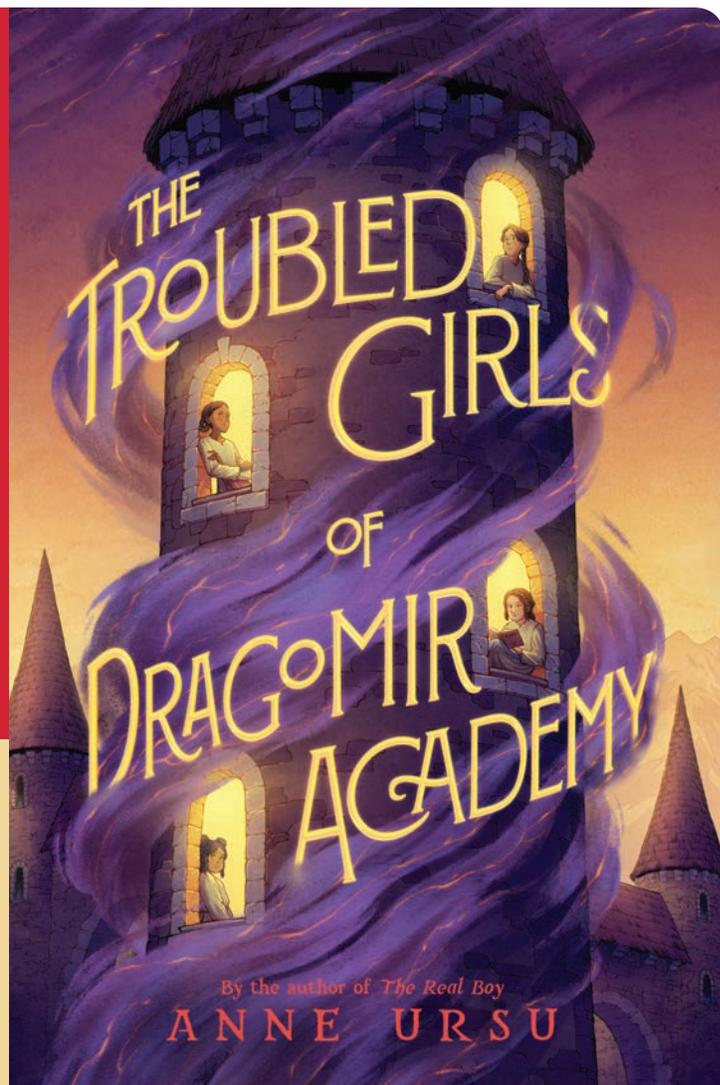


# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FOR CLASSROOM USE

Includes Questions,  
Classroom Activities,  
and an Exclusive  
Author Letter

If no one notices  
Marya Lupu, it's likely  
because of her  
brother, Luka.



And that's because of what everyone knows: Luka is destined to become a sorcerer. The Lupus might be from a small village far from the capital city, but that doesn't matter. Every young boy born in Illyria may possess the rare ability to wield magic, to protect the country from the terrifying force known only as the Dread.

For all the hopes the family has for Luka, no one has any for Marya, who can never seem to do anything right. But even so, no one is prepared for the day that the sorcerers finally arrive to test Luka for magical ability, and Marya makes a terrible mistake. Nor the day after, when the Lupus receive a letter from a place called Dragomir Academy — a mysterious school for wayward young girls. Girls like Marya.

Soon she is a hundred miles from home, in a strange and unfamiliar place, surrounded by girls she's never met. Dragomir Academy promises Marya and her classmates a chance to make something of themselves in service to one of the country's powerful sorcerers. But as they learn how to fit into a world with no place for them, they begin to discover things about the magic the men of their country wield, as well as the Dread itself — things that threaten the precarious balance upon which their country is built.

## DEAR READER,

*The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy* combines a lot of things that I love in books — mysteries, monsters, boarding school stories, worlds with magic coursing in their veins. And I love fantasy novels because they tell stories that raise questions about the very real world around us. As this book began to develop, it, too, began to ask questions: Who has power and how do they keep it? What stories do the people in power tell about their countries and themselves? Who do those stories serve?

At its heart this book is the story of a girl trying to figure out her place in a kingdom that has no room for her. Marya Lupu has grown up in the shadow of her brother Luka who, everyone believes, is destined to be a sorcerer — someone who, as the story goes, is entrusted with the safety of the kingdom. As for Marya, she can't seem to do anything right; she's a troubled girl, according to everyone around her. But as she arrives at Dragomir Academy and meets more girls just like her, she comes to wonder if the problem is really with her. Maybe there's something wrong with the story in the first place — and the people who tell it.

I hope the kids that read this book get lost in its pages. I hope they like the world and the monsters. I hope that they can relate to Marya, and all the other troubled girls of Dragomir Academy. And I hope that maybe, as they look at the stories being told around them — about themselves, and about our society today — they may be able to take a step back and ask, who does that story serve?

And maybe that will help them write their stories for themselves.



A LETTER FROM  
THE AUTHOR

THE TROUBLED  
GIRLS OF  
DRAGOMIR  
ACADEMY

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Ursu is the author of the acclaimed novels *The Lost Girl*, *Breadcrumbs*, and *The Real Boy*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award. The recipient of a McKnight Fellowship Award in Children's Literature, Anne is also a member of the faculty at Hamline University's MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults. She lives in Minneapolis with her family and an ever-growing number of cats. You can visit her online at [www.anneursu.com](http://www.anneursu.com).

**Anne Ursu**

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# PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Consider the title: *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy*. What does the word “troubled” imply? What can readers anticipate about the characters of this story before opening to the first page?

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Chapter 1: The Girl in the Coop

- What does this chapter tell us about the role of women in Illyria?
- What is the community’s response when a baby boy is born? Why?
- Compare and contrast Marya and Luka as characters. How do their relationships with their parents differ from one another?
- Why is the Lupu household expecting the council? Do you think it would be better for Luka to be chosen or not to be chosen? Why?

### Chapter 2: The Bandus

- How does Marya’s life change after she loses Pieter?
- What does Marya do when she visits Madame Bandu?
- Why do you think Madame Bandu asks for help from Marya?

### Chapter 3: Folk Songs

- Why are sorcerers revered in Illyria?
- What is the origin of the Dread?
- Why does Marya struggle to imagine her future?
- What does Luka fear?

### Chapter 4: The Council Visit

- What happens to Marya’s new dress?
- Why is Marya’s mother so bothered by her request to spend time with Madame Bandu?
- Why do you think Madame Lupu tells the council that Luka is their only child?
- List at least two disasters that took place during the council’s visit.

### Chapter 5: The First Letter

- What is Marya’s mother’s main concern about her daughter?
- Why is the consequence of not being allowed to go to the Bandus so devastating to Marya?
- For what do you think Marya’s mother blames her?



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## Chapter 6: The Second Letter

- What does Madame Bandu teach Marya about the weaver's code?
- Why does Madame Bandu hide Marya from her mother?
- What surprising turn of events awaits Marya?

## Chapter 7: Trouble

- Why does Marya struggle to make sense of the letter?
- How does Marya's family feel about Marya leaving for school?
- What might the coming of the Dread mean for the people of Illyria?

## Chapter 8: Goodbye

- Why is it remarkable that Luka asks for advice about handling Anton?
- What does Marya mean that it is her job to keep Pieter's memory?
- What do you think about Marya's departure for Dragomir Academy?
- According to the handbook, what is the school's goal?
- How does Marya feel about her mother?

## Chapter 9: Dragomir Academy

- Describe the first of Marya's roommates we meet, Elana and Ana-Maria. What do we learn about Dragomir Academy from their perspectives?

## Chapter 10: The Girls of Rose Hall

- On her first day there, what evidence does Marya find of the school's values?
- Why does the headmaster explain the girls are not supposed to talk about or remember their pasts?
- What happened to girls in the past who had been considered to have "strayed from the virtuous path"? (P. 135)
- Why were the Dragomirs' ideas about building a transformative school for girls considered controversial?

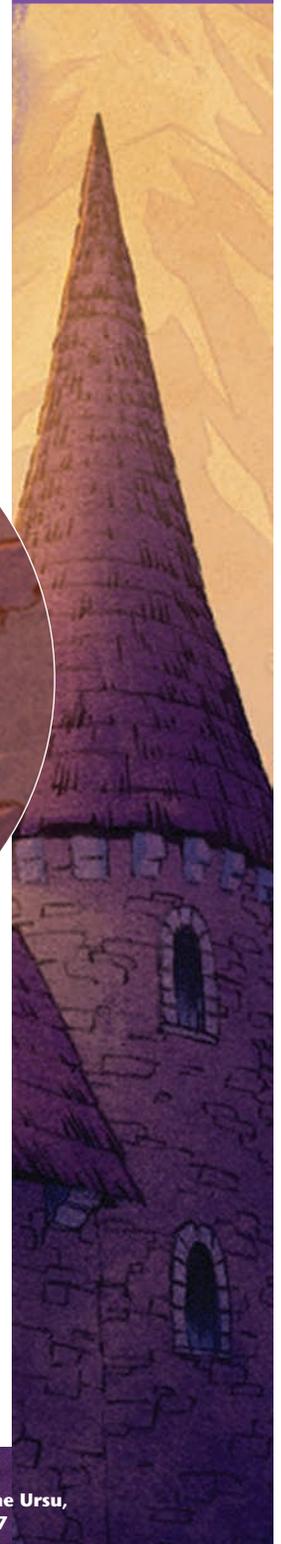
## Chapter 11: The Dragomir Way

- What is the promise for girls who do well at Dragomir?
- What kinds of jobs might the girls hold when working for the sorcerers?



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## Chapter 12: More Letters

- Why does Marya say there is a gap between the girl she is and the girl they want her to be?
- Why are the letters Marya receives so precious to her?
- What do Illyrians believe about witches and the Witching Wars?

## Chapter 13: The High Count Arev

- What is impressive about High Count Arev?
- According to High Count Arev, what is true about the Dread? What is a myth?
- What does Marya believe the threat of the Dread to be?
- Describe the interactions between Madame Rosetti and the headmaster.
- What is Elana's perception of High Count Arev, and why?

## Chapter 14: The Portraits in the Hallway

- Why do you think Marya kept her ability to read a secret?
- Why would it be “dangerous” for girls to get an education?
- What is “mountain madness”? How is it cured?

## Chapter 15: In the Rose Hall Parlor

- Why does Marya feel “seas and eternities away” from Madame Bandu and Luka? What does she mean that it will only get worse? (P. 199)
- What does Elana share about the history of witches? What does she take issue with from the book she is reading?
- How do the relationships between the Rose Hall girls change in this chapter, and why?
- Why are the Rose Hall girls reprimanded by Madame Rosetti?
- Why have Ana-Maria's parents disowned her?



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## Chapter 16: Missing Pieces

- Marya believes finding out what happened to Nadia is important to understanding what's happening at the school. What might the Dragomir teachers be keeping from the girls?
- Why and how could the girls of Dragomir Academy be considered a threat? (P. 225)
- What does Marya's trip to the infirmary make her wonder and question?
- What news comes in Elizabet's letter and why is it significant? (Pps. 232-233)

## Chapter 17: The Many Uses of Fire

- What is different about the attack of the Dread in Lacsat? What does it mean for Dragomir Academy?
- What is the girls' reaction to High Count Arev's presence?
- Explain "magical permanence." How is this theory related to the Dread? (Pps. 244-245)
- What is the difference between witches and sorcerers?

## Chapter 18: The Fire Salamander

- What does Marya suspect is the reason why the Guild put a sorcerer at Dragomir?
- Why might Madame Bandu have included the bird wing symbol at the end of her letter? (P. 255)

## Chapter 19: The Tulip

- Is Elana a good friend for Marya? Why or why not?
- What symbols and messages does Marya find in Countess Dragomir's embroidery?
- How might "Nadia's Curse" fit the mystery Marya and Elana are trying to solve? (P. 267)

## Chapter 20: The Maze

- What does Marya conclude by studying the embroidery in the apron?
- Why does Marya believe she should share her findings with the headmaster? How does he receive them?
- Marya and Countess Dragomir both experience grief. In what ways is their grief similar? How does it differ?
- How does the headmaster know about Pieter?



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## Chapter 21: The Butterfly

- Why do you think Simona is crying? Where are the Rose Hall girls, and why?
- Marya keeps revealing her feelings of shame through an inner dialogue that everything is her fault. Why does she feel that way? Is she right?
- What do the girls learn about Elana's past while working in the kitchen?
- How does Simona's story help us to understand the curse of mountain madness? Why is the illness not talked about?
- How does the school allow Simona to be in "a position to help"? What do you think she means? (P. 302)

## Chapter 22: The Spiderweb

- What news does Madame Rosetti share with Marya? What do you think about the accusation?
- What signs are there that Marya should be careful about sharing what she thinks?
- How does Mademoiselle Gris try to protect Marya, and why?
- What does High Count Arev suspect Madame Bandu of doing with her tapestries? What is the concern from Marya's point of view?

## Chapter 23: The Spider

- Name some of Marya's feelings at this point in the story. How have her many losses affected her?
- What do you think about the way the headmaster questions Marya?

## Chapter 24: The Sanitarium

- Where is Marya, and what happened?
- What is a sanitarium?
- What does High Count Arev do after the Dread is detected? Why?
- Why does High Count Arev let Marya and Elana go instead of insisting they ride along with him?

## Chapter 25: The Road at Night

- How does High Count Arev's choice challenge what Marya believes about sorcerers?
- Why is Luka on the road to Dragomir Academy?



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## Chapter 26: The Dread

- Why doesn't Madame Rosetti believe Marya and Elana's warning?
- Why does Madame Rosetti seem edgy about the headmaster now? What are Marya's feelings towards him?
- What happens to Elana? What does it mean that Marya recognizes what is wrong?

## Chapter 27: The Tapestry

- How is Dragomir Academy freed from the Dread?
- Why does Madame Rosetti apologize to the girls?
- Why have the girls been told they are "troubled" instead of being told the truth? Who does that lie serve?
- Though Marya has suffered many losses, she has also made many gains. What are some of them?

## Chapter 28: The Other Monster

- Why does the headmaster try to convince Marya she has been overcome with mountain madness, and that he and High Count Arev saved everyone from the Dread?
- How does Marya get the headmaster to tell the truth?
- Why do the sorcerers rid the girls of "female magic"?

## Chapter 29: The Nightengale

- What agreement does the king come to?
- How would Illyria be different if girls had been allowed to work magic as boys have been?
- Why does Marya feel like she didn't do anything? How do Luka and Elana see it differently?
- How does Marya feel as she realizes she had let the headmaster convince her something was wrong with her?
- What will become of Dragomir Academy, and who makes that decision?

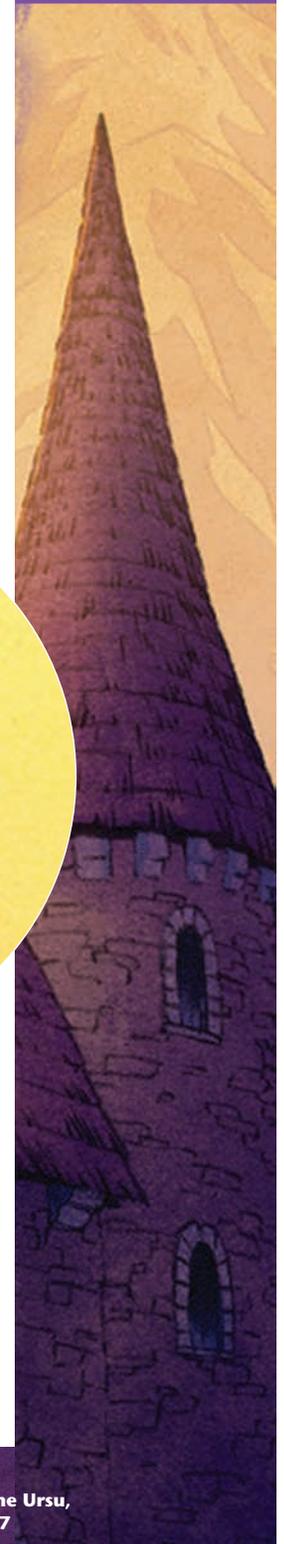
### Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2,  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4,  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6,  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10



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# FOR MORE DISCUSSION

## Structure and Craft Choices

The genre of fantasy is often an opportunity to explore truths about our world in a fantastical setting. What truths about our own world do you see underlying the conflicts of *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy*? What big themes and topics from real life appear in the text, even though this book is fantasy?

Take note of the chapter titles through the novel, especially those titled with the embroidery symbols that Marya is studying. In what ways do the symbolism of each of these chapter titles and the events of those chapters relate?

## Power

Early in the book Madame Bandu tells Marya that “reading is power.” (P. 23) Later, in a letter to Marya, she writes: “...learn everything you can. That is the best way to keep the monsters away.” (P. 159) In the last chapter, when Madame Rosetti is talking with the girls about the future of Dragomir Academy, Marya recognizes this theme again: “Reading was power; education was power; information was power.” (P. 419)

- Discuss how this idea relates to real life. In what ways is reading power? Education? Information?
- How or where do we see examples of people in power trying to control others' access to education and/or information?

Reflect on the balance (or imbalance) of power between the male characters and the female characters in this novel. Consider the interactions between:

- Marya and Luka
- The headmaster and the teachers
- The headmaster and the Dragomir girls
- High Count Arev and the teachers
- High Count Arev and the Dragomir girls

Can you identify parts of the novel where girls or women step aside for the men? Parts where they are interrupted or their voices are quieted? Where men contradict or dismiss what a woman says? Where the men are the protectors? Where they are in prominent positions of power?

How do these interactions compare to power imbalances between women and men in our own world?

When Marya visits High Count Arev in the library to protest Madame Bandu's arrest as a suspected witch, they talk about the power of her position as a weaver. High Count Arev argues that she wields the power to alter the facts of the stories she weaves into her tapestries. Marya, on the other hand, considers that the person



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## FOR MORE DISCUSSION CONTINUED

hiring Madame Bandu to make a tapestry might be spinning their own story and altering history.

- Who do you think has the power in this situation?
- What danger is there in either side telling a biased or untrue story?
- Why is documenting the truth so important?

### Family and Identity

Marya's relationship with her mother undeniably shapes her inner monologue. Madame Bandu tries to gracefully support Marya and tells her, "Your mother is trying, in her own way, to give you the world." (P. 31) Madame Bandu is essentially saying Marya's mother is doing the best she can. Consider how this might be true, even as Marya feels unseen and not valued. In what ways might Madame Lupu be doing what she thinks is right for Marya?

Talk about the Dragomir family and how they handled Nadia's magical abilities.

- How do you infer each parent — Count and Countess Dragomir — reacted to Nadia being a witch? (Pps. 276-277) If you were Nadia, how would you have wanted your parents to handle the news that you were different than what they expected? What could either or both parents have done differently?
- How is Nadia's parents' reaction the same or different from the way people in society sometimes react to particular character traits or parts of people's identities?

### Who Does the Story Serve?

"When you hear a story powerful people tell about themselves, and you're wondering if it's true...ask yourself, who does the story serve?" (P. 76) This piece of wisdom from Madame Bandu resonates with Marya, and she internalizes it as she tries to reason and find her place in the halls of Dragomir Academy. How does this question help guide Marya in her quest for the truth?

Extend this lens for critical thinking to your everyday life, especially when consuming and digesting information about news events.

### Rules and Consequences

Elana explains to Marya why she disregards the rules of Dragomir Academy this way: "...if I do what they say, that means I am everything they say about me. And I'm not. Do you understand? I'm not." (P. 214) In what ways might rules force people to conform? When do rules force us to act against our inclinations? How and when are rules appropriate or useful? What kinds of rules are simply "understood?" Who makes those rules? When is it appropriate to bend or change the rules?



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## FOR MORE DISCUSSION CONTINUED

At Dragomir Academy, the policy is that if one girl breaks a rule, the whole group serves a consequence. Madame Szabo reminds the girls, “Remember, at Dragomir, if one of you falls you all fall, just as it will be out in the world.” (P. 162) To what degree is this true or false? Can you think of examples where a whole group has to pay a consequence for an individual’s choice? In your experience, do group consequences happen more or less often than individual consequences? Does this happen more often for certain groups of people?

### Pretty Words

One thing that gets a reaction from Marya again and again are what she refers to as “pretty words” from the people in positions of authority. (Prs. 175, 184) What does Marya mean by “pretty words?” Why do “pretty words” frustrate her? Have you ever felt your own frustration with someone’s “pretty words?”

## ENRICHMENT & EXTENSIONS

### Storytelling

One theme that emerges in this novel is that of stories, told and untold. Explore the various means of storytelling beyond traditional print narratives. Capture one of your own stories, or one of someone you care about. Consider drawing a “tapestry” or writing a folk song as a way to preserve your story.

### Weaving

Research the art of weaving and the tools required to do so. Make an at-home loom using a piece of cardboard with slits, string, and yarn. Experiment with using different colors and explore how you might weave images into a tapestry.

(One possible resource: <https://www.theweavingloom.com/how-to-make-a-cardboard-loom/>)

### Embroidery

Madame Bandu teaches Marya about the symbols village women would use in their embroidery and the meanings behind these symbols. She gives Marya an apron



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# ENRICHMENT & EXTENSIONS CONTINUED

with some symbols, signs her letters with others, and eventually, Marya follows her curiosity about and knowledge of these symbols to uncover Nadia Dragomir's story. Revisit some of the symbols and their meanings in this novel.

**Dreadbane:** protection

**Diamonds:** courage

**Fire:** light in darkness

**Fire salamander:** wisdom

**Tulip:** daughter

**Bird wing:** protection against giants

**Snake:** protection against pricolici

**Bells:** protection against capcaun

**Spiderweb:** omen

**Spider:** treachery, corruption

**Beetle:** menace

**Waves:** eternity

**Butterfly:** transformation

**River:** border between good and evil

**Maze:** confusion, journey, trap

**Empty hands:** sorrow

**Tentacles:** peril

**Mountains:** barriers

**Nightingale:** thresholds, a new beginning

Some symbols record sadness and heartbreak, while others are good wishes offered to the person who receives them. We see the good wishes especially in the symbols Madame Bandu uses to sign her letters to Marya. What wishes or gifts might you want to bestow on someone you care about? What symbols would you embroider to “code” that message or protection?

## Rebellion

Madame Bandu tells Marya the crescent moon symbol she weaves into tapestries with questionable truths is “a small rebellion.” (P. 78)

- What is a rebellion? Do you think that action by the weavers is rebellious?
- When and why do people rebel? How? Consider examples from history and the recent past.
- Are there times when rebellion is warranted?
- Are there varying degrees of rebellion? How might this be a matter of perception?

## Witches and Witchcraft

Research the history of witches and witchcraft to learn more about the historical witch hunts, across Europe in the 1400s-1600s and the Salem Witch Trials in the 1600s. What was the intent of the witch hunts? Why did they take place? How does this historical context compare to the story of the witches of Kel in *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy*?

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# ENRICHMENT & EXTENSIONS CONTINUED

## Mental Health

Throughout the story, readers can see the negative inner monologue developing for Marya. Influenced heavily by what others tell her she is and isn't, Marya takes on the narrative that she is troubled, bad, weak, evil, shameful, unworthy. Brainstorm positive self-talk that could help Marya counteract this negative self-perception. What could you do or who could you talk to if you found yourself feeling like Marya?

## Equitable Education

Across the country and around the world, there are disparities in educational experiences. While the United States offers educational opportunities for all young people, there are still some countries around the world in which education is only offered to some young people based on gender and/or class. If you'd like to learn more about education and equity in different countries, read about these organizations committed to elevating and empowering underserved students, especially girls.

- **Malala Fund:** <https://malala.org/girls-education>
- **Save the Children:** <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/education/girls-education>
- **UNICEF:** <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>
- **The World Bank:** <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation#1>



DISCUSSION GUIDE  
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## Creative Writing

Choose one of the girls of Rose Hall (Marya, Elana, Katya, Ana-Maria, Daria, Elisabet, or Simona). What do you think they will they go on to do in their lives? How will their futures unfold? Write a companion story for that character. Use details from the novel to craft a likely and empowered future for that character beyond this year at Dragomir Academy.

Often fantasy characters can offer models of how to handle adversity, or of how to triumph resiliently over challenges and obstacles. What can you learn from Marya's character? What will stay with you beyond this book? Write a letter to Marya to share with her how the events of her story have helped you think about facing your own challenges.



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