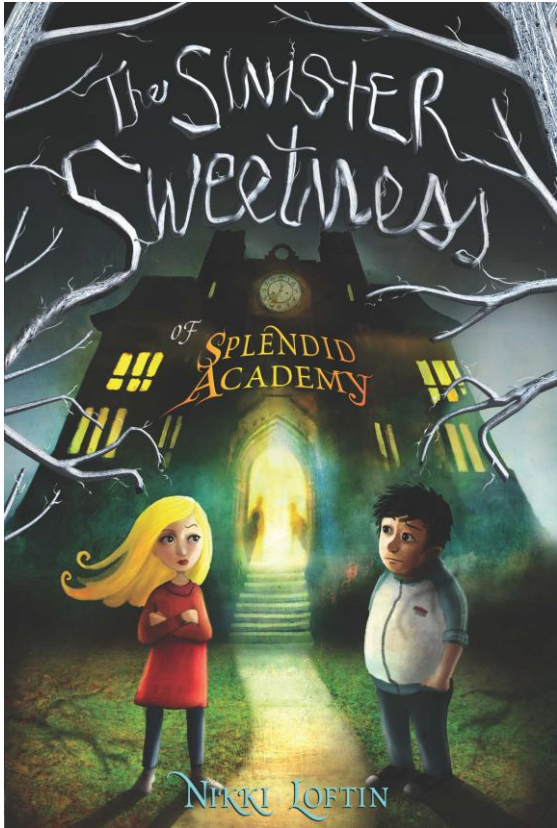


Discussion Guide for
The Sinister Sweetness of Splendid Academy
by Nikki Loftin



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Razorbill
Hardcover \$16.99
9.25x6.25in, Ages 8-12

Praise for “Sinister Sweetness”

“A mesmerizing read...a fantasy that feels simultaneously classic and new.”

Publishers Weekly

“A pinch of Grimm, a dash of Greek mythology and a heaping helping of fresh chills make for an irresistible contemporary fairy tale...Deliciously scary and satisfying.”

Kirkus Reviews

“The sprinkling of Roald Dahl creepiness with peculiar, cannibalistic adult characters is the icing on a cake baked with a take-charge heroine, subtle references to the seeds of childhood obesity and lesser-known Greek mythology. This smart, enchanting book will leave readers hungry for more by this first-time author.”

Shelf Awareness, Adam Silvera, reviewer and former bookseller.

Summary

Lorelei is bowled over by Splendid Academy--Principal Trapp encourages the students to run in the hallways, the classrooms are stocked with candy dishes, and the cafeteria serves lavish meals featuring all Lorelei's favorite foods. But the more time she spends at school, the more suspicious she becomes. Why are her classmates growing so chubby? And why do the teachers seem so sinister?

It's up to Lorelei and her new friend Andrew to figure out what secret this supposedly splendid school is hiding. What they discover chills their bones--and might even pick them clean! Mix one part magic, one part mystery, and just a dash of Grimm, and you've got the recipe for a cozy-creepy read that kids will gobble up like candy.

About the Author



Nikki Loftin is the debut author of *THE SINISTER SWEETNESS OF SPLENDID ACADEMY* (Razorbill, 2012), which Publishers Weekly called “a mesmerizing read,” and Kirkus Reviews called “deliciously scary and satisfying.” Her second children’s novel, *NIGHTINGALE’S NEST*, will be published in early 2014.

Nikki’s short children’s fiction has appeared in *Boy’s Life* and *Pockets* magazines, among others. She also writes literary fiction, poetry, and essays for adults, and has been published in numerous literary journals and anthologies. Her essays have been included in the anthology, [Dear Teen Me: Authors Write Letters to Their Teen Selves](#) (Zest books, Nov. 2012). Nikki is represented by Suzie Townsend of [New Leaf Literary Agency](#).

[Agency](#).

Nikki enjoys public speaking, and served as keynote speaker at the Houston Writer’s Guild conference in the spring of 2012, as well as a presenter at libraries, SCBWI conferences and meetings, and various panels and workshops throughout the year. She is an active member of the [Austin SCBWI](#), the [Writer’s League of Texas](#), the [Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America \(SFWA\)](#), and [the Junior League of Austin](#).

Nikki attended the University of Texas at Austin for both her BA (French, '92), and MA (English – Fiction Writing, '98). She speaks conversational French and limited Spanish, and has spent most of her professional life working with children and young adults. After teaching in the New Braunfels Independent School District as a Music and Gifted and Talented teacher, she pursued a career as a Director of Family Ministries at Presbyterian churches.

A native Texan, she lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband (a Scottish photographer), two sons, and an assortment of dogs and chickens. Her home on the web is www.nikkiloftin.com.

Discussion Guide

Talking over characters

Folktale characters (such as Hansel and Gretel) are sometimes “flat.” That means they are either all good or all bad, but rarely like real people (who have both admirable traits and traits less admirable). Talk about whether Lorelei, Andrew, and Principal Trapp had traits more like real people or more like folktale characters. Find evidence in the book to support what you think.

Sometimes illustrators “see” the characters differently from the author or the readers. Do you have pictures in your head for any character that seem different from the artist’s ideas? What did you “see” when you read? Make a sketch of the way a character looked to you. Find and share some places in the books that gave you clues.

Ms. Loftin created Lorelei as a character who experiences difficulty in writing. How do you think Lorelei’s learning difference contributed to the story?

Dad tells Bryan that “family takes care of one another.” Were there times when Dad seemed to forget his own advice? Talk about those spots.

Why do you think Andrew chooses to warn Lorelei about not eating the school foods?

Litterbugs! Did you notice how often the schoolchildren dropped their trash and food onto the playground and floors? What could cause kids to treat their school like this?

Which seems scarier to you—a character who appears to be nice and then turns out to be evil, or a character who seems evil from the beginning? Tell why.

Vasalisa tells Lorelei, “I, too, fought the hunger,” She explains that if she had chosen to eat, “at least then, there i[would be] an end.” What do you think Vasalisa means? (p. 136)

Talking over plot

Some stories move straight through time from beginning to “happily ever after.” But *Sinister Sweetness* is a story with moments that look back in time to Lorelei’s memories of her mom. How do these “memories” of mom make her feel? Do you think Lorelei’s guilt over her mother’s death is important to the story? Why?

“Stories” are important to the characters in this book. Lorelei’s mom read to her every night. “Use your imagination, Lorelei,” her mom had said, “and your whole life can be a fairy tale.” What kind of fairy tale do you think Lorelei’s mom might have had in mind?

Ms. Morrigan tells Lorelei that “...there are many sides to...old stories. Many ways to look at them. Even the villain in a play can bleed, and weep” (p. 76). What do you think she means?

How do you think learning in school might change if all classroom rules were revoked? For example, what if kids could leave the classroom whenever they chose, eat and drink in class, use cell phones, and not do homework?

What foods would be the hardest for YOU not to eat if they were always in your desk? What tricks would you use not to eat?

Activity: Ms. Morrigan refers to a game involving candy. Invent your own “candy math” game, explain the rules, and play it with your classmates.

A house made of sugary windows and gingerbread attracted Hansel and Gretel. But it was a playground that made Splendid Academy for Bryan and Lorelei so hard to resist. Think about what features a school might have that would make *you* want to enroll. Make a list with your classmates.

Activity: Create an advertisement for your irresistible school. Think about including sample cafeteria menus, illustrations of the interior and exterior of the building, the playground, a school name, motto, and more.

Gathering clues? Like breadcrumbs through the forest, the author leaves clues that help you make decisions about characters. What are some of the clues you noticed that helped you make decisions about Ms. Morrigan?

How are “trying to remember” and “trying to forget” both important parts of this story?

Lorelei tells Andrew that some people “want love so bad, they can’t see what’s right in front of them (p. 197).” What does she mean? Which characters in the story seem a bit ‘blinded’ by their need for love?

If you were Lorelei, would you have thrown away the broken pieces of wand at story’s end? Why or why not?

Intriguing details to research:

Character names can have layers of meaning. Pick one of the major characters and see what you can learn about his or her name. Try to match some of the author’s descriptions of your character with what you learn in your research.

You can find a picture of the sixth grade’s classroom rug that was copied from the tapestry, “The Unicorn Tries to Escape” at

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/3312486988/>

Why do you suppose Principal Trapp and Ms Morrigan smelled like lilies? Do some research on the symbolic meanings of the lily flower.

Find some pictures of marzipan on-line to show your class.

On YouTube, you can listen to the song that Lorelei’s mother taught her, Que, sera, sera:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdhAfMor9BM>

and to her mother’s German lullaby (p. 130) at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQtWTnFdFbQ>

The story of *Vasilisa the Brave* is retold by Marianna Mayer and in other sources. There may be a copy in your library.

In some versions, La Llorona (p. 172) is a grieving mother rather than a witch. See what you can learn about her legend.

Would you like to learn more about Demeter, Persephone, and Hades? Check out Ann Turnbull's *Greek Myths* (Candlewick, 2011)

Language used magically

The author, Ms. Loftin, likes the words she chose when she wrote: "Her voice became a tiny snake that curled through my ear and lodged in my brain." Find some places you think Ms. Loftin's words seem just right. Put a sticky note there and plan to read those words aloud to your class.

There are some fun 'idioms' and phrases in English that seem especially eerie at Splendid Academy:

"eat Andrew alive" (p. 115)

"I chewed him out" (p. 117)

"she's stuffing us full of knowledge" (p. 163)

Use your own words to tell what makes these phrases 'splendid ones' for the Sinister Academy.

Only Neil Ogden (and other bullies) use a word such as "moron" to refer to someone who struggles to learn. How do you think words come to be hurtful and unacceptable (p.159)?

Ms. Morrigan accuses Lorelei of being like a 'little mouse' nibbling. Locate a version of Hansel and Gretel in the library to see what the witch says to the children who nibble from her cottage.

Vasalisa is amazed that Lorelei cannot figure out who is a witch in the Sinister Academy. She wonders if parents no longer tell their children the warning stories of witches. Vasalisa says, "[Parents] guard their homes full of plastic but leave their true treasure to be plundered by the wicked" (p. 174). What do you think Vasalisa means?

And then...(for talking over when the story concludes)

Sometimes stories leave you wondering. What are you wondering at the end of *Sinister Sweetness*? Make a list of your wonderings with your classmates:

For example:

We wonder:

...if Mr. Robinson will figure things out

...if the kids can get used to regular school food again

...if Molly will continue being mean

...if the parts of the wand will work again

Some people think folktales are too "grim" for kids—too filled with violence and gore. Tell what you think. Why do you think such tales exist?