



***Oculum* by Philippa Dowding Teacher's Guide**

Created by Martha Brack Martin and Philippa Dowding with support from the Cormorant Team.

Oculum is a fast-paced, dystopian middle grade novel told in alternating perspectives. The strong characters of Miranda¹, William¹, and Mannfred are struggling to make sense of their particular realities and the recent events that have caused their understanding of these worlds to change. It is an engaging story that will provoke thoughtful conversations among its readers. It would also be a wonderful choice to support curricula focusing on environmental issues, STEM, and different civilizations, past and present.

Themes

Some key themes and “big ideas” in this book include:

- Global warming and environmental destruction
- Survival
- Found families
- Loss of individualism and free thought
- What does it take to be human?
- Rebellion

The Plot

The world is slowly recovering after environmental collapse, and the children of the automated, domed city of Oculum have begun to awaken. Miranda, William, and the 998 other children wake to tend the fruit trees and gardens behind the thick, opaque walls of their world. Some speak quietly of Outside, which is forbidden. Until William finds a door...

The children outside the dome of Oculum — Mann, Cranker, and others raised by Grannie — live among the rubble of the old destroyed city. They live with hunger, hard work, and stories about a time before the fall, of buggies without horses, light without fire...and magical fruit called “peaches.” But it must be lies, until one day Mann and Cranker get close enough to the ancient dome to find...a door...

The Setting

This story takes place in the future, in a world ruined by global warming, pollution, and mass environmental destruction.

What Kind of Reader Will Love This Book? One who...

- Loves dystopian and science fiction genres
- Is fascinated by the idea of a society ruled and run by robots
- Has a strong social conscience and a passion for environmental issues
- Likes books with strong characters who aren’t afraid to take risks and challenge authority
- Enjoys stories told in the alternating voices of characters

Pre-Teaching Prep

To fully appreciate this novel, students should have some familiarity with current global environmental issues. Discuss as a class what students consider the “most concerning global environmental issue in the world today.” Are they able to offer a number of relevant options? Depending on their understanding, you may wish to explore some specific topics in greater detail before beginning the book. Alternatively, if they have enough general knowledge, you may decide to have them investigate relevant topics after the story ends and share their knowledge with the class.

Chapter Questions (for Independent Work or Class Discussion)

Pick and choose the questions that work for *your* students in *your* classroom. Use as many or as few as you like. All page number references are from the first edition (2018).

Before the Story Begins

1. Before the story officially begins, the author shares both the definition of the word “oculum” and a poem.
 - a. What are your thoughts, as a reader, when you read the definition?
 - b. What questions arise in your mind when you read the poem?
 - c. Why do you think the author has chosen to share these elements before beginning the actual narration? How does their content affect the readers? Explain your thoughts.

Chapter 1: Miranda1 (pages 1-12)

2. What is your first clue that Miranda and Mother are not your average mother-daughter pair?
3. There seems to be a great deal of attention put on the value of seeds and the fruit they bear. Why do you think this is so important to Miranda's community?
4. Jake47 has gotten in trouble because he's listened to gossip about what is outside Oculum. We learn he's only 11 and that Miranda is supposed to punish him for this. Do you think that's fair? What does this tell us about the way Oculum is governed?
5. Jake47 mentions "Fandoms" on page 6. In your opinion, what might these Fandoms be?
6. Create a graphic organizer of your choice (e.g., chart, mindmap, etc.) and record information you learn about Oculum using jot notes. Think about how the community is organized, daily life, key figures in the community, etc.
7. On page 12, Miranda1 is shocked by what William1 shows her. Look at the way the author describes her thoughts. Why is this discovery such a big deal?

Chapter 2: Mannfred (pages 13-26)

8. This chapter introduces us to a very different society from Oculum. What do you notice about Mannfred's world? What do you wonder about it? Make a T-chart outlining things you notice on one side, and questions you may have about it on the other side.
9. What are the "Olden Begones" that Mann mentions on page 17? How do you think they came up with that name?
10. Why does Grannie say, "What I wouldn't give for a peach" (p. 16)?
11. Why do they call their visitor "the Shiny Man"? What would you call him if you were in their community? Explain your thoughts.
12. Where do you predict the children in this chapter began their lives before arriving in Granny's care? On what do you base your prediction?
13. Pick two adjectives you feel describe Mannfred's character. Use specific words or scenes from the chapter as evidence for your choices.
14. What do you suppose causes the Black Rain? Share your ideas with a partner.

Chapter 3: Miranda1 (pages 27-34)

15. In this chapter we learn more about Oculum. Add any new information you have gained from this chapter to your graphic organizers from chapter 1.
16. Would you like to live in Oculum? Why or why not?
17. The author manages to give human touches to the machines in Oculum, making them seem more human. How does the author do this?
18. What does the name "Regulus" mean?
 - a) Using your research skills, try to find at least three meanings for this word.
 - b) Knowing its meanings, why do you think the author chose it for the character in the story?
19. Why do you suppose it is forbidden to speak about "love" in Oculum (p. 34)? Since it is forbidden, why does William1 tell Regulus he and Miranda1 are in love? Explain your thoughts.

20. What message do you think William is trying to send to Miranda when he mouths the words, "THE DOOR" (p. 34)?

Chapter 4: Mannfred (pages 35-42)

21. On page 36, Mann mentions that some of the people in their village "got Dying Fever and went for good." Why do you suppose only some people died of this fever, and not everyone? Does this remind you of anything in our world today? Explain.
22. As Grannie and her children leave their home, we see more of the countryside as they travel. Mann says, "We have to be wary and watch careful" (p. 40). What do you think they are worried about?
23. Why do you suppose the one-eyed dog follows Grannie and her crew on their journey?

Chapter 5: Miranda1 (pages 43-49)

24. The children of Oculum occasionally hear stories read aloud from an old, precious book they call the Willbook. In this chapter, Miranda hears one of her favorite stories from this book, about a girl who is also named Miranda and lives on an enchanted island (p. 44). Why might the author have chosen to include a story with a character also named Miranda? What might her purpose be?
25. Both Miranda and her "Mother" show they are changing in this chapter. In what ways are they behaving differently?
26. If you were Miranda, would you venture out to meet William1 at the door? Why or why not?

Chapter 6: Mannfred (pages 50-56)

27. The city gates are a real experience for Grannie's crew of children. What do you think would happen if Grannie didn't bribe the gatekeepers? Prove your answer with evidence from the text and your own ideas.
28. Cranker seems more streetwise than Mann, even though they both have the same background and experiences. Where do we see that in this chapter?

Chapter 7: Miranda1 (pages 57-66)

29. William has been given a book from his Mother and tells Miranda, "There are so many answers in this book..." (p. 63).
- What do you think the book says about the children of Oculum and their world?
 - Why do you suppose William's Mother was supposed to give it to him on the day he first speaks of love?

Discuss your ideas in a small group, and then share them with the class.

30. Are you surprised at William's actions in this chapter? Why or why not?
31. The sentries pay no attention to William once he goes through the door. Miranda says, "Instead they only focus on me" (p. 66). Why do you think this is the case?
32. How would you handle the situation in which Miranda finds herself at the end of the chapter? Describe what you would do and say, and explain why.

Chapter 8: Mannfred (pages 67-76)

33. Carefully read pages 69-71 again. Look at the description of what Mann sees as he walks through the city. Based on all of this, in what time period do you believe the story is set? Explain your reasoning.
34. On page 70, Mann describes some vehicles he sees, left along the road. What are they?
35. He says, "Some of them been busted up, and used for shiny" (p. 70). Here "shiny" is used as a noun. What word or phrase would you use as a synonym for "shiny" in this sentence?
36. Mann and Cranker notice a lot of things we recognize as today's technology. Mann even asks Grannie about one, and she admits that she knows what it is as she says, "It's an old way of sending messages, Mann. A useless magic from the Olden Begones" (p. 72). Do you think Grannie recognizes it herself, or has this knowledge just been passed down to her from those who came before her? Share your ideas with your classmates.
37. Mann observes, "They were interested in this magic, I think, it's everywhere. But it didn't save them from the Black Rain, the fevers, or the end of the fruit trees" (p. 72). Soon after, Grannie explains to Mann that the symbol on all these bits of technology they are spotting is a symbol for an apple with a bite out of it. In a class discussion, share your ideas about the message(s) and connections the author is trying to suggest in these paragraphs.
38. What discovery do the two boys make at the end of the chapter? How does this discovery make you feel as a reader? Explain.

Chapter 9: Miranda1 (pages 77-84)

39. On page 77 Miranda says, "My William, my best friend and lifelong confidante, is *Outside*." Why is the word "Outside" in italics? Why is it capitalized?
40. Regulus summons Miranda stating "*Miranda1 will appear at Oculum Senate before Regulus at nine o'clock. She will come accompanied by the Mother of Miranda1*" (p. 78). Why are these words in italics?
41. How do you feel about the way Miranda handles the meeting with Regulus? Share your thoughts.
42. Miranda accidentally observes Regulus dealing with the Mother of William1. Regulus is a machine, yet the author describes the scene in a way that makes Regulus seem humanlike. How does she do this? Use quotations from page 83 to prove your ideas.

Chapter 10: Mannfred (pages 85-97)

43. What do we learn about the new character of Jonatan Briar in this chapter?
44. Jonatan tells Grannie and the boys a story about Oculum City. Write a summary of this story using the format for summarizing your teacher has taught you.
45. How does Jonatan Briar's story make you feel?

Chapter 11: Miranda1 (pages 98-102)

46. Regulus pretends to all of Oculum that William1 has died, rather than admitting he escaped out the door. Why do you think Regulus is insisting on this false narrative? He's a robot. Why would he not just admit the truth?
47. Miranda1 has a plan to do something "tomorrow night" (p. 102). What do you predict she will do, and how do you imagine she will do it?

Chapter 12: William1 (pages 103-108)

48. With this chapter we suddenly have a third narrator. How is William's perspective of the world outside Oculum different from that of Mannfred's? Give at least one example that shows their different viewpoints.
49. William creates a variety of different things outside the door of Oculum. At first, they are practical, like his outline of the actual door. By the end of the afternoon, however, he's created much more. In your opinion, why does William make his final creation?
50. What are your thoughts as you read about the creature William encounters at the top of page 108?

Chapter 13: Mannfred (pages 109-115)

51. Mann notices, "...the closer we get to the dome, the more garbage and bigger piles of rubble we walk through" (p. 113). Why do think this is so?
52. Are you surprised when you see who shows up at the very end of the chapter? Why or why not?

Chapter 14: Miranda1 (pages 116-123)

53. Miranda notices that the inhabitants of Oculum seem almost excited by William's supposed death. Why does she think this is so? Use evidence from the novel to prove your ideas.
54. The children of Oculum are taught about grief in the Teaching Hall. How do we learn about grief in our world today? Which do you think provides the better lesson? Why?
55. More than once in this chapter, Miranda notices she is given space when she shows her sadness. Even the sentries seem put off by her tears. Why are people, even today, uncomfortable around crying? How does Miranda use this to her advantage?
56. Using jot notes, make a list of all the things Miranda does in this chapter to prepare for her plan. Now look at your list. What do you think she is going to do, and how is she going to do it?

Chapter 15: Mannfred (pages 124-130)

57. Where does the one-eyed dog lead Mann and Cranker? What reason might it have for doing this?
58. How do the two boys manage to make an impression on their new discovery? What do you predict will happen next? Explain your ideas with evidence from the text and your own ideas.

Chapter 16: Miranda1 (pages 131-139)

59. Despite living a very sheltered life, in this chapter Miranda¹ shows how far her character has developed. Choose two adjectives that describe Miranda as we see her in this chapter. Use evidence from the chapter (e.g., a scene or a phrase) to prove your chosen adjectives are accurate.
60. Why does Miranda say, "I know now that Mother understood love" (p. 136)? How does Mother show this to Miranda?
61. What were your feelings as you read this chapter? How did the author make you feel this way? Explain.

Chapter 17: Mannfred (pages 140-149)

62. The one-eyed dog again leads the boys to a discovery. What is it this time?
63. Cranker leaps into action in this chapter when he and Mann run into the thieves again. What is his idea, and how does it work?
64. Why do you think William¹ spits out the FatRat meat and asks, "How can you eat this" (p. 148)?
65. Why do the boys decide William¹ is crazy, even though they were getting along with him moments before?

Chapter 18: Miranda¹ (pages 150-158)

66. Miranda has made it Outside safely.
 - a. What are Miranda's goals now that she is safely Outside?
 - b. What does Miranda follow to make her way through Oculum City?
 - c. Who does Miranda encounter on her first full day Outside?
67. Why is Miranda so emotional as she continues her journey at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 19: Mannfred (pages 159-169)

68. When William first shows Cranker and Mann the peach, why do they think he's crazy? How does their opinion change once they experience the peach for themselves?
69. The one-eyed dog follows the boys with his new massive dog friend. Suddenly he drops something for Mann to pick up. What is it?
70. Mann says, "I'm beginning to think there's something weird about that dog" (p. 162). How do *you* feel about the dog?
71. In the earlier chapter, after William went through the door, the children of Oculum went through the motions of grieving. In this chapter, the experiences of death and grief are much more real. How do Grannie and the boys deal with their grief? Do you think it is any easier for them, since they have experienced it before? Share your thoughts and ideas with others in the class.

Chapter 20: Miranda¹ (pages 170-173)

72. Miranda wakes up to the two dogs nearby. She names the one-eyed dog Ariel, and the massive gray dog Caliban, after the story in the Willbook. With your teacher's permission and the use of technology, do a search for a reference that includes the names Ariel, Will, Miranda, and Caliban. What do you find?

73. As a reader, how did you feel when you read the end of this chapter? Why?

Chapter 21: Mannfred (pages 174-177)

74. Mann comments that "...Miranda1's got a will of steel" (p. 174). What has convinced him of this? Was she always this way? Discuss your ideas with your peers.

75. On page 176, Mann explains, "The cracks run and run, then stop. We eye the dome, me a little worried and Cranker just about wild with excitement." This quotation perfectly sums up the difference between these two characters. Why do they have such different reactions, do you think? Which one are you most like?

76. What discoveries do the kids make as they enter Oculum through the broken door?

Chapter 22: Miranda1 (pages 178-188)

77. How do the Mothers protect the children of Oculum when they "rise at the call" (p. 186)?

78. Miranda is a natural leader and realizes in this chapter, "...it has been my destiny all my life to lead the children of Oculum and our precious cargo in this moment" (p. 188). Show how she fulfills her destiny by describing the events in this chapter.

Chapter 23: William1 (pages 189-193)

79. William and Grannie discuss the truth of Oculum and try to make sense of what's happening. What has William figured out, and how does it fit with what Miranda and the boys have experienced in the previous chapter?

80. On page 189, Grannie is surprised by what William is telling her, and asks, "You got Mothers in there?" Why do you think this is what interests her the most?

Chapter 24: Mannfred (pages 194-201)

81. Imagine you are one of the one thousand children of Oculum, suddenly Outside after living your life in the dome. Write a brief journal entry, sharing your experiences, hopes, and perhaps your fears.

82. What challenges do you think the group will face, now that they are united and starting their new lives? How do you think they will meet these challenges? Explain your ideas.

Culminating Activities

Give students the opportunity to make connections to the world and themselves, as well as to other texts, and to choose their own way of demonstrating them. Here are some other activities to consider at the end of the novel:

Who Wants to Live in Utopia?

The story of *Oculum* takes place in a dystopian world where all of the current environmental issues our world faces today have destroyed the world as we know it.

Imagine that you have the opportunity to create a perfect, "utopian" world – the opposite of dystopian. What would your ideal world look like? How would it work?

In a group, create a presentation where you promote your utopian world or city to prospective new inhabitants. Be sure to include the name of your “brave new world,” how it is governed, its laws, its fashions, the roles its inhabitants take to make it function, and what makes it ideal.

Pass It On

Jonatan Briar explains that part of his role in life is to share his learning about the past through stories he tells as he travels for work. He received this information growing up in his island home, where the old stories and information are carefully protected and saved. This oral tradition of storytelling is the way many cultures have historically shared their knowledge.

Consider our world today. How would our most important stories, learning, and cultural treasures survive us? How could we pass on our culture and knowledge if our present world was destroyed?

- a) What do you believe would be most important from our culture to share with future generations?
- b) What would you personally most want to share?
- c) Why are these things so important to share, in your opinion?
- d) How would you try to do it?

Create a concept map where you can show your ideas visually, or orally share them in a small group or class discussion.

Go Graphic!

Select a favorite scene or part of the novel. Think about how you could portray it visually. What would you want to include? How would you show what happens with minimum text? What colors would you use? What perspectives would you show?

Now create your own version of a graphic story to portray that section. Create a spread of either eight or sixteen panels, or as your teacher prefers. Use conventions of graphic novels, like panels, gutters, captions, etc. Learn more about what goes into a great graphic novel here: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-create-a-comic-book-step-by-step-guide-for-making-your-own-comics#what-are-the-elements-of-a-good-comic-book>

Sounds Like...

Pick three scenes in the book where you could really “see” the action happening. Imagine these scenes are part of a movie adaptation of the book. What kinds of sound effects or songs would best fit the scenes in the “movie” you imagine?

Design the “soundtrack” for the three scenes you’ve selected. Think about what sound effects might fit well with the action. Find a minimum of three songs and two sound effects. You may even want to create an “audiobook” or old-fashioned “radio play” of the scenes, with the songs and sound effects in the background. Share the soundtrack with your class.

Model World

The world of *Oculum* was, in some ways, a “model world.” Now it is your turn to make it into an actual model world.

Create a model or a diorama of a scene from the book. Use the descriptions from the book to help you portray the scene in detail. Can your classmates figure out the scene you have created? Be prepared to discuss your design choices and your process, as well as why you chose your selected scene.

A Rose by Any Other Name

In the setting of *Oculum*, many things have been given new names. Concrete is referred to as “brick they make the roads out of with little pebbles in it” (p. 114). The past is called the “Olden Begones.” How would you rename things from our world today, if you discovered them as people in the future?

Create a dictionary with new, more descriptive names for at least ten things from our current world. After, share your dictionary with your classmates to see if they can figure out what you are describing.

Exploring the Same Themes in Different Texts

After reading *Oculum*, consider reading *The Giver* or *The Gathering* by Lois Lowry, *City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau, or the book’s sequel, *Oculum Echo*. How are some of the same themes repeated in these stories? How are they handled differently?

Create a presentation comparing the themes in your choice of books, or share your ideas orally in a class discussion or with a friend.

Take Action

The world of *Oculum* is in ruins because of humanity’s poor handling of today’s global, social, and environmental issues. In order to ensure we don’t find ourselves in such a world, we need to take action today to turn things around.

Select an environmental or social issue about which you feel passionately. It could be something “small and local,” like the loss of bee habitat in your community or donating to a shelter, or something on a grander scale, like trying to stop pollution in the world’s oceans or building seed vaults and ensuring food security around the world. Research the issue, and determine at least one specific action you personally could do to make a difference. Take that step and document your results. Share these with the class or your school.

Interview with the Author

Martha: What inspired the story of *Oculum*?

Philippa: The acknowledgements at the back of the book mention that the kernel of the story started with a dream about a robot mother tucking a child into bed. While it's true that the spark of the story started there, there are many inspirations for *Oculum*, some of them lifelong and some more recent.

I've always loved dystopia, ever since I read John Christopher's *The White Mountains* trilogy as a child. I still read dystopian fiction as much as I can. So, the genre appealed to me right from the start, and I've always known that I would one day write a dystopia.

The interest in environmental issues started early, too. When I was in university, I lived for six months on the Athabasca Glacier in Alberta. It was a fantastic summer, and I hiked all over the glacier, the mountains, and onto the Columbia Icefield. When I went back to visit the glacier thirty years later, I was shocked at how much it had shrunk. I mean really shocked, so shocked that I stood and cried. The loss of the bulk of the beautiful glacier that I loved really brought home to me what we are doing to the planet. After that, I knew any dystopia I wrote would be an environmental dystopia.

Add to that the increasing disparity between rich and poor in the world, the rise of technology as both the cause of and answer to our current economic and environmental problems, and you have the perfect storyline: robots raising humans in the wasteland after environmental and societal collapse. As a society, we would have to choose: who lives in the dome, and who has to survive in the ruins? I wondered which group of kids would be best suited to thrive in the new world they inherit? Or would the children survive best when united and working together?

There is also a pandemic in the story, the Dying Fever, but that wasn't inspiration, I just paid attention to the history books. *Oculum* was published in 2018 (and written a few years before that) so it was produced entirely pre-Covid. Still it was unsettling to be so weirdly accurate on that aspect of the story.

So *Oculum* came together out of a lifetime of different influences, including a love of dystopia, an interest in technology, a lot of reading, and a summer spent on a glacier.

Martha: I'm just curious. Were you influenced by the Sky Dome in Toronto? Or Auroville in India?



Photo by Andrea Gutsche

Philippa: Oh yes, Sky Dome is definitely the prototype for the Oculum dome (I'll have to find out more about Auroville). It was a huge deal for Toronto when Sky Dome was being built in the 1980s. There was an excitement and mystique around this enormous, new, state-of-the-art dome with a retractable roof. How would the roof retract? It was a huge engineering challenge. And how would it feel to sit inside the dome when it was closed (no more spring baseball games in the snow!), and what if it opened while you were in it?

It sounds sweetly innocent now, but the first time I was at a Blue Jays game where the roof opened during the game, I was sitting near the top of the last row of stands. The sound of the wheels rolling behind me as the roof folded into itself filled me with awe, like watching a rocket take off or something. It was very cool and exciting to be sitting in this marvel of modern engineering, a unique world-class building.

When you read *Oculum*, I spend a lot of time describing what it sounds like when the Oculum Arm raises the roof of that domed world (no folding roof in my story), or how overjoyed everyone is when the fresh air flows in or when the Black Rain is kept out. There's a definite scent of humanity and a muffled soundscape to a closed dome with a lot of people in it, I capture that too. So yes, Sky Dome is very much the blueprint for the dome in *Oculum*. Thanks for asking this great question!

Martha: There are some lovely connections to Shakespeare and *The Tempest* in the book. Were those in your mind as you started the book, or did they come along during the process of writing it?

Philippa: *The Tempest* was part of the story from the start, partly because it's my favorite Shakespeare play, but for other reasons, too.

First, let me explain why I wanted one book, a great book, the WillBook, in the story and not a library. I really struggled with that, whether to use just one book or a library of books.

If I put a library of great books in the story, I reasoned that I'd also need a librarian, a keeper of the truth, a defender of knowledge. In a dystopia, knowledge and truth are the first things to die, and since the librarian would be a threat to the leader Regulus, suddenly I was writing a subplot struggle between the librarian-defender-of-truth, and Regulus-creator-of-lies. It got a bit complicated for the story I was trying to tell.

So, I decided on no librarian and just one book for the children of Oculum. A single book is symbolic of the desperate situation: if all knowledge and art is to be distilled into one book, what book should it be?

I cheated. I chose *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare*! My copy has 37 plays, 6 poems, and 154 sonnets, so there are many stories and poems bound in one book.

Of course, one of those plays is *The Tempest*, whose main character is also Miranda. There are loose connections between *The Tempest* and *Oculum*: both Mirandas live a very isolated life,

one on an island and one in a dome, both are in a state of innocence and know nothing of men or humanity as they grow up, and yet despite that careful upbringing, both choose messy freedom and life at the end of the story.

That's kind of a long answer to say that yes, *The Tempest* was part of *Oculum* from the beginning.

Martha: Did you stick closely to your initial vision for this book, or did you find yourself making significant changes as the writing progressed?

Philippa: Of all my books, this one is probably closest to what I imagined from the start.

That original spark for the story, that dream of the mother robot tucking in her child, came with a whole subset of thoughts and emotions: why is the mother a robot, why is the child so accepting of the robot mother, what limitations or advantages would a robot parent have over a human parent in a post-apocalyptic world? Can she whistle, does she hum, can she cook, is she fearful, is she programmed for a particular purpose, does she have mother-bear instinct in her? Can she play, can she love? All that arrived in the dream or as I began to think more about her, and it was all there as I wrote the book, slowly examining all aspects of this robot mother. Since she was so clear for me, everything else fell into place around her.

And of course, once I created her, then I needed a human counterpart to balance her, so the fierce character of Grannie appeared. I've always wanted to write a tough, strong, smart, loving, older woman character in one of my books, since you so seldom find them. Grannie came to life pretty vividly, too.

Martha: You chose to tell the story through alternating narrative voices. Did you write each character's chapters first and then intersperse them, or write them as they are in the book? I would think it would be challenging to "switch voices" when Mann's is so different from Miranda's and William's.

Philippa: I'm a very linear storyteller. I can only tell the story as it unrolls forward from one chapter to the next, so I wrote it exactly as you read it, in order, switching voices as I went.

This is also because I had to get to know each character slowly, and at the same pace. I couldn't rush ahead with Mannfred and Cranker's story, then go back and develop Miranda, because she had to come to life, she had to reveal herself to me, in tandem with Mannfred and Cranker. This tied them together in real time for me; as Miranda wandered the heath, I could see Mann and Cranker on the porch with William, sharing his peach, carrying him to Grannie after Miranda had just left her. The story wouldn't have developed with such delicacy if I'd written one storyline first then added the second, they had to develop together, grow up together, struggle together, in real time in my head as I wrote it.

As to switching voices, I found it easy. Since they are so different in tone, it was always clear who I was writing. I did keep a good journal for this book and kept meticulous running notes as I

went, noting what would happen next when I ended a chapter. I had a pretty good road map for where everyone was going and where they were going to end up.

In an interesting way, their language differences helped me to get to know them better, to define them more sharply in their actions and responses. Manfred's language became a big part of who he was as I developed him. I realized that I was digging deep into my childhood and drawing words from my parents and grandparents: festering mercy, hot gob, make water, pester, midden, and so on.

To be completely honest, each time I started a new chapter, I was excited to be with that voice again. I'd been away long enough from that voice to miss them! No one got boring. I was happy to greet the writing day with my character, whichever one it was. That's a perk about writing in two voices, it's nice to get back to a character and storyline you've been away from for a while.

Martha: You mention in your acknowledgements that you are writing for all the "mothers" in the world, and especially those with found families. You even name some specific inspirations. Miranda's "mother" is a robot, yet you managed to make her warm and nurturing. How difficult was that to do?

Philippa: It was actually pretty easy to create a caring and nurturing Mother robot, mostly because of the intensity of that original dream idea. That dream came with a feeling. The deep connection between the robot mother and the child was very vivid. So, I just drew on that. Having children of my own also helped, I was able to pour everything into Mother of Miranda¹ that I have learned mothering my own children, or from watching other mothers and caregivers with their children.

Martha: Peaches take on an almost holy aspect in the story. Are peaches your favorite fruit <grin>?

Philippa: Oddly, I don't love peaches! I know that sounds unlikely, but I grew up on a new subdivision that had once been a peach orchard, and the developer left a lot of the old peach trees on the properties. My backyard had a peach tree, and while it was beautiful and bore so much fruit, I quickly got really sick of the smell of peaches, the taste of peaches, the look of peaches, the frozen peaches on everything in the winter, the angry buzz of wasps wallowing in fermented peaches every autumn, or the bizarre antics of squirrels eating the same. Okay, the squirrels were kind of funny, but I really did get just very tired of peaches.

You're right though, peaches are really important in the story, almost sacred. There's even a peach on the front cover. I chose peaches as a symbol of the planet because they are fragrant, fragile, beautiful, delicious (people tell me), and represent all that we have accomplished in our agricultural development, and all that we stand to lose if we trash the planet forever. They are unique and worth saving, even if I personally don't particularly want to eat one.

Martha: You've carried on the story of *Oculum* into a new book, *Oculum Echo*. Were you always planning a sequel? Will there be a trilogy?

Philippa: The simple answer is no, I didn't plan to write a sequel when I started out with *Oculum*. There is a second book that launched October 2022 called *Oculum Echo*, and a third book, *Oculum Scribe*, is coming soon.

I've never actually sat down and planned out a series from the start, although now I've written three series. I'm not sure why, maybe because it's just so hard to know if you'll get one book published, let alone three. Luckily my series have worked out reasonably well, so I guess it works for me, although it's not a process I would recommend to anyone else. There's a lot of mental gymnastics and teeth gnashing for a while when you try to extend what was a stand-alone book into a trilogy, at first anyway. Hopefully you built a big enough world and left enough open-ended possibilities in book one to develop into something more.

Martha: What do you hope to inspire in your readers as they read these books?

Philippa: I'd really love young readers to be mindful of the present-day, real-world parallels in the books, and think critically about them. I'd like them also to realize that we are better together, that there is hope to be found in each other.

In *Oculum*, I'd want them to think about the environmental crisis we are facing right now, how do Manfred, Cranker, and the Littluns live in their ruined world? How would it be to live in a dome with peaches, but no freedom, like Miranda and William? Would they choose freedom and walk through the door if they could? Or would they stay in *Oculum*? How do Manfred and Cranker handle the pandemic of Dying Fever? What special skills do the children of *Oculum* bring to the world Outside, and how is it the perfect complement to the skills that Manfred and Cranker have with Grannie and the Littluns?

In *Oculum Echo*, I'd like readers to think about the added misery of living through a war, and what that would mean to security, home, the future. In *Oculum Scribe*, I'd like readers to think about our narrative history, and how we keep and tell our own stories.

Ultimately, I'd like young readers to ask themselves what matters most to them in a society? How can we ensure everyone has access to fresh and abundant food, safe air and water, education and literacy, and can freely and safely express themselves? How do we work together to protect ourselves, animals, the environment now and into the future?

If the Children of *Oculum* series leaves readers thinking about the world they really want to create together, then I did my job.

About Philippa Dowding:

Philippa Dowding has won many marketing industry awards and has had poetry and short fiction published in journals across Canada. Her children's books have been nominated for numerous literary awards in Canada, the US, and Europe, including the SYRCA Diamond Willow and Snow Willow, OLA Silver Birch and Red Maple, and Hackmatack awards. In 2017, she won the OLA Silver Birch Express Honor Book award for *Myles and the Monster Outside*. She is also

the winner of the Governor General's Literary Award 2021 and the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Award 2022. Dowding currently lives in Toronto, ON.

Awards and Recognition for *Oculum*

Finalist, 2019 SYRCA Diamond Willow Award

Nominated, 2020 Forest of Reading - Silver Birch Fiction

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