

# Classroom Resources



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## Silver Linings

Katrina Nannestad

### BOOK SUMMARY

A heartwarming novel set in 1950s Australia from bestselling author Katrina Nannestad.

Nettie Sweeney has a dad, three big sisters, a farm full of cows and a cat called Mittens. But it's not enough. She longs for a mother. One with a gentle touch and sparkles in her eyes. Instead, she has Aunty Edith with slappy hands, a sharp tongue and the disturbing belief that peas are proper food.

When Dad marries Alice, all Nettie's dreams come true. The Sweeney home overflows with laughter, love and, in time, a baby brother. Billy. The light of Nettie's life.

Then tragedy strikes. The Sweeney family crumbles. Nettie tries to make things right, but has she made everything so much worse?

From multi-award-winning Australian author Katrina Nannestad comes a heartbreakingly beautiful and uplifting historical novel. Life and death. Weddings and floods. Coronation joy and post-war grief. Nettie Sweeney and her community experience it all. Together. With humour, kindness and love.

### KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ACELT1608
- ACELT1613
- ACELA1529
- ACHASSI127

### THEMES

- Families
- Grief
- Belonging

**Recommended Reading Ages:** 11+

**Resources Created For:** Upper Primary/Lower Secondary

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# Classroom Resources

## Before Reading

1. What is meant by the phrase 'silver linings'?
2. What ideas are suggested by the cover art?
  - a. As a class, identify as many elements as possible on the cover of *Silver Linings*.
  - b. Discuss the connotations of each item, and then how their meaning may change when thought about in relation to the other items on the cover.
  - c. What themes, topics, genre, setting and/or characters may be reflected by these elements?
3. What other Katrina Nannestad books are familiar to the students?
  - a. Discuss which titles they have enjoyed and why.
  - b. Are there any common elements between the books that students have read?
4. Organise a bulk library loan of the author's books as well as non-fiction on the 1950s (see Resources at the end of the notes for some suggestions).
5. For those using Visible Learning strategies, implement a Learning Wall in the classroom.

## During Reading

1. Map the structure of the plot and key events in the narrative as the class reads *Silver Linings*.

### Setting

1. The narrative takes place in a rural setting near the town of Lismore, NSW, in the 1950s. Do some research to gain a sense of understanding what life was like in the mid-20th century (see Resources at the end of the notes for some suggestions).
2. Well before we have been given any dates, it's quite apparent that *Silver Linings* is set in the past. Identify five clues in the novel that helped you to work out roughly when it is set.
  - Think about: how people speak; food; objects in and around the farm and homestead; transportation.
3. While WWII has concluded before the events of *Silver Linings*, its effects on the Sweeney family, their community and Australia continue to be felt.
  - a. Identify three examples from the novel of the shadow WWII continues to cast over the Sweeneys and their community.
  - b. What do these examples tell us about WWII's lingering effects?
4. The years following the end of the war saw what is described as a 'baby boom' in Australia, to the extent that today people born in that era are called the 'Baby Boomers'.
  - a. *In fact, the 'baby boom' after the second World War was mainly a 'marriage boom' as fertility rates within marriage changed little (Ruzicka & Caldwell, 1982). From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, the fertility rates of women aged 20–24 and 25–29 were markedly higher than that of all other groups. (AIFS).*  
What reasons might be behind the much higher rate of marriage in the 1950s–70s?

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# Classroom Resources

- b. Interview someone in your family, or a family friend, who fits the Baby Boomer demographic about their childhood, particularly about things that were different from yours.
- c. The post-war years also saw a huge increase in advertising for many new products and services. There was also an increase in what is generally termed 'pop culture', e.g. following fashion trends, interest in movie stars and celebrities, rock and roll music. The identification and importance of the demographic of children aged 12–18 lead to the coining of the term 'teenager' ([Marketing in the 50s/60s](#)). How is an increase in consumerism, particularly in children and teenagers, reflected in *Silver Linings*?

## Language use

1. Before reading *Silver Linings*, the class discussed the meaning of the title, which boils down to the idea that there is always hope, even in the most terrible situations. Can students suggest any synonyms or other phrases that mean hope?
2. Are any other proverbs used in the novel, e.g. 'Strike while the iron's hot' (p.44)? Create a list of proverbs students find.
  - a. Ask students to research these proverbs and their origins.
  - b. If appropriate, as an extension activity students may like to come up with their own proverbs to more accurately reflect their own lives and experience.
3. There are idioms used throughout the narrative, many of which are very typically Australian and in common usage at the time the novel is set. Some are no longer heard. Compile a list of these idioms in the table below as a starting point.
  - a. Using contextual clues, guess the meaning of each idiom.
  - b. Using appropriate resources (human or online), check their actual meaning.
  - c. Research the origins of each idiom.

Idiom	What I think it means	What it actually means	Origin
ruddy p.18			
bottler p. 124			
whacko... p. 127			
[a] porky p. 289			
cackleberries p. 32			
bee's knees p. 35			
strike me pink p. 37			

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# Classroom Resources

stone the crows p. 37			
bobby dazzler p. 110			
<i>Add further examples of your own...</i>			

- Use the Learning Wall to record and explore the use of noun groups/phrases and adjectival groups/phrases to describe more fully a person, place, thing or idea.
- On the Learning Wall, or through small group discussion, ask students to identify non-fiction information – e.g. food, clothing and transport – conveyed through the text.
  - Using evidence from the novel, ask students to write a paragraph explaining how the inclusion of these details helps to convey a sense of time and place.

## Characters

- Create character profiles for Nettie, Alice and Aunt Edith. Using the acronym **S.T.E.A.L.**, look for examples of what/how each character:
  - **SPEAKS**  
What does the character say? How do they say it? What is their tone? Their word choice?
  - **THINKS** (including their values, attitudes and beliefs)  
What does the character think? What do we learn from their thoughts and ideas? What do they value? What attitude do they have towards different things? What do they believe in?
  - **EFFECTS they have on others**  
What is this character's effect on others? How do they interact with other characters?
  - **ACTS**  
What does this character do? How do they behave? What can we learn from their actions?
  - **LOOKS**  
What does this character look like? What can we learn from how they present themselves to others?
    - Include quotes and key words from the novel, and any other important information.
    - Explore the conflicts each character faces and their overall role in the narrative, as well as their traits. Use quotes or examples.
- Nettie is considered very bright, e.g. 'I'm only in kindergarten, but I do Second Class spelling. I was reading long before I started school. Dad calls me the family genius. Mu calls me the family show-off.' (pp. 52 & 53). However, she is very young and often gets things wrong or confused, which brings a lot of humour to the narrative. Pinpoint some examples of her confusion, e.g. 'Elizabeth is a perfect name for our new mongoose' (p. 29).

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# Classroom Resources

- a. Because Nettie is so young and doesn't know how she is 'supposed' to act, her response to Billy's death is quite different to that of most of her family. What ideas do you think the author was trying to communicate through Nettie's reaction to Billy's death?
3. Nettie is considerably younger than the audience of *Silver Linings*. Most authors of children's books create a main character who is a similar age to that of their reader (Katrina Nannestad herself has done so in other books). Why do you think Nannestad has chosen such a young narrator in *Silver Linings*?
  - a. As a reader, do you understand more of what is happening than Nettie does?
  - b. What is the effect of this?
4. The author uses the device of Nettie speaking via Fancy Nancy, the doll. For example, 'Fancy Nancy springs out from beneath the blankets and shouts, "That'll teach the old bat to lie!" "Hush, Fancy Nancy!" I snap. "Don't be bold."' (p. 31). What is Nannestad's purpose in using this device?
5. Aunty Edith and Alice are, at first glance, very different characters, especially in their role of caregiver, yet they do find some common ground eventually. Use a graphic organiser such as a Venn diagram to look at their similarities and differences.
  - a. Why do you think two people who care so deeply for their family – the same family – express that love in such different ways? Use examples from the text to provide evidence.

## After Reading

1. What is Katrina Nannestad's purpose in opening *Silver Linings* with the incident of the dead piglet?
  - a. How does it help establish major themes in the novel?
  - b. What other examples of foreshadowing can be found? For example, "'Don't be silly!' I cry. "Children don't die. Animals die. Old people and valiant soldiers die. But not children.'" (p. 76).
2. Describe the difference between a memoir and a fictional account of family/personal history? Think about both the technical differences and the effects of these differences on the reader.
3. There are always adjustments to be made when a family is altered, such as when a step-parent is introduced, a child is born or a sibling moves away. What are some of the reasons Alice is so welcomed into the Sweeney household?
  - a. What does she bring to the four girls and their father?
  - b. Why does Aunty Edith have trouble welcoming Alice into the family?
  - c. Nettie has very high expectations of what Alice can do for both her and her family. Are these expectations fair or realistic?
4. In the 1950s there was little understanding of mental health disorders as illnesses in the same way that people thought of illnesses like the flu and chicken pox. It was considered shameful to suffer from a mental illness, so many people hid their conditions and didn't ask for help. Throughout *Silver Linings* we meet several characters who are suffering with poor mental health, and are shown how they're treated by their families and community:

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# Classroom Resources

- Robyn's father, Mr Parkes, suffers from what was once called shell shock, but what is now known as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Many men and women returned from the war with complicated mental health issues. Largely they were told to forget about what had happened during the war and get on with their lives.
- The grief experienced by the Sweeneys, in particular Alice, is particularly poignant. The way Aunt Edith and others behaved after Billy's death – removing all trace of him and refusing to talk about him – was quite typical and considered the best way to deal with the loss of a baby at that time.
  - a. Nettie has no memory of her mother, so she is very happy to let Alice replace her. However, her older sisters do remember their mother and the devastation of her death. How are these different experiences of being 'mothered' and of the death of a family member reflected in the way the four sisters react to events of *Silver Linings*?
  - b. When Billy dies, the various members of the Sweeney family have very different ways of dealing with their grief. Using evidence from the novel, explain how and why different members of the family express their grief as they do.
  - c. If the school has access to a guidance officer or psychologist, ask them to visit to discuss how mental health can be supported.
  - d. In pairs or small groups have students research some of the organisations or agencies that offer support with these issues, and present their findings to others.
    - i. Ask groups to prepare a poster with key information about the organisation they have researched – what they do, when it might be helpful to contact them, contact information – which could be put up around the school.
- 5. As Nettie says, 'Talking helps.' Individually or in small groups ask students to come up with a campaign to share with their school about the importance of talking about how you're feeling. This campaign could include:
  - a. A slogan
  - b. A logo
  - c. A poster
  - d. A pamphlet with advice on when it might help to talk to someone, who they can talk to, places to find help if they need to go beyond people they know.

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# Classroom Resources

## Activities

1. Queen Elizabeth's visit to Australia in 1954 was the first by a reigning monarch and was a worldwide news event. Write a newspaper headline and short article that describes her visit to Lismore. Find images to illustrate and use a free template to create (several available online).
  - a. Extension: students could explore resources such as [Trove](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#) or the [National Museum of Australia: Royal Romance Exhibition](#).
2. Every decade has its trends and fashions. The 50s had many iconic examples. In small groups, ask students to research an aspect of life in 1950s Australia, e.g. fashion, cinema, music, food, hobbies or celebrities.
  - a. Ask each group to present a short PowerPoint to the class on their topic.
  - b. As a class, plan (and, if possible, execute) a 1950s festival where the class gets to 'spend the day in 1950s Australia'.
3. Create a map of the Sweeneys' community using the descriptions and the map in the front of the book as a guide. Include the farm, the creek, Robyn's place, the roads to Fernhill and Lismore, Nettie's school, Fernhill Cemetery. Students may like to use Google Maps to look at the countryside around Lismore to get an idea of what the terrain is like.
4. There are many funny moments in *Silver Linings*, such as chasing the guinea pigs around. Ask students to select one of these moments and turn it into a picture book to be shared with a Kindergarten/Prep/Reception class.
5. The importance of remembering, and sharing memories, is one of the messages *Silver Linings* leaves us with. Ask students to think of an important event in their family; it could be something they themselves remember like a big holiday, moving house or a parent's marriage, or it may be something they've been told like their grandparents immigrating to Australia, their own birth or how their parents met.
  - a. If students would like to write about a memory they've been told, ask them to interview family members about what happened.
  - b. Ask students to write a fictionalised account of this family memory. Remind them that evoking a sense of time, place and atmosphere will help their readers really understand what it was like to be there.

## Resources

### Fiction

- *52 Mondays* – Anna Ciddor
- *All in the Blue Unclouded Weather* – Robin Klein
- *Dresses of Red and Gold* – Robin Klein
- *When I Was a Kid* – Rachel Tonkin
- *Our Australian Girl: Lina* – Sally Rippin

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# Classroom Resources

## Non-Fiction

- *Australians All: A History of Growing Up from the Ice Age to the Apology* – Nadia Wheatley
- *Country Town* – Isolde Martyn, Robyn Ridgeway and Louise Hogan
- *Australian Farming Families* – Deb Hunt

## Websites

- [My Place: Australia in the 1950s](#)
- [Australia in the 1950s: Huntley Film Archives](#)
- ABC Education: [Back in Time for Dinner: Food and Family in the 1950s](#)
- [Archive footage of Australia \(Taree, NSW\) in the 1950s](#)
- National Film and Sound Archive of Australia: [1950s Brisbane: Chermiside and a Visit from the Queen](#)
- [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#)
- [Lismore Historical Society](#) (photographs)
- [Trove](#)
- [National Museum of Australia](#)
- [Marketing in the 50s/60s](#)
- [Children 1950s | FAMILY STORIES | Recollections : One Story at a Time](#)
- YouTube: [The Happy 50's in Australia](#)
- 1950s Melbourne: [Background to Australia in the 50s](#)
- OverSixty: [Growing up on a farm in 1950's Australia](#) (personal anecdote)

## About the Author

Katrina Nannestad is a multi-award-winning Australian author. Her books include the CBCA-shortlisted *We Are Wolves*, *The Girl Who Brought Mischief*, the Travelling Bookshop series, the Girl, the Dog and the Writer series, the Olive of Groves series, the Red Dirt Diaries series, the Lottie Perkins series, and the historical novels *Rabbit*, *Soldier*, *Angel*, *Thief* and *Waiting for the Storks*.

Katrina grew up in country New South Wales in a neighbourhood stuffed full of happy children. Her adult years have been spent raising boys, teaching, daydreaming and pursuing her love of stories. Katrina celebrates family, friendship and belonging in her writing. She also loves creating stories that bring joy or hope to other people's lives.

Katrina now lives on a hillside in central Victoria with her husband, a silly whippet called Olive and a mob of kangaroos.

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