieked.' Find and explain five things in the short passage that emphasise the tension.

Themes

Family

1. Explain the different forms of ‘family’ that we see in **The Firebird Mystery**. For example, the Sunnyside orphans are like a family even though they don’t all get along with each other.
2. Why do you think Jack and Doyle need each other?
3. While families may be separated physically, they are never really apart. Support this idea with evidence from the novel.

Trust and loyalty

1. “His parents taught him not to be afraid of falling. Only then could they teach him to soar and fly through the air.’ In what way is this advice about more than being a trapeze artist?
2. Doyle says to Churchill: ‘You send the best and brightest of our nation into danger like sending lambs to the slaughter...’ Could the same be said for Jack and Scarlet? Are they lambs to the slaughter in **The Firebird Mystery**?
3. Who are the people that Jack trusts and who is he suspicious of? Are his instincts correct?

Power and corruption

1. ‘Well, you know what they say about absolute power...it corrupts absolutely.’ P. 20 How is this evident in the novel?
2. Do you agree that greed is the source of corruption? Is this evident in the novel?
3. It is not always those in positions of power who are the most powerful. Do you agree? Find examples in the novel to support your point of view.

RESPONDING

1. ‘String has a thousand uses and I know you will find it invaluable.’ P.36 Write a story where string (or another ordinary object) is the central feature.
2. Create a visual collage of Jack’s world and find a quote from the novel to match it. Consider some of the inventions that he mentions and places he goes. If you can’t find a real image, create your own.
3. In the questions under the heading ‘Style and Structure’, Doyle’s habit of listing items from previous cases was noted. For example, ‘a spanner, a rubber plant and an exploding nun.’ P.169. Use one of the combinations from a list you found in the novel and write a report of that case, highlighting the role that the three objects played in it.
4. Doyle tells Jack: ‘Sometimes people ask me what the war was like and I simply tell them it reduced men to nothing.’ Do you agree with Doyle’s opinion? Explain your answer (either verbally or in writing) with evidence from the novel and real life.
5. ‘I must agree that airships made all the difference in the Great War, I imagine dominance over space will, in fact, be the next.’ What do you imagine future wars will be like? Write a description of a futuristic battle.

6. Metrotowers are used as a symbol of national pride and power in Jack's world. They are self-sufficient and a place for the wealthy. Towards the end of the novel, Scarlet's father is preparing to build the tallest Metrotower in the world, in China. Design what you imagine the tower would look like and what features it would include. Be prepared to present your design to the owners (the class) for approval. Let your imagination run wild!
7. Scarlet is a fan of Brinkie Buckeridge novels where the heroine achieves the impossible to solve the mystery. Write a Brinkie Buckeridge story.
8. The Firebird Mystery shows us that family is more important than anything else. Do you agree?
9. **The Firebird Mystery** is the first Jack Mason Adventure. Write a review for a teen reading guide blog to help promote the series.
10. The Jack Mason Adventures are to be made into a film. As the director, choose a key passage from the novel and create a storyboard for that scene in the film. A storyboard is a little like a comic strip and helps everyone involved in the making of the film see the directors vision of what the film scenes will look like.