Reading Notes and Discussion & Activity Ideas

Take a ride in Philip Reeve’s incredible imagination as he returns with this stellar follow-up to Railhead (shortlisted for the 2017 CILIP Carnegie Medal)


Full of extraordinary beings and utterly real, complex characters, of thrills and thoughtful moments, Black Light Express is a stunning step beyond the Universe, which will appeal to both sci-fi fans and foes alike.

Zen and Nova have ridden a train from one world to another before. They come from the Network Empire, whose stations are scattered across half the galaxy. But this time it’s different. They’ve passed through a gate which shouldn’t exist at all. They did terrible things to open it, they don’t know where it leads, and now they can never go back.

Chandni Hansa has just been defrosted from the prison freezers by the new Empress of the Great Network. When railwar erupts around them, the two find themselves running for their lives. But where can they run when nowhere is safe?

All the while, the mysterious Black Light Zone is calling them. But as their lines separate and intersect, among trainsong and engine-roar, battle cries and gunfire, will they find a way home? If home even exists any more…

About the author

Philip Reeve worked in a bookshop for a number of years while also co-writing, producing, and directing a number of no-budget theatre projects. He then began illustrating and has provided illustrations, cartoons, and comic strips for around forty children’s books, including the best-selling Horrible Histories, Murderous Maths, and Dead Famous series.

It was while working on these that he wrote his first novel, Mortal Engines, a gripping adventure story set in a future world where moving cities trawl the globe. A magical and unique read, it immediately caught the attention of reviewers and book buyers. It was the Gold Award winner at the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize 2002 and the winner of the 2003 Blue Peter Book of the Year. Predator’s Gold, Infernal Devices, and A Darkling Plain are the following three books in the Mortal Engines quartet.

In 2008 Philip won the CILIP Carnegie Medal for Here Lies Arthur, which is set in the Dark Ages and explores how a myth can be created simply through spin-doctoring and story-telling.

See the ‘Further Reading’ list at the end of these notes for details of the rest of Philip’s books.

Philip also collaborates with illustrator and comics creator Sarah McIntyre. Their books together include Oliver and the Seawigs, Cakes in Space, and Pugs of the Frozen North.

He lives on Dartmoor and has a website at www.philip-reeve.com
What readers say

“We lose some characters; we gain new ones. The trains may be on rails, but the story isn’t, as Reeve yet again weaves a multi-stranded, layered plot line in the same flowing and compelling prose that made the first novel so readable.”

“The Universe itself is the star of these books. The idea of trains built by an unknown dead creator leaves a sense of mystery that permeates the book. Reeve plays on this idea more in book two, and we start to discover who and what the Railmaker may be.”

“The ending is utterly believable and will get a reaction from you. There are some great ‘punch the air’ moments.”

“I like the way the story zips along. I LOVE the trains!”

HERE ARE SOME READERS’ NOTES AND DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR READING GROUPS AND TEACHERS.

Thinking and talking about the book

READING THE BOOK:

Talk briefly about Railhead – the first book in this series. You could show this introductory film clip to Railhead from Philip Reeve’s website: http://www.philip-reeve.com/blog/page/17/

Read the last few lines of Railhead, where Nova and Zen are off through the new K-gate to new worlds and adventures:

In the carriage, Nova and Zen sat down together. The Damask Rose revved her engines… (p298)

Then look at the cover and the blurb of Railhead and set the scene.

Read the first chapter aloud and pick up on any questions, and then read the book all the way through, either reading aloud to everyone together, or letting everyone read and experience the book for themselves.

Keep the flow of the story, and at the end allow time for people to reflect on it and think about their responses to it.
Thinking and talking about the book

TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK:

Get everyone to share their first responses to the book. This could be with the whole class/group, or children could discuss their ideas in small groups and then share their feelings and questions with everyone.

Ask lots of open questions to get people talking and encourage discussion about their feelings and responses to the story, the characters, and the writing.

Explain that there are no right or wrong answers – we’ll all have our own feelings and thoughts about the book, and the things we like and don’t like.

Here are some questions you might use.

• How did you feel when reading this book? And how did you feel when you’d finished it?
• Which parts of the story do you remember most?
• Did you skip any parts? Which parts?
• Was there anything that took you by surprise?
• Were there any parts you couldn’t make sense of?
• What was the thing you most liked finding out from the book?
• What kind of book did you think it was going to be?
• If you gave up on this book, can you say why?
• What would you say about this book if you were telling someone what you’ve just read?
• Does the story work for you? What does the book say to you?
• Has reading the book changed or affected you? At the end of the story did you feel as if you’d shared a real experience?
• Did you stop and start, or did you want to read it all through in one go?
• Are there parts you want to read over again?
• Was this book what you expected after reading Railhead?
• How would you compare it with Railhead?
• If you haven’t read Railhead, did you still find you got into the story quickly and soon felt in touch with the characters?
• Would you recommend the book to your friends? Why? Or why not?
QUIZ: Recap from Railhead!

Here’s a quick, fun quiz about key characters and features in Railhead which reappear in Black Light Express.

The choices are easy to make and give you a chance to refresh on Railhead, ready for Zen and Nova’s new adventures.

You’ll also find a Glossary at the back of the book with lots of information about the worlds of these two books.

In Railhead and Black Light Express:

1. Zen is
   a) The main character – an adventurer and petty thief who is in love with Nova
   b) A religion
   c) A kind of computer

2. Nova is
   a) A star
   b) A Motorik – a humanoid and amazingly skilled robot who is in love with Zen
   c) A magazine

3. Threnody is
   a) A kind of song
   b) The new Empress of the Great Network
   c) A sore throat

4. Kobi is
   a) The son of a rich Network family, who was going to marry Threnody; she thought he was an oaf, but he turned out to be quite brave
   b) A robot
   c) A desert

5. Raven was
   a) A bird
   b) A plunderer
   c) The creator of the new K-gate which takes Zen and Nova to new worlds

6. Uncle Bugs was
   a) A lepidopterist
   b) A Hive Monk – his body is made from thousands of insects
   c) A rabbit

7. The Guardians are
   a) Twelve AIs (Artificial Intelligences) who became more intelligent than the humans who created them; they have multiple interfaces and watch over the Network Empire
   b) Station guards on the Great Network
   c) Carers of orphaned children in the Network

8. Damask Rose is
   a) A beautifully scented flower
   b) A luxurious patterned fabric
   c) An old red train who takes Zen and Nova through the new K-gate. Like all trains on the Network, she is sentient – she is as intelligent as a human and sings and talks to her passengers

9. The K-Bahn is
   a) A German railway network
   b) The railway that links the Network Empire
   c) A large farm building

10. The Worm is
    a) A worm
    b) A monstrous serpent
    c) A machine which made the new K-gate and laid the rails for the track to new worlds
**Things to think about**

As you read *Black Light Express* you’ll have much to think about and discuss: Who or what built the railway system? Who will rule the Network Empire? What was the Blackout? What caused it, and what is the Black Light Zone? And what is calling to them from the Zone?

This story raises lots of questions and things to think about:

**VIOLENCE AND WAR**

Violence like that was something everyone liked to say the human race had long grown out of; the stuff of historical threedies, wars on Old Earth. But it was still there, just beneath life’s settled surface. (p83)

‘Let’s see what they want before we start a fight’, said Zen.

‘Nothing wrong with starting a fight,’ grumbled the Ghost Wolf, unhousing its new Neem guns. ‘Not if you can win it’. (p230)

Talk about Zen and the Ghost Wolf’s points of view – what do you think, and what does it tell you about the characters?

Do you think there could be a time when the human race has grown out of violence? What changes might there need to be? (A massive question!)

**MEMORIES**

‘This body will die one day, and then what will happen to all its memories of the unique things it has experienced?’ (p165)

How can we save the memories of things in our lives so that they are there for people in the future to enjoy and learn from?

‘Except for memories. I’ll hold onto those always.’ (p302)

How do we make use of the memories of things we have seen and done? What are your favourite memories? And which are your worst ones? Find out more about how our memories work.

**BEING AN EMPRESS**

Everybody seemed to think it must be wonderful to live in the palace and go out every night to dinners and balls. (p26)

How does Threnody really feel about being the Network Empress? What do you think it would be like to be King or Queen of the UK?

**BEING RICH**

Sometimes Chandni worried that if she went on living with rich people she would end up acting like a rich person… (p66)

Why does Chandni alternate between thinking this is a good idea and a bad idea? What do you think are some advantages and disadvantages of being rich?

**LOVING A MOTORIK**

When you loved someone, she was discovering, you loved all of them, the good bits and the bad. (p129)

He had learned … that love grew wild and didn’t much care about things like who was human and who was a machine. (p195)

Zen is human and Nova is a Motorik – a robot – and they are in love. Do you find their love affair believable? What do you think about the ending of the book? Do you find that your feelings for the people that you love mean that you care about them whatever they are like?
POPSICLE GIRL

The worst part of being frozen was thawing out again. (p18)

As a punishment for theft, Chandni had been sentenced to be frozen for a length of time in freezer-prison. Often these sentences were for years, so that when you were unfrozen and released, the world had moved on, whilst you were still the same age and at the same place in your mind as when you were imprisoned.

Find out about cryonics and cryopreservation – the nearest that science in our world has come, so far, to this suspended animation practice.

More things to think about

They clamped the head in a stand to keep it upright, and connected pipes and cables to the ducts which dangled where her neck had been. (p163)

Can you think of some more stories where a head is (almost) able to act independently of its body?

How about Nearly Headless Nick in the Harry Potter books? Or the Green Knight in the Arthurian legend Sir Gawain and the Green Knight?

How about stories where severed hands or feet still have a life of their own – like the ‘Hand’ in The Haunting of Hiram by Eva Ibbotson, and ‘The Feet’ in her book The Beasts of Clawstone Castle?

He had changed the chameleon settings on his poncho so that it was bright orange, in the hope that somebody would spot him... (p52)

They were good clothes: a video-fabric kurta... (p19)

What do you think these fabrics are like? Imagine some more amazing materials!

Nova had a whole collection of movies stored in one of the attics of her mind (p134)

When Nova’s head is separated from her body, she watches her favourite films to pass the time. What are the films that you like best and enjoy watching over and over again?

‘How can there be a new K-gate?’ she asked... ‘Of course it’s not possible,’ snapped her uncle. ‘...This is a hoax. Doctored footage and an old train rigged out in fancy dress... (p259)

‘We will announce that the K-gate is just a clever hoax’. (p269)

Laria and her uncle can’t believe that the news on screen about a new K-gate is true – and then one of the Guardians proposes that they twist the news so that it looks as if there is a plot by Threnody Noon.

The concept of ‘fake news’ is in the news a lot at the moment – talk about what it is and how it might be used. Can you think of any examples of this?

THE TRAINS

The loco seemed to sense Threnody’s touch. It sort of purred deep down inside itself, and two red lights glowed like fiery eyes up among the complications of its armour. (p87)

The trains are sentient machines, as intelligent as humans – each of them has its own character. Which are your favourites? The caring Damask Rose or the cheeky Ghost Wolf? What do you think Heavy Weather might be like – or Crystal Horizon?

Collect the train names in Black Light Express and suggest some more. They could be the titles of forgotten songs, or of poems or artworks. How about The Angel of the North? What kind of train might this be? Or Better Than Revenge, or The Gruffalo?!
Threnody and Chandni find Ghost Wolf in a Network store for old trains – *It was always a problem, what to do with old trains. You couldn’t just scrap them when they became outmoded.* (p86)

Why couldn’t you scrap them? What happens now with old trains, ships, and planes? Find out about the ‘aviation graveyards’ in the deserts of California.

**ALIENS**

Through the new K-gate, Zen and Nova enter the Web of Worlds and meet up with fascinating non-human creatures: the Neem, the Krait, the Ones Who Remember the Sea, the Hath, and the Herastec.

Can you match these names with their descriptions below?

1. Three-legged antelopes with black glass masks
2. A squid which has somehow learned to walk on land
3. Old bleached tents with papery swags of skin and starfish limbs
4. A chunky, spiny, alien-looking gigantic spider crab with a shell stencilled with strange hieroglyphics
5. Muscly man-sized lizards with flat faces and wide mouths
Draw a picture
Try drawing a picture of the Kraitt’s female leader: the Tzeld Gekh Karneiss – pages 138, 140, 150, 152, and 180 will tell you what she looks like!

MORE PICTURES
The author, Philip Reeve, creates striking pictures with words of the worlds and creatures in this story. Here are some of them – choose one and create your own picture with paint, crayons, or collage:

At the centre of the Network lay the planet called Grand Central … a sprawling city had grown up there: a green city, more like a beautifully managed forest, with tall buildings rising here and there above the trees – see p24 for more of this description of Grand Central.

The Black Light Express was travelling across the floor of an immense dome. The space above it was criss-crossed by soaring viaducts… – see p214 for more of this description of the dome.

The volcanoes spoke. They opened their hot red throats and roared. They built towers of smoke and decked them with multi-coloured lightning. The dry plains west of the Fire Station stretched and yawned, and fans of lava sprayed into the sky. (p275)

And on page 266 are descriptions of the Guardians – the AIs who watch over human affairs. Perhaps you can use these as inspiration for your artwork or cartoons!
Create a Black Light Express storyboard

So much happens in this book – lots of pace and excitement and amazing creatures and places! Individually or in groups, talk about and recall the main scenes – what happens, and when! – and make a storyboard showing the sequence of the adventures of Zen, Nova, Threnody, and Chandni.

TELL PEOPLE ABOUT BLACK LIGHT EXPRESS!

What would you say about this book if you were recommending it on a radio or TV programme? Prepare a simple script, saying briefly what the story is about, what you liked about it, and why you would recommend it.

Rehearse this and then get someone to film you, or film yourself on your phone, and share your review with your friends!

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

…the old red train carried him back to the Network Empire, where the rest of his life was waiting to begin. (p303)

Is there a Railmaker? Will Zen and Nova get together again? What might The Twins and the other Guardians have in store for them?
### More reading

#### More books by Philip Reeve

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#### with Sarah McIntyre

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#### BOOKS BY OTHER AUTHORS ABOUT TRAINS...

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#### ...AND SCIENCE FICTION

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#### NON-FICTION ABOUT SPACE, ROBOTS AND ALIENS

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ANSWERS

RECAP QUIZ
1. a)
2. b)
3. b)
4. a)
5. c)
6. b)
7. a)
8. c)
9. b)
10. c)

ALIENS
1. The Herastec
2. The Ones Who Remember the Sea
3. The Hath
4. The Neem
5. The Kraitt