



The Phoenix Files: Mutation
By Chris Mophew

Summary

The plot thickens in this episode as we count down the days to the end of the world. Jordan, Peter and Luke now have tracking devices embedded in them, ones with the power to inflict irreparable damage. The trio also has an eight p.m. curfew. As the title of this episode suggests, strange things are happening to some of the inhabitants of Phoenix.

The story opens with Officer Reeve's funeral and Shackleton's insincere eulogy. The ceremony is rudely interrupted by an enormous explosion in the bush behind the ceremony and a fireball. A huge crater, the size of a house, appears in the ground as if the explosion came from below ground. Shackleton blames the fireball on our three protagonists, and the townspeople accept their culpability, even though Luke, Jordan and Peter were visibly present at the funeral when the explosion happened. There is little support for Jordan, Luke and Peter in Phoenix. In this book, as Armageddon draws nearer, Mike, Cathryn and Tank are up to something, and it is not only Jordan who is developing strange powers.

The first book, *Arrival*, set up the scenario of the town run by ruthless despots and their sinister plan for those beyond the town of Phoenix. The second, *Contact*, revealed more of the conspiracy and some horrendous examples of what was in store for those not protected from Tabitha. This one, as the title suggests, reveals what is happening to some of the inhabitants of Phoenix, but explanations must wait for a later installment. It becomes apparent that there are more inhabitants of the town than Peter, Jordan and Luke have known about. It's all about expectation – what is happening to the three and their families?

The first two books in this series are page-turners, and this one is no exception. It would make an excellent text for small group focus and discussion, with readers progressing through it together, making predictions and piecing the puzzle together as they go.

Mutations

We are not long into the book when it becomes apparent that Crazy Bill and Jordan are not the only ones to be experiencing unusual behaviors or incidents.

- Jeremy, in year seven, has something wrong with him – his handmarks on Jordan's skin turn it white. (p37) She and Luke are worried that such changes signal mutations like they have seen with Crazy Bill. (p43)
- Jordan mom's baby is growing much faster than normal. She became pregnant after the move to Phoenix. The baby is now due on Day Zero, August 13. Plot this into your records.
- Peter is increasingly suffering from outbursts of violence.



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- He becomes irrationally angry at Luke. (p64)
 - Jordan thinks there is something different about his anger – more out of control. (p65)
 - Peter blows up again – he is getting worse. (p82)
 - He attacks Mr. Hanger in a frenzied rage – “all instinct, all animal rage.” (p177-178) What is happening to him? Is something/someone controlling him? (p179)
 - He says to Jordan, “They were going to hurt you.” (p180) Does this give us a clue as to the increasing rages?
- Georgia, Jordan's little sister, can read minds, or hear thoughts. (p55)
 - When Georgia is comforted by Arthur van Pelt, she scrabbles to get away from him, saying, “He wants to hurt everybody.” (p86) Jordan is worried that Shackleton will punish Georgia for this.
 - Georgia reads Jordan's mind again. (p255)
 - Jordan's visions are becoming more frequent, but not much clearer of purpose.
 - Jordan has a flashback to the week before and sees a number 1308 on Dr. Montag's arm. (p27) Any ideas?
 - Jordan has another vision. (p78) Up until now, they have been memories, but this one is of a future event. She sees Mike, Cat and Tank at night, escaping from the supermarket with a basket full of food, and timing their escape. What can it mean? This reminds us that Cat was talking about time at the locker. Mike has a black notebook he is concerned to keep with him.
 - Jordan has another vision in the cave, of Mike, Cat and Tank blindfolded, with tattoos on their shoulders – the circle with spirals (in the “O” on the cover of the notebook). (p132) Mike speaks of “destiny” – what do you make of this? (p134)
 - Jordan tries to make sense of the reasons for her visions. (p150)
 - She sees the landscape with the whole town gone and then a two-story concrete building with the spiral logo on it. (p165) Any suggestions?
 - Jordan has another vision: she sees herself and Luke, both wounded and bloodied, running in the bush and being shot at. (p233) How weird would it be to see yourself in the future?

Do the particular mutations spring from the personality or character of the person who exhibits them? Does this suggest where the scenario might head in future books?

Characters

Jordan

- We see her from the inside as she is recounting events in this book. She is brave and determined. She knows she is disappointing her parents, but can't tell them what is happening for fear of what it might mean for them. She is concerned that they already suspect there is something going on.



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- She is spirited, challenging the official version of events by drawing attention to the impossibility of being in two places at once, at the dinner table with Dr. Montag at Luke's house. (p46)
 - She is headstrong – doesn't want to wait, such as when she steals Mike's notebook. (pp90-91)
 - Is she too tough on Peter? Unable to put herself in Peter's shoes and understand his feelings for her?
 - She is a strong heroine who initiates actions and never needs saving.

Georgia

- Jordan's lively six-year-old sister is developing powers of her own: she "heard" Jordan say "Tabitha" in her mind, and was frightened by it. (p55)
- She reacts when she is held by van Pelt and yells out that he wants to hurt everyone. (p86)
- She says to her mother that she doesn't have to speak anymore. Georgia hears her thoughts. (p104)

Peter

- We see him through Jordan's eyes: she sees him as erratic.
- He still thinks he has a chance with Jordan. But Cathryn is after him. On page 153 Cat kisses him. Do you think she is being told to do this?
- He's still as rude as ever to teachers. (p98)
- He declares his love for Jordan. What do you make of this? (p170)
- He appears to be reviving his friendship with Mike and company. Why are they courting him? Will it compromise him?

Luke

- Jordan sees him as "straightforward."
- He is the most cautious of the three, the most aware of consequences.
- He's loyal to Jordan and Peter, even when he is reluctant to be involved in their actions.
- Luke is afraid his father has been killed, but still hopes his dad might effect a rescue. Which scenario is the likeliest?



Mike, Cathryn and Tank

- These three are going to play a greater role in the events to follow, but it isn't clear at this stage what exactly is happening with them. They have been branded with tattoos, and seem to believe fervently in the "overseers" who are leading or manipulating them. Luke suggests that their destiny might be to get rid of Shackleton. (p151) Do you think this is likely? If so, who are these overseers?
- Peter, Jordan and Luke discover Cathryn, Tank and Mike getting a letter out of a locker with a false bottom, which goes down to the tunnels underneath Phoenix. Who are the "they" Tank refers to? Why does Mike ask Peter to hang out with them? (p68)
- Why would Cathryn, Mike and Tank steal from the Shackleton Cooperative if they were working for Shackleton?
- Jordan thinks they are working for Shackleton. Do you agree? Is this ambiguity to keep readers off the trail? (p91)

The plot thickens

In these novels it is important to take notice of small details to build up a picture of what is happening in Phoenix. A lot of the pleasure is in trying to figure out the motives and grand plan of the Shackleton mob. A class wiki would be perfect for this, with students adding pieces of the puzzle. Ideas added need argument/supporting evidence. This could be mapped onto what is already known from the first two books.

- Arthur van Pelt is in charge of the mall. (p72) There have been breaches of the mall and groceries stolen. Who might have broken in and why?
- Peter's father wants to know what is going on in order to protect Peter. He's the first parent to query anything. (p75) What does this suggest? Jordan and Luke play dumb to protect him.
- Jordan reads Mike's notebook. (p101) What do you think of what she finds? Do you think she is making the right connections? Who are the two people in white? She sees them as sinister angels: "The kind that strike you down in awe and terror." (p102) What does this ambiguity (terrifying angels) suggest about these figures?
- Jordan is concerned that Dr. Montag is examining Georgia from more than her health.
- There are strange drawings in Mike's notebook, which appear in Jordan's nightmares. (p103)
- Mike tries to steal back his notebook and says he made up the figures. Jordan is unconvinced. (p109) Are you?
- The three try to unravel what Mike's notebook reveals – dates, the locker, the creepy figures in white, drawings of the bush. (p114) Invite students to draw or create on the



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computer what they envisage the white figures to look like, or create the pages in Mike's notebook.

- Peter recognizes the lake, and so they head out to it, but Jordan has misgivings and realizes what Mike and the others are doing has nothing to do with Shackleton, but "something else." (p116-118) Any ideas what this might be? Record suggestions on the class wiki for future verification.
- Jordan wonders how there is dense bush land inside the wall and wasteland outside. (p123) Any ideas?
- They locate the lake and a cave with a rope bolted to the floor. (p1125-129) This location could be added to the map that has been drawn from the previous books. When it is looked at in proximity to what is already known, does it give any clues as to what the overseers might be up to?
- Description of the cave with a stone table, stools and candles. Jordan thinks it is like something out of a cult. (p130) What are your reactions and interpretations? Are any patterns emerging?
- Mike calls the people they are involved with "overseers." (p144) What are the implications of that word and what might they mean for the story?
- Cathryn believes the three friends are the killers of people in the DVD. (p151) Do you think the overseers have perhaps fed her this view?
- Peter thinks Bill might be behind Cathryn, Mark and Tank since he said, "find me under the ground." (p155) Do you agree with him? What do you think his motives would be? Why haven't we heard of/from Bill in this book?
- Compulsory blood tests are being carried out. (p156) Why do you think this is? What do they hope to monitor/find out? A clue might be in Georgia's blood test "turning up something." (p158)
- Jordan sees a vision of the area in the future or the past – the town is gone and the only thing left is a concrete building with the circle logo on its side. (p164) Is this post-Tabitha, do you think? If so, does that mean Jordan survives? Does anyone else? Or could it be before the construction of Phoenix, signifying that the overseers were there first?
- Jordan thinks the blood tests for everyone at school are a response to Georgia's outburst at the mall. (p171) What do you think?
- Shackleton orders Peter's suppressor to be activated. Peter bravely still tries to attack him, but is rendered incapacitated. It is now down to only two opponents of Shackleton – Jordan and Luke. (p191)



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- Shackleton continues to exhibit lack of empathy and psychopathic tendencies. (p192)
 - Peter goes missing from the medical center. His parents are distraught. (p204) What do you predict has happened to him?
 - Mr. Weir knows that awful things are happening, but feels powerless. (p209)
 - Jordan thinks about how much longer all of this could stay secret. (p209) What do you think? Is it going to blow open soon?
 - Officer Calvin takes Jordan and Peter out to the airport and asks them where Peter is. (p214-215)
 - Jordan thinks maybe Calvin is acting against the wishes of Shackleton. (p216)
 - Calvin appears determined to shoot one or both of them. He doesn't believe that they don't know where Peter is. (p217) Where is he? Why isn't his tracking device activated? Is he somewhere where he can't be tracked? Has the device been neutralized?
 - Jordan fights back and then is shocked when Calvin cries and says, "I'm sorry," to her, gets in the van and drives off and leaves them. (p219) What are the possible interpretations of this? Is something terrible about to happen? Has he done something to Peter? Did Jordan touching him have an effect on him?
 - There is no sign of Calvin around town. (p220) What happened to him?
 - Jordan sneaks up on Mike and Cathryn and overhears Mike say they will send a message to the overseers and bring them an offering. (p224) What is this about? What could an offering be? Could it be a person? Why would they need an offering? Are they part of a cult?
 - Dr. Montag delivers a message: All the people were chosen because of their genetic criteria, that is, resistance to the Tabitha weapon. But it turns out that neither Luke nor his mother is a correct candidate, so as soon as Shackleton finds out they will die. Montag has not revealed that yet. (p227) Why not? Are his relationships going to interfere with the plan? What do you think this means for Luke and his mother? Will they be disposed of?
 - Cathryn reveals that she, Mike and Tank kidnapped Peter. (p236) Why would they do that? Is Peter the "offering" she mentioned earlier? If so, what does it mean for him?
 - Cathryn says the overseers are the ones in charge and they needed Peter. (p238) Why? Who are they? Alien beings? Government operatives who have known about Phoenix and Tabitha all along? What are the possibilities? Add all ideas to the wiki.



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- Cat reveals that the three of them meet the overseers at the cave which is “a sacred place,” and they have to be blindfolded. (p238)
 - Cathryn reveals that the overseers said Peter was dangerous and had to be lured away. For the three to be able to “kidnap” Peter, the overseers must have access to the town security. (p241) Are they anyone we know?
 - Mike bashes Peter and they leave him in the crater, badly hurt and bleeding. (p242) Are they being controlled?
 - Jordan and Luke decide to enlist Peter's dad's help. He agrees to create a diversion while the two go in search of Peter at the crater. (p248)
 - Tension is building: Jordan's parents want to return to Brisbane and are getting tired of the stalling tactics. (p252) When will they see what Phoenix is all about?
 - The bizarre nature of their lives: “Life and death covert rescue mission. Then math.” (p253) Is this an important part of the suspense?
 - Luke and Jordan go to the crater and find evidence of Peter being bashed, but Mike and Tank confront them. (p266)
 - Tank reveals that the overseers didn't tell them to hurt Peter. They did that by themselves. (p269) Why would they do this to Peter who was their friend? Are they “mutated” in a moral sense?
 - They fight and Jordan accidentally breaks Mike's arm. (p278)
 - It is very tense as Luke and Jordan climb the rope with Tank after them, only to be caught by Officer Calvin. He gets Tank and Mike to leave, and Jordan is worried that he is getting rid of witnesses to their demise. But the other guards challenge him. (p276-278)
 - Jordan's vision turns out to be right. (p297) Are these visions saving her?
 - In this underground building someone has been watching the town on the bank of computers. Luke and Jordan find files and images of themselves from before they came to Phoenix. (p303) Does this help you predict who the overseers are?

Thriller genre characteristics

Examining the structure of a novel can be appealing, engaging and enlightening and empowering in determining where the story might be heading. These elements can also be used to assist writing in the genre. Thrillers typically have:

- Fast pace
- Frequent action



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- Resourceful heroes who must thwart the plans of more powerful and better-equipped villains
 - Crimes to be prevented, rather than solved as in a mystery
 - Writing style that uses
 - Suspense
 - Red herrings
 - Cliffhangers
 - Exotic or unusual locations
 - Protagonists who are often ordinary citizens drawn in to danger
 - Female lead characters as well as more traditionally male ones
 - Supernatural elements (almost a subgenre)
 - A mood of fearful excitement (very important)
 - Tightly controlled plots that reveal elements in small pieces to maintain suspense

Brainstorm how many thrillers the class can identify – books, movies, television shows. Do they have the characteristics defined above? Who enjoys them and who doesn't? What is it about the genre that is liked/disliked? Has the class identified any subgenres of thrillers?

Writing examples

- There is someone in Jordan's room. (p106) This is suspenseful writing. What elements make it so suspenseful? Write a short piece using these elements of language.
- Shackleton's manipulation of events in the media, his use of scapegoating, exaggeration, close-up photos. (p188) Is this view of how easily the press can be manipulated too cynical, or just a symptom of Shackleton's pathology? How easy is it to do? Take an incident out of the local/daily newspaper, or off the web, or choose an event at school or something that has happened to you and your friends. Write it to manipulate readers to a particular interpretation of the events. Have a catchy headline, use emotive language, exaggeration and strong images to support your view. Now rewrite it from an alternative perspective.
- A lot of tension in the novel is about what Shackleton is up to. Invite the students, individually, with a partner or in a small group, to write some of these events from Shackleton's point of view. What is he thinking, planning? What are his motives? Does this give clues to where the story might be heading?

Ideas

- "They'd all been so well trained to think the worst of us that they were more than willing to believe Peter had brought his injuries on himself." (p194) Why is this so easy? Do we tend to go along with a generally accepted view? Can you think of any parallels in our society where this has occurred or is occurring?
- Why do the kids protect their parents from the knowledge of what is really happening in Phoenix? Jordan says on page 202 she doesn't want to put them in danger. Do you



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think the parents would like to know, or are they in denial? Is that why they were chosen? Compliant personalities? Why doesn't Jordan tell her dad? Would you tell in their situation?

Readers' theater

There are excellent episodes for readers' theater in this book, which would allow students to express fear, tension and excitement and interpret the characters. One example is the dinner party on pages 44-49, but there are many others.

Intertextual references

- *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* – resonances? (p113)
- "The Twilight Zone" – television series popular in the 1960s. You can watch some episodes on YouTube. What connections can you make between this television series and the trilogy?

The symbol

- What do you think about the symbol that Jeremy was drawing (p53) when Tank lays into him, and that Mike, Cat and Tank have tattooed on them.

Visual interpretation

Most readers would have clear images in their minds about what Phoenix looks like with its uniform housing, bicycle paths, intimidating Shackleton headquarters, as well as what they think Jordan, Luke, Peter, Mike, Cathryn, Tank, Shackleton, Calvin, Montag look like. In a small group, create a short 2 to 3 minute book trailer for *Mutation*, using i-Movie, Moviemaker, Photostory, ComicLife or I Can Animate (if you wanted to do stop-motion). Discuss what mood you think is best for your trailer and how music would help in conveying it. Does it need voiceover/sound effects/text as well as image? Present these trailers to the class to see the variety of interpretations. This could be used for assessment – it will reveal much about how the book is being read, responded to and understood. The trailers could be presented to other classes who could be asked who would buy the book on the basis of the trailer, etc.

Related Reading

The Watertower, Beneath the Surface by Gary Crew and Steven Woolman
The Hunger Games series by Suzanne Collins
Remote Control, Hit List, Third Transmission by Jack Heath



Map of the town

This map is taken from Chris Mophew's website and could be used as a basis for a more detailed, even 3-dimensional, version constructed by the students.



Study Guide adapted from Teacher's Notes by Dr. Pam Macintyre from Hardie Grant Egmont.