

TALLOW

KAREN BROOKS



TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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PLOT SUMMARY

We are introduced to Tallow, a child who is rescued by a candlemaker and his mother in the fictional city of Serenissima. To keep this child safe from an evil force, she is dressed as a boy and trained as an apprentice. Pillar, the candlemaker, is kind but weak-willed and controlled by his mother, Quinn. Quinn is very cruel to both of them and emotionally and physically abuses Tallow.

Tallow becomes proficient at candlemaking but, as she reaches puberty, her candles begin to produce strange effects when burnt. We learn she has special powers and that she is, in fact, an Estrattore – she can extract and transfer specific emotions and feelings from people, animals and even objects. This power has great potential, both for good and for evil. Tallow is the last of the Estrattore race: hundreds of years earlier, due to fear of their powers caused by a religious schism, the Estrattore were killed en masse. Any survivors were driven into exile.

One day a mysterious woman arrives at the house to see Tallow. She explains that her name is Katina and that she is one of the legendary Bond Riders, who have pledged their soul to a specific cause. Each Rider's bond is sealed within one of the great Pledge Stones at the edge of Serenissima, bound by blood. Katina's Bond is to Tallow, and for hundreds of years she has waited in a place called The Limen, which is a cursed space; any human who is not a Bond Rider who enters the mist-bound region never returns. While in the Limen, Katina is not affected by the passage of time; however, once in Serenissima her mortality catches up with her. She teaches Tallow how to use her powers but, as she cannot stay away from the Limen too long, the lessons are rushed and often sketchy. Along with Pillar, Katina encourages Tallow to distil the emotions she extracts into the candles in subtle yet powerful ways. Pillar's struggling candle business becomes extremely successful due to the positive emotions Tallow distils into the candles. However, Tallow's power is still uncontrolled and, while she always means well, her actions often have unintended negative consequences for those around her.

Ravaged by her body's accelerated aging, Katina returns to the Limen to recuperate. Before she leaves, she forbids Tallow to continue practicing her Estrattore skills without supervision.

Tallow's part in the candle business's new-found success gives her more freedom from Quinn's tyrannical rule and she eventually makes two friends – a dog whose mortal wounds she secretly heals (Cane) and a soapmaker's son (Dante). She falls in love with Dante but feels that she cannot make her feelings known while he thinks she is a boy.

In the meantime, seeking to exploit her talents, a number of parties are searching for the legendary child. These include a mysterious dark force that Katina is reluctant to discuss, the Queen of Farrowfare (who has also kidnapped the Doge of Serenissima's grandson), the Maleovellis, a father and daughter duo from an ancient, impoverished noble family.

The city is hit with an outbreak of sudden, deadly disease. Only Tallow can see what is happening – ghost-like creatures touch the people, who then quickly

sicken and die. The Serenissians believe it is either due to the unnatural spurts of cold weather they are having, or that it is God punishing the wicked. The city is placed under quarantine. Tallow realises that anyone who had bought and used her candles survives the plague, despite the odds.

Tallow sneaks out to see if Dante has survived the plague. A short time after she returns from Dante's house, Quinn succumbs to what the Serenissians now call the Morte Assiderato (which literally means 'frozen to death'). Tallow pleads with Pillar to burn one of her candles, which will save Quinn's life, but Quinn refuses to submit herself to Tallow's 'unnatural' power. Quinn dies in agony and Pillar accuses Tallow of bringing the disease into the house after learning she has broken the quarantine. Mad with grief, Pillar tells Tallow to leave him and never return.

In the meantime, Katina has been recuperating in the Limen. Her long stay in Serenissima has aged and weakened her greatly, and it takes Katina some time to recover. The Bond Rider Elders are also in search of Tallow and we discover their motives do not have Tallow's best interests at heart. The Elders send a Bond Rider (Santo, Pillar's long-lost father) to kidnap Tallow. Santo fatally tramples both Tallow's dog and Dante, who are desperately trying to save her from the rider. Tallow reveals her gender to Dante just before he dies.

Tallow plunges herself into the canal to escape the Bond Rider and is rescued by some 'kind' passersby. Defeated and exhausted, she divulges the secret of her gender and heritage to the strangers, the Maleovellis, who make plans to use her Estrattore talents for assassination.

GENRE, STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Tallow is an intriguing fantasy story, set in the fictitious country of Serenissima, which is reminiscent of Renaissance Venice. The neighbouring country of Farrowfare is ruled by a ruthless queen and displays a hint of Byzantine Turkey and Elizabeth the First's England. The setting lends itself to a variety of integrated activities between History and English.

The novel has an engaging narrative style. It constantly changes narrative voices and points of view, adding greater dimensions to the story. For example, Chapter 1 is first person narration from Tallow's point of view, Chapter 2 is third person from Pillar's point of view and Chapter 40 is third person narration from Lord Rodbury's point of view.

The language is descriptive and sophisticated, which is typical of the genre. It is a wonderful way to immerse your students in rich language and hopefully have them experiment with this in their creative writing. Intertwined through the novel are a number of Italian/Venetian phrases. While it can be tricky for students to get their heads around it initially, it adds authenticity and interest to the story. The words are integrated well and easy enough to decode as you read, however, there is a handy glossary at the back (pp 405–8) so you might prefer to have students familiarise themselves with this before they begin reading.

The novel contains a variety of conflicts and challenges for Tallow, keeping readers on the edge of their seats through Tallow's entire journey. Many fantasy novels are hero/quest related, however, our 'hero' is a teenage girl who dresses as a boy and can't control her powers. Poor Tallow has a string of obstacles to overcome, just to survive:

- She has no knowledge of her parentage.
- She is an Estrattore but still isn't really sure what this means and is still working out how to use her powers.
- She was raised by a cruel woman, Quinn, who physically and emotionally abused her.
- Katina, a kind Bond Rider bound to protect her, has left and is yet to return at the end of the novel.
- When Quinn dies Tallow is blamed and kicked out by Pillar, a father-figure and the only man she had thought was on her side.
- She is being pursued by at least three evil parties.
- Her dog, Cane, is killed.
- Her only friend, Dante, is killed.

This makes for an exciting read with lots of mysteries to unfold.

The novel's characters are interesting. While many characters perform bad actions, very few are outright 'evil'; they all have some sense of humanity about them and simply have different and believable motivations.

Fantasy novels are not often chosen as class texts, with schools displaying tendencies towards more realistic fiction. The irony is that fantasy is arguably the most popular genre amongst middle-school and teenage students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Associate Professor Karen Brooks is Deputy Head of the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University in Lismore and has a PhD in cultural studies. Renowned internationally for her work on popular culture, Karen is also a dynamic and award-winning teacher. She is a columnist for *The Courier Mail* and an 'expert' on Channel 7's *Sunrise*, *The Morning Show* and *Today Tonight*. She is also a regular on ABC's *The Einstein Factor* as part of the Brains Trust. Author of the popular Cassandra Klein quartet and *Rifts Through Quentaris*, Karen's first non-fiction book *Consuming Innocence: Popular Culture and Our Children* was published in 2008 to rave reviews. In recognition of the public debates she has stimulated and her academic and creative contributions to Australian and global society, she is cited in *Who's Who of Australian Women 2007–2009*. Karen has a wonderful partner, Stephen, and two children, and shares her house with three dogs, a cat and an assortment of chickens and sheep as well as resident birdlife and possums. She lives in a place known as the Rainbow Region which is the perfect environment for writing fantasy.

THEMES

Friendship

The importance of friendship and love during extreme adversity is explored in *Tallow*. Throughout the story, Tallow relies on many friends/allies to help her overcome hardship. To manage the physical and emotional abuse from Quinn, Tallow relies on Pillar to offer her words of encouragement and secretly nurse her back to health. Katina is important to help Tallow control her powers, teach what it meant to be an Estrattore and to provide her with a sense of family. Cane, Tallow's dog, is her constant companion and confidant, always ready for a cuddle. Finally Dante, her friend and object of her love, shows her fun, laughter and freedom as they explore the city by night.

QUOTES:

- *Then, beneath the endless layers of grief and self-doubt was something solid and new – a tiny bloom in a desert of pain. It was me.* (p. 23)
- *Instead, she privately relished every little thrill, because Tallow – the candlemaker's apprentice – wasn't alone in the world. Not any more.* (p. 85)
- *"Happiness," I answered. "And safety. I feel safe."* (p. 107)
- *Katina was more than just her teacher; she was a link to a past and a future that Tallow had never thought possible.* (p. 122)
- *I didn't stop until I had climbed the trellis, reached my room, cowered beneath my blankets and buried my head in the comforting ordinariness of Cane's warm fur.* (p. 296)
- *"You don't have to ask me to be what I already am . . . always. For eternity."* (p. 322)
- *It had never really been Pillar who protected me; it had always been Quinn.* (p. 343)
- *I was his pledge stone, he was my Bond Rider.* (p. 380)

Loyalty

Loyalties of varying degrees and for differing motivations are expressed in the novel. Katina is loyal to finding and training Tallow pursuant to her Bond. Similarly, Lord Waterford is loyal to Queen Zaralina (and by extension to Shazet, leader of the Morte Whisperers) out of a sense of duty, fear and the threat of harm to his family. Dante is loyal to Tallow out of a sense of love and brotherhood, as is Pillar loyal to Quinn as her son. Tallow also shows loyalty in her desire to do what she sees as right, even if it means she disobeys orders to do so and sometimes gets it wrong.

QUOTES

- *Perhaps, with his sacrifice, his people would have reason to hope again.* (p. xiv)
- *And though he'd lied for her, killed for her, and he'd most likely die for her, Waterford didn't like this at all; but he knew from past experience not to show his displeasure – especially not in the company of the Mortian.* (p. 74)
- *For Tallow it was heartbreaking that people like Dante, like her, were trapped in a world not of their making, where roles and rules were imposed long before they were ever born.* (p. 357)
- *Katina was torn. Oh Tallow, be safe, she thought. But stay out of sight. I need to get this right – for all our sakes.* (p. 382)

Sacrifice

Tallow is required to sacrifice her freedom and female gender to keep her secret safe. Pillar sacrifices an independent life of his own in order to appease his mother. Lord Waterford sacrifices time with his family to stay loyal to his Queen and prevent his wife and son from being killed. The Bond Riders sacrifice their souls based on their pledge; Filippo even dies to save Tallow. Similarly, Dante sacrifices his life to help protect Tallow from the Bond Rider.

QUOTES

- *Perhaps, with his sacrifice, his people would have reason to hope again.* (p. xiv)
- *We're ensnared in a prison of our own making . . . and for what?* (p. 12)
- *I've been to hell and back for you.* (p. 53)
- *And she'd sacrificed some of her very life blood to the pledge stones in order to find Tallow.* (p. 85)
- *Fancy being made to pay a debt with not only your life, but your family's as well.* (p. 166)
- *The moment we gave our blood to the Stones, we became prisoners of fate. Nothing can change that.* (p. 257)

Bullying and Cruelty

There are many instances of cruelty and bullying throughout the novel, such as Quinn's treatment of both Pillar and Tallow. There are also suggestions that the Bond Rider Santo, Pillar's father, has a cruel streak. Queen Zaralina ruthlessly rules Farrowfare and her court and the Maleovellis regard their spy Baroque in a similar manner.

QUOTES

- *The familiar smirk that twisted her mouth to the left appeared.* (p. 4)
- *I didn't cry out. It wouldn't have done any good; it never did.* (p. 6)
- *Like an Estrattore, she extracted the best and worst from Pillar and used it to suit her own purposes.* (p. 343)

Good and Evil

While there are many cruel acts that occur in the novel, very few characters are completely 'evil' – through the varying narrative points of view, the reader is made aware of the motives of the characters, which helps them all become sympathetic in some way. Lord Waterford kidnaps a child, but we realise his family is being held hostage by his ruthless Queen, whose motives he questions. Quinn, while abusive towards Tallow, ultimately does what she can to protect her and is still suffering the devastation of her husband leaving. The Maleovellis on the surface seem money-hungry and wicked, however, by the end of the novel the reader has been given a little insight into their motives.

QUOTES

- *For a moment, pity knocked her heart. He didn't deserve this. Like her, he was a victim of someone else's caprices.* (p. 9)
- *But that day her son had shown a strength of character she hadn't known he possessed, and while she had been furious with him, she'd also been proud.* (p. 11)
- *If he can't control himself anymore, then what hope do we have?* (p. 13)
- *Woe betide, they said, woe betide.* (p. 76)
- *She'd never really believed that Quinn cared about her; but there were times when she thought that Pillar did.* (p. 168)

MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Candles and Candlemaking

Candlemaking is a metaphor for moulding, growth and change. Just as Tallow manipulates the tallow and beeswax, she too is moulded and manipulated by those around her. In the darkness of Tallow's tragedies, there is always a flicker of hope, like the flicker of a candle's light.

Clothing and the Body

Tallow's eyes are silver and mirror-like in appearance, which is a clear betrayal of her Estrattore heritage to other people in Vista Mare. Both her eyes and her female body require concealment, leading her protectors to acquire golden-lensed glasses and shabby male clothing. Clothing in *Tallow* is used as a symbol for identity – it projects class and gender image, but it also conceals aspects of the body.

Water

Water pervades every aspect of life in Serenissima, which is laced with canals and surrounded by the ocean. The canals are a major transport lane and citizens must plan their activities around conditions such as the acqua alta (high tide). Consider how Tallow and Dante explore the city by night, particularly when they appropriate the gondola: water in this case acts as a symbol of flux and change. When Tallow jumps into the canal at the end of the novel to escape the Bond Rider, her near-drowning symbolises the death of her old life as a male candlemaker's apprentice and her cleansing/rebirth. Shortly afterwards she confesses to the Maleovellis that she is a female Estrattore, setting the scene for a new stage of her journey.

Borders

The Limen divides the world of Vista Mare. It is a borderland where time does not pass as it does in the world outside. Look up the literal meaning of 'limen' and a state called 'liminality' (the threshold at which binary opposites undo themselves).

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Tallow

Tallow is the novel's protagonist and is named after the animal fat used to make candles. Abandoned as a baby, she was rescued by a candlemaker called Pillar and his mother, Quinn. She initially has no knowledge of her family or history; simply that there is something strange about her that needs to be hidden and as a result she needs to dress and act like a boy to keep her identity safe. As she reaches puberty her talents start to surface and she finds out she is really an Estrattore, or someone who can extract and distil emotions from other people or objects. Although she is treated poorly by Quinn, she is determined and has a kind heart, trying to do what she can to help those around her. At times, however, she can be a little careless; she often ignores her premonitions/gut instincts. In the meantime she is also trying to come to terms with her newfound abilities and what this means. Although she endures countless hardships throughout the story, she still manages to find flickers of hope around her. Once she meets Dante, she also has to come to terms with her faux gender and her real sexuality the battle between how she appears and who and what she is – as an Estrattore, but also as a young woman.

QUOTES

- *I rejoiced at what I saw even while a small voice within me sounded a warning. But, blinded by my accomplishment, I didn't listen. (pp 5-6)*
- *I know Quinn thought I could control it; that whatever was happening lay within my power. (p 17)*
- *This could not continue. I had to have answers, now, tonight. (p 20)*
- *Unbeknownst to her, Quinn had taught me well. I could be stubborn, too; pitiless even. (p 22)*
- *Even now, I wonder at my stupidity. (p 40)*
- *Somewhere, deep in my heart, something unlocked. I allowed myself, for the first time in memory, to feel – not only my body, but my real self. The me I'd kept buried and hidden my whole life. It was not Katina I needed to fight, it was myself. (p 53)*
- *I am an Estrattore. An outcast, a heretic; one of those doomed by law to die. (p 60)*
- *My voice was too small for such a large task. (p 68)*
- *'Happiness,' I answered. 'And safety. I feel safe.' (p 107)*
- *I was so caught up in the joy of my new life that I missed what was happening right under my nose. (p 111)*
- *There was something about this place that made my head ache and my chest flutter. (p 151)*
- *Unable to help myself, I ran forward and knelt by its side. (p 174)*
- *Though Katina had told me never to practise my talents on humans, she never said anything about dogs. (p 175)*
- *Katina tried to think of how to describe Tallow. How to describe someone who, despite the cruelty that life has meted out, carries with them a great capacity for hope? (p 259)*
- *My intentions, as good as they'd been, went horribly wrong when translated into action. I was too inexperienced, too naive. (p 277)*

Quinn

Quinn is Pillar's mother and Tallow's guardian. She is physically and emotionally abusive to Tallow, secretly fearful of what she is. Quinn is still grieving for her husband who left her and their son to become a Bond Rider. As a result she is quite bitter and resents Tallow, given her heritage link to the Bond Riders. To

manage her grief, Quinn turns to alcoholism to drown her sorrows. She is practical and frugal, not wanting to waste money or resources. Quinn eventually dies from the Morte Assiderato, too stubborn to burn one of Tallow's special candles that could save her from the disease. She is someone who is selfish and narrow-minded, but not without some redeeming qualities. She too is a victim of life's caprices and the narcissism of the man who abandoned her with a young son to follow his own desires many years earlier.

QUOTES

- *'It's clear you've wasted our hard-earned coin on this ne'er-do-well again.'* (p4)
- *The familiar smirk that twisted her mouth to the left appeared.* (p4)
- *I didn't cry out. It wouldn't have done any good; it never did.* (p 6)
- *'You need to control that boy. Do what I do, treat him with a firm hand.'* (p 7)

Pillar

Pillar is the candlemaker who trains Tallow as his apprentice. He is bullied by his mother and finds it difficult to stand up to her. Pillar does, however, show kindness to Tallow, often bringing her up food and giving her comfort after a beating from Quinn. He is weak, lacking in confidence, and struggles with who is he and who he could have been. He compares himself unfavourably to others and seeks approval – especially from his mother.

QUOTES

- *Pillar's face also changed as grief and weariness sloughed away. I could see the grey hairs on his arms darken and watched as his arthritic fingers straightened and stretched toward the candle, towards something that life had cruelly snatched away from him before he could fully taste it.* (p 5)
- *And somehow Pillar knew that Tallow's skills would only improve with age.* (p 9)
- *Weak fool! If only he would rage at her, call her names.* (p 9)
- *Like her, he was a victim of someone else's caprices. And he did try; he always had.* (p 9)
- *I hated that he always wanted to apologise. He who suffered in ways I would never understand.* (p 18)
- *'Don't try to tell me otherwise. I know what I am. I am weak to let her treat you like she does. I am weak not to have the courage to sell your fine candles –'* (p 19)
- *Pillar didn't like it. But he justified his inaction . . .* (p 26)
- *With a sinking heart, I realised Pillar had no intention of defending himself.* (p 49)

Katina

Katina is a Bond Rider who is Bonded to Tallow. She is strong, independent and sure of herself, an excellent mentor for the timid Estrattore. She is protective of Tallow, standing up for her against the cruelty she suffers at the hands of Quinn. As a Bond Rider she is under the authority of the Council of Elders, whose intentions for Tallow does not align with her own. While she is obedient to these Elders, the reader is given the impression she may follow what she believes is right, not what she is told to do. The novel alludes to Katina's being in a relationship with one of the other female Bond Riders, Deborah.

QUOTES

- *The kindness in her voice brought tears to my eyes.* (p 51)
- *The woman looked at me so boldly, unafraid, relaxed even.* (p 51)

- *There was something timeless about her. I don't know how else to describe it. She was lined, not in the weary way that Pillar and Quinn were, but in a way that made me think of sunshine and darkness all at once. (p 57)*

Dante

Dante is a chandler's son and Tallow's only friend, acting as a big brother to her. As far as Dante is concerned, Tallow is a boy and although he tries to deny it Dante falls in love with Tallow. Once he starts to have feelings for her, Dante refuses to see Tallow, ashamed of his emotions. After months go by they meet up again and Dante decides to continue the friendship despite his feelings. Dante ends up losing his life to save Tallow from the Bond Rider and as he lays dying, he confesses his love for her and Tallow does the same, also revealing to him that she is actually a girl.

QUOTES

- *And, unexpectedly, I felt this boy's great capacity for love. (p 176)*
- *In many ways, Dante and I were the same. We were both at the whim of forces beyond our control. We would, as Dante said, know what we would become when it happened. (p 207)*

Queen Zaralina

Queen Zaralina is the beautiful but ruthless ruler of Farrowfare. Most insight into this character is provided from the point of view of her court. She has organised for the doge's young grandson to be kidnapped and orders the guards to treat him badly, allowing her to come in and act as if she is his only friend in the world.

QUOTES

- *And though he'd lied for her, killed for her, and he'd most likely die for her, Waterford didn't like this at all; but he knew from past experience not to show his displeasure – especially not in the company of the Mortian. (p 74)*
- *It wasn't the red hair, white skin or the luminous golden brown eyes that he knew set many hearts racing – and not just the men's. Perhaps, he thought, taking in her calculating mouth and the hardness behind the eyes, it was the darkness that resided in her soul – a darkness matched only by his own. (pp 159-60)*
- *She would not let her frustration show; to do so was weak. (p 229)*

The Maleovellis/Baroque

Giaconda and her father, Ezzelino, are plotting. They plan to have Tallow use her powers to become an assassin; their motives are unclear, although there is an allusion to the fact that it will help them restore their family's wealth. They hire a spy, Baroque, to find Tallow. They use deceit to track Baroque during the curfew and plan to 'dispose' of him once he has completed his task, suggesting they are ruthless and money-hungry.

QUOTES

- *Her father could be so ruthless when he had to. She hoped that when the time was right, she would be the same. (p 368)*
- *She wanted some answers, now, while he was still vulnerable. (p 395)*