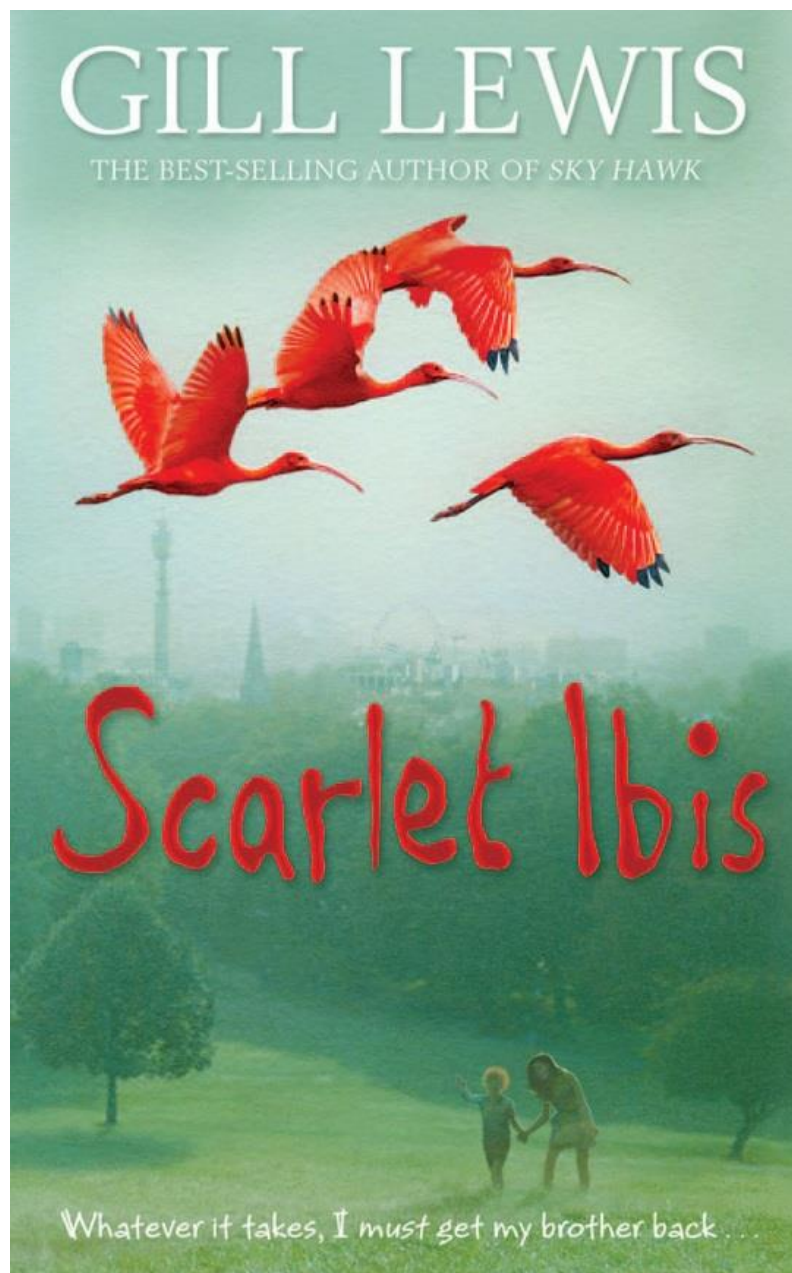


# The World of *Scarlet Ibis*

**Ideas for exploring *Scarlet Ibis* by Gill Lewis with  
pupils in Years 5-7**



# Scarlet Ibis

## Introduction

Twelve-year-old Scarlet looks after her mum and her younger brother, Red. It's not easy, as both Red and Mum have their problems. Scarlet tries to keep the family organized whilst still going to school herself. Red is special—different—and is passionate about birds and his collection of feathers. His favourite story is one that Scarlet tells; of flying across the sea to Caroni Swamp in Trinidad where thousands of scarlet ibis fill the sky. When one day a fire breaks out in their flat, social services intervene. Red and Scarlet are forced to live apart. Scarlet resolves to do everything in her power to get her brother back.

## Synopsis

Scarlet and Red live with their mum in a flat on the eighth floor. They are expecting a visit from Mrs Gideon, their social worker. She will be checking up on the family, so Scarlet wants to show her that they are coping. Red is excited that a pigeon egg is hatching in a nest on their window ledge. When the chick emerges, they call it Little Red.

Once a month, Scarlet takes Red to his favourite place, the zoo. They know someone who works on the gate who can let them in for free. Red watches the birds, and picks up feathers for his collection. He wants a feather from a scarlet ibis and he sneaks into their enclosure. Red falls into the water. Scarlet is afraid that they are in big trouble, but the keeper is kind to the children and seems to understand Red. They warm up in the cafeteria, and Scarlet buys her mum a Sun Jar with some of the housekeeping money she has saved. But Mum is unkind and ungrateful to Scarlet.

The next day Red is ill, so Scarlet goes to school leaving him alone with Mum. On the bus coming home with her friend, Sita, she sees smoke coming from their flats. There has been a fire at home, and Red and Mum have been taken to hospital. Scarlet manages to rescue the chick, Little Red, which she hides in her bag.

She is taken by Mrs Gideon to Renée's home where she is to stay for the time being. Scarlet is very worried about Red. But Renée's is a welcoming family—dad Theo, and son Jez—and reluctantly she finds herself feeling calmer. Though she sees her mum, she is given no access to Red. Scarlet goes to a new school, with Jez, and makes friends with Tamsin. In order to join their 'Rooftop Gang', Scarlet is given a dare—to visit the house of an old lady the girls think is a witch—Baba Yaga. Scarlet agrees. She finds that Baba Yaga is a bird person too—her house is full of birds, and Scarlet feels safe there. The old woman's name is Madame Popescu, an eccentric but kindly lady who is to become an important friend for Scarlet. With the dare completed, Scarlet is initiated into the gang and is pleased to have friends. When they ask

Scarlet why she is living with Jez, Scarlet lies and says that he is her cousin and that she can't live with her mum because she has cancer.

Scarlet meets the rest of Renée's family, grown-up daughter Avril and grandmother, Nan. She enjoys being part of a 'normal' family, compared to her own fragmented threesome. Renée and Avril take her shopping, but Scarlet continues to fret about Red and Little Red. The chick is unwell and she knows she must help it survive—for Red.

Scarlet visits her mum but is told by Renée and Mrs Gideon that she won't be able to see Red yet because he is settling into his care home. Scarlet realises that she must take some action about both Little Red and Red. She bunks school to take the chick to be nurtured by Madame Popescu. A week passes and the little chick pulls through. Scarlet visits again, and they agree that the bird will soon need to be released to find its own family. Scarlet is interested in Madame Popescu's life, and wonders about her past.

Mum meets Scarlet at the zoo, with Sita, Sita's mum, and Mrs Gideon. During the trip, Sita and Scarlet talk about finding Red. The girls look through Mrs Gideon's phone messages to search for clues about Red's whereabouts. They find details of Meadowville Children's Care Home. Before they leave the zoo, the keeper who rescued Red from the pool—the birdman—finds Scarlet and gives her a packet of feathers, including one from a scarlet ibis. Sita's mum gives her a photo of her mum, taken that day in the zoo. Scarlet is sad about her mum, but also begins to accept that she must stay with Renée.

Scarlet bunks off school again and sets out to Meadowville Care Home. She quickly sees Red sitting alone outside and attracts his attention. He is frantic to reach her, so crawls under the fence and they run away together. Instinctively, Scarlet knows that they will be safe at Madame Popescu's, so that's where she heads. Immediately Red is happy there, and is reunited with Little Red.

News breaks about the abducted boy. Scarlet is in trouble at school for missing lessons, and her friends turn against her, believing that she has something to do with the abduction. They demand the truth. Scarlet explains that Red is her brother, and that she has lied about her mum, who doesn't have cancer but is unfit to look after them.

Scarlet packs clothes and food, planning to run away with Red. Her friends at school believe her story and stand by her. But Scarlet sees police cars outside Madame Popescu's. She feels betrayed by Madame Popescu, who has told the authorities. Scarlet finds herself back at Renée's, exhausted and confused by her experiences. She wakes the next day to find the house calm; by her bedside is a note and some chocolate from Jez. Theo tells her that she isn't in trouble and that Red's situation is being reviewed.

When Renée comes home, there's some amazing news. With special training she will be able to look after Red, so he can join Scarlet and be fostered too. Madame Popescu has told her own story to the panel, and changed the way they were thinking about Red. They prepare a room for Red and when he arrives he seems to like his new surroundings. Scarlet is keen to hear Madame Popescu's story which is one of terrible loss and sadness. It explains her eccentricities, and why all the rescued birds have become her 'little children' and are so important to her.

Animal welfare people arrive to take away the birds, but Little Red remains hidden. Madame Popescu, Scarlet, and Red release him to fly off to find his own kind. The epilogue describes Scarlet telling Red his favourite story; the two of them are rowing across water watching the flight of scarlet ibis, together again.

## **Themes and ideas for exploring Scarlet Ibis**

### **The Birds**

- How many references to birds can you find, interwoven into the story?
- Why do you think birds and feathers are so important to Red?
- Think about the idea of flight. Who in the story needs to fly, and from what?
- Which other characters as well as Red have a love of birds? Are these characters also sympathetic to Red's strange ways?
- Research the scarlet ibis. Try to find out why these birds are red, how a chick changes colour as it grows up, if it is a protected species, and how important it is as a symbol in Trinidad.

### **Families**

- What are the differences between Scarlet's and Renée's family?
- Are you critical of Red and Scarlet's mum, and the way she has failed to take responsibility for her children? Or do you feel sorry for her?
- Imagine how it must be for Scarlet to be in charge of everything at home, and still to manage at school. Do you admire the way she copes?
- Scarlet envies her friends with their 'nice families' and 'nice homes', with mums and dads who look after them and cook their meals. Do you understand her point of view?
- Why does Scarlet hide the truth about her Mum's mental illness, pretending she has cancer instead?

### **Tender Loving Care**

*'TLC. Tender Loving Care. It makes a world of difference.'*

This is what Madame Popescu says, in relation to the chick, Little Red, but it has a wider relevance to other characters in the story.

- Who needs tender loving care in this novel?
- Who is good at giving it?
- Children, grown-ups, birds—everyone needs love, care, and attention. Would you agree that this is a powerful message in the novel?
- Fostering provides stability and tender loving care at certain difficult times in some children's lives. How does the care offered by Renée's family help Scarlet?

## Friendship

Scarlet is delighted to have made some friends her own age:

*'I smile deep inside. I don't want to be alone anymore. I want friends. I want to be in their gang too.'*

- Why does Scarlet agree to do the dare?
- Can you think why Scarlet initially hides the truth about her family's situation from her new friends?
- In the end, do you think Scarlet has made some loyal friends? What qualities make a strong and lasting friendship?
- Where do you find other positive friendships developing in the novel?
- How important are friends to you?

## Madame Popescu – Witch or Good Fairy?

- The children at school call her Baba Yaga, after an evil, metal-toothed witch in Russian folklore. Why do the children see her like this?
- What is she really like?
- What do you think about Scarlet's dare to enter Madame Popescu's house? Would you have done it?
- Why does Scarlet feel that Madame Popescu's home is a safe place?
- Why does Red feel so comfortable and happy there?
- How do you feel when you find out about Madame Popescu's life?
- Do you think Madame Popescu did the right thing to tell the authorities about Red?

## The Colour Red

Definition of red:

*'Red is the colour of blood, rubies, and strawberries . . . Next to orange at the end of the visible spectrum, red is commonly associated with danger, sacrifice, passion, fire, beauty, blood, anger, Christmas, socialism, communism, and in China and many other cultures, with happiness.'*

- Why has Gill Lewis chosen the names Red and Scarlet?
- Can you think of any other shades of red which might make good first names?
- Why do you think Red treasures his scarlet ibis feather so much?
- What else do you associate the colour red with? Think about the list in the definition above. Do any of these associations connect with themes and ideas in the book?

## Just you and me...

- Why is there such a strong bond between Red and Scarlet?
- In what ways does Scarlet understand her brother better than anyone else?
- Do you think Scarlet is right to take him from the care home? Would you have done the same?
- The children dream of going to Trinidad, where Scarlet's dad is from, to see scarlet ibis in their natural habitat. Where do you dream of going, and who would you go with? Why is this place significant to you?

### **Home is where the heart is...**

Gill Lewis' original idea for the novel was prompted by seeing scarlet ibis in Trinidad returning each evening to their roosts in the mangrove trees of the Caroni Swamp. They have a strong homing instinct.

- What makes a place home to you?
- Is home just a physical place, or do think it is more to do with the people who inhabit that space?
- Where does Scarlet call home?
- Do you think that Scarlet and Red, once reunited, will feel that Renée's house can become their home?
- Do you think that in some ways Trinidad is where Scarlet and Red really belong, and this is why they always dream of being there together?

### **About the Author**

Gill Lewis spent much of her childhood in the garden where she ran a small zoo and a veterinary hospital for creepy crawlies, mice, and birds. When she grew up she became a real vet and travelled from the Arctic to Africa in search of interesting animals and places. Gill now writes children's books and her first three novels, *Sky Hawk*, *White Dolphin*, and *Moon Bear* have been published to worldwide critical acclaim, and have been translated into many languages.

Gill lives in Somerset with her husband and three children and writes from a treehouse in the company of squirrels.