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FOOTPRINTS ON THE MOON

Lorraine Marwood



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When Sharnie struggles to adjust to high school and the change in her older sister, Cas, she confides in her beloved grandmother. Something is different with Grandma, though; she is fragile and becoming forgetful.

Fearful of losing Cas, Sharnie finds comfort in her new friendship with Gail, an outsider at school who is not afraid to say what she thinks. But can Sharnie ever have the confidence to speak from her heart?

Set against the backdrop of humans landing on the moon and the Vietnam War, *Footprints on the Moon* is a coming-of-age verse novel for middle readers that captures the social upheaval of the 1960s and the importance of finding one's voice.

THEMES

- Grief
- Courage
- Relationships
- Vietnam War; Conscription
- Space exploration; *Apollo 11*
- Poetry

WRITING STYLE

Footprints on the Moon is a verse novel told in first-person present tense. It cleverly interweaves the impending *Apollo 11* mission to land humans on the moon with the anti-conscription protests of the Vietnam War era. As such, Sharnie finds herself caught between the patriotic opinions of her parents' generation and the burgeoning anti-war sentiments of her peer group. Adding depth to this narrative is the loss of Sharnie's grandmother, a war widow who during her last days, quietly sides with Cas's anti-war stance. The narrative climaxes as Sharnie and her new friend, Gail, find their voice and peacefully protest through art. Through well-placed poetic devices, the verse novel is relatable and evocative to middle readers, and is extremely powerful in conveying the frustrations of voicing opinions that are not always well-received by those you love and respect.

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STUDY NOTES

- In the opening verse of the book, Sharnie is excited about the prospect of watching the moon landing. Why does she wonder if ‘our world,/my world, [will] suddenly change’ (p. 3)? In what ways will Sharnie ‘watch history happening’?
- Why does Sharnie ‘want things/in my world/to stay the same,’ but also hope to ‘learn/and make/new friends also’ (p. 5)?
- How is life likened to the phases of the moon?
- Why does Sharnie believe she needs to stretch her mind (p. 5)? How is this realised in *Footprints on the Moon*?
- How does Sharnie feel about humankind ‘conquering’ and ‘trampling on [the moon’s]/milky surface’ (p. 5–6)? How do the author’s language choices help readers to make inferences about Sharnie’s thoughts?
- How is navigating high school like the mission to the moon (p. 7)?
- Sharnie sometimes refers to herself as ‘little-sister me’ (p. 8). How does this change as the text progresses? Have you ever felt like Sharnie? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Sharnie feel that ‘four years age/difference/seems like light-/years apart’ (p. 8)? How else does Sharnie describe the widening gap between her and Cas? Is this as noticeable towards the end of the novel? Discuss.
- Lorraine Marwood incorporates complex concepts into *Footprints on the Moon*, such as communism, the Cold War, the Space Race and conscription. To contextualise the backdrop of this text, use jigsaw group-work to find out more about these issues, reporting to the class on your chosen topic.
- Just as Sharnie is asked to do homework in Geography class, complete the homework tasks on p. 17 using a world map.
- Predict why Gail is squirming in her seat when Vietnam is mentioned.
- When talking about astronauts going to the moon, Sharnie asks her Grandma: ‘What if they don’t come back?’ (p. 20). How does the author use Sharnie’s question to discuss war and conscription?
- Create a character profile of Gail, Mia or Ellie using evidence from *Footprints on the Moon* to support your ideas. Why are characters like these necessary to the story?
- What do you think may be wrong with Grandma? Why do you think this?
- Re-read the poem ‘Good morning America’ (p. 24–27). What can we tell about Cas by what is *not* said in this verse?
- Discuss Dad’s saying: ‘You’ll never plough a field/by turning it over in your mind’ (p. 28).
- What role does Grandma play in Sharnie’s life? What are examples of their special bond?

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- Why does Miss Anders play Simon & Garfunkel's 'I Am a Rock' (p. 40)? How do the lyrics of this song represent themes and characters from *Footprints on the Moon*?
- In what ways does Sharnie think Grandma and Cas are 'both saving and hiding/important events/from the world/around them' (p. 52)?
- In a piece of prose, explain the significance of the little red horse in *Footprints on the Moon*. Why is the verse, in which the horse is broken, entitled 'Memory is treasure, too?' (p. 58–64)?
- How does the poem 'Cas, oh Cas' (p. 65–67) show the true nature of Sharnie's relationship with her sister?
- Why does Sharnie wonder: 'Will the moon get poisoned/by us too?' (p. 92)?
- Why does Sharnie say: 'Cas and Gail have/more in common/than I thought' (p. 99)?
- Dramatise the poem 'Strive and strife' (p. 101–103).
- After Grandma dies, what does Sharnie mean when she says, 'The world feels/thick and sticky/like a spider's web' (p. 112)?
- Sharnie keeps wondering what else she could have done while Grandma was alive. Why does she keep thinking in this way? Discuss, using Margaret Wild's *Old Pig* (Allen & Unwin, 2017) as a companion text.
- How important is the friendship between Sharnie and Gail to the story *Footprints on the Moon*?
- Why does Lewis think that Grandma and Sharnie are similar? How would this make Sharnie feel?
- How does Sharnie describe her grief for Grandma? If you have ever grieved, how did it feel for you? In what ways can you relate to Sharnie?
- When Gail finally says her brother's name, why does she say it like a 'foreign word' (p. 159)?
- How do their respective feelings of grief help strengthen Sharnie and Gail's friendship?
- How is the generation gap portrayed in *Footprints on the Moon*? Is the generation gap as pronounced today as it was in the 1960s? Discuss.
- Re-read pp. 201–202. Discuss how the author ties together many of the themes and ideas of her text in this passage, including concepts of invasion and conflict.
- Why, after the fighting in her household and her growing understanding of the Vietnam War, does Sharnie feel 'like an astronaut/about to step into/the deep unknown' (p. 205)?
- When reaching out to Cas, Sharnie describes herself as being on the *Eagle* space capsule, before 'moonwalking/to Cas' (p. 207). How is taking this step likened to Neil Armstrong's famous first steps on the moon? Why does Sharnie find this so difficult?

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- Why does thinking about Grandma's pot plants make Sharnie feel less sad?
- Discuss the formatting of Neil Armstrong's famous quote on p. 218.
- Sharnie wonders if Grandma's footprint will last forever, like human's footprints on the moon. Respond to this question using evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- On p. 222, Sharnie comments that both Armstrong and Steve would have 'thought/of not coming back/from such missions./But one would always be a hero,/the other quickly forgotten'. Why does she go on to ask: 'How can we look up/and touch the moon,/when we don't know how/to look across to our neighbours/to listen and take note/of their opinions?' In what ways is this the crux of Marwood's text?
- Why do the students form a 'picket fence of human flesh' (p. 226)? How does Mr Grear respond?
- What is the significance of the rosemary garden in Grandma's yard? How is this therapeutic for both Sharnie and Gail?
- Discuss the scene in 'Afterwards, is there change?' (p. 228), in which Sharnie tells her dad that Grandma would have agreed with Cas. Why is this such a powerful verse?
- Explore the various poetic devices used throughout the text, discussing how they contribute to the narrative. Examples include:
 - The silver/of a moonbeam reflects/along the length/of Jules's tail/ like a special wish (p. 4)
 - Just like the moon/on its travels/around Earth/its changes/are shadowed,/halved and quartered/till it's full/and round again (p. 5)
 - ... Mia appears/at the mouth/of the long,/straight corridor (p. 10)
 - ... she is like/a flash of light/in a space telescope/weaving her way/against the flow/of students (p. 10)
 - Miss Campbell [says] in a dramatic voice/as if she's about to unwrap/ a special birthday present (p. 12)
 - ... I'm/still stitched to my pillow/by sleep, my hair tousled/to cloud dreams (p. 24)
 - I have a cat, a very/fluffy moccasin-slipper-/like cat (p. 31)
 - ... giggling/is like the measles:/contagious and makes/us red-cheeked (p. 36)
 - Miss Anders .../tries to quieten Ellie .../her arms waving/like seaweed,/to and fro (p. 41)
 - A little tsunami has just/washed over Gail's beach/and wet us through,/making me gritty/and uneasy (p. 42)
 - The girls/are like trumpeting/elephants/storming for the door (p. 43)
 - ... we/are like rocks,/and Ellie and her friends/are like the sea smashing/at us, but mainly at Gail (pp. 43–44)
 - I heard/that last whisper long/and hissing/like a snake (p. 51)

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- Our fingers/are gloves of soil/and we feel/like space magicians,/pulling new life/out of a little twig (pp. 71–72)
- ... there's only/a trickle of spectators (p. 75)
- I can't quite hear/everything over/the boom/of the brass band,/but war sounds hard,/cruel,/full of pain (p. 76)
- I see several posters/hoisted shoulder-high,/the ugly black-and-white/lettering and a graphic image/of barbed wire and guns (p. 78)
- ... her lips were/the shape of downturned/moon crescents,/her eyes were smudges/of moon dust (p. 83)
- ... little drops of tea/fall on the dainty/embroidered cloth/like little drops of blood (p. 92)
- I see a figure/coming down/the backyard,/like a ghost wavering (p. 110)
- I feel like a tea towel/twisted until/there is not a drop/of moisture left (pp. 110–111)
- The world feels/thick and sticky/like a spider's web (p. 112)
- ... I watch as a globule/of spider thread unwinds/like a fissure/of moon parachuting down./The spider thread/is as white as/moonlight floating,/sticky floating (p. 114)
- Cas's face goes from/red to paper white (p. 117)
- Dad sort of crumples a bit,/gives a watery smile to Mum (p. 122)
- Like the magic Grandma/created with flowers/and plants, a green/kaleidoscope of colours (p. 150)
- 'Really?' she says sweetly/as if her mouth is full/of coconut rough chocolate (p. 166)
- '... look at your hair,/Sharnie, wild like/a cat licked it clean' (p. 172)
- It shakes wildly/like a captured butterfly/in her hand (p. 180)
- ... our house feels/like a war zone (p. 201)
- It feels like a holiday,/unstructured, like the whole/world is holding its breath (p. 217)
- ... a/picket fence of human flesh (p. 226).
- Create your own anti-war posters, or re-create one as described in *Footprints on the Moon*. Alternatively, find a range of protest posters to analyse and create a protest poster of your own on an issue important to you.
- In the role of Gail, write a series of diary entries describing what life is like after Steve's death. How has meeting Sharnie helped?
- In a journal entry, reflect on the relationship you share with your sibling/s. How does a text such as *Footprints on the Moon* help you to value that relationship more fully?
- With reference to the entire context of *Footprints on the Moon*, write a reflection in response to the following lines: 'Moon, we've left our footprints,

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too./I know that your moon dust won't/blow them away./Not yet ... not yet.'
(p. 246)

- Discuss the symbolism of gardening and Grandma's treasures in *Footprints on the Moon*.
- Explain the significance of the novel's title.
- Write and perform a short dramatic piece that shares Sharnie's high school experiences.
- Using the verse titles as a guide, create a story map outlining the main settings, characters and events of *Footprints on the Moon*.
- In what ways is *Footprints on the Moon* a book about finding one's voice?
- Use picture books about the moon landing such as *Moonwalkers* by Mark Greenwood and Terry Denton (Penguin, 2019) or *Touch the Moon* by Phil Cummings and Coral Tulloch (Allen & Unwin, 2019) as companion texts to *Footprints on the Moon*. Alternatively, view footage of the landing as stimulus.
- Use Gary Crew's *Memorial* (Hachette, 2016) to help better understand the different perspectives of war represented in *Footprints on the Moon*.
- With older students, share selected passages of *The Grief Book: Strategies for Young People* by Elizabeth Vercoe and Kerry Abramowski (Black Dog Books, 2004).

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Two events seemed to collide together in the momentous year that was 1969. Humas walked on the moon and Australia continued to be involved in the Vietnam War – an unpopular war that used conscription and chemical warfare. I wanted to explore both themes, one due to a fascination with space and moon exploration, and the other to highlight the plight of Vietnam veterans. I also wanted to write the school setting of my own high school, to have my main character, Sharnie, growing up and taking notice of the world around her and dealing with conflict in her home life and in her friendships. I didn't want Mia to desert Sharnie, they were great friends but their paths diverged, and upon meeting Sharnie, Gail had a chance to tell her story.

It was an ambitious ask to bring these social issues into a verse novel but now I can share with you a slice of Australian social history 60s-style – when television first appeared, when classrooms had chalkboards and pull-down maps, when textbooks mattered for reference, and wonderful songs like 'I Am a Rock' filled radio air waves. I am thrilled to have finished this novel at last and to set Sharnie free, to share 1969 with readers as they make their own footprints in the world.

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