



**RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA  
READING GUIDES**

## ***The Red Cardigan and Nine Letters Long*** by J.C. Burke

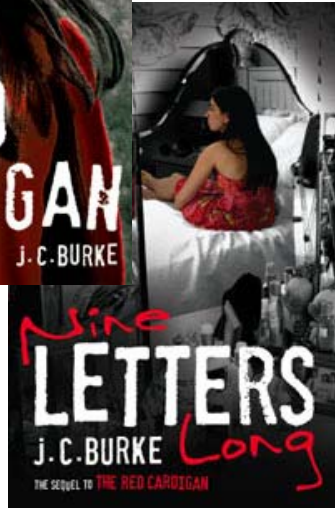
Random House Australia

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Reading Level:

Young Adult Fiction (14+)



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### **SYNOPSES**

#### ***The Red Cardigan***

Sometimes Evie sees things that other people don't. The visions began when she was a little girl. The recurring appearance of a hit-and-run victim's ghost on the side of the road convinces Evie that her second-sight might be more sinister. Now in year 11, her psychic visions are a powerful, unwieldy force, alienating her from classmates and, most hurtful of all, her mother, who just wants a 'normal' daughter. Only fellow classmates Poppy, Alex and Seb offer their hands in friendship.

When a strange girl (a girl who once wore the red cardigan Evie now wears) appears in her sketchings, Evie realises that she is being called to solve the mystery of girl's disappearance. An old family friend provides Evie with much-needed clarity about her 'gift' and the murder mystery she must unravel. Evie discovers a missing person's photo that matches the young woman in Evie's sketches and the investigation into the disappearance of Athena Poulos moves to a recent carnival site in Adelaide. With the help of her father, the local authorities and her grandmother's bracelet, Evie reconstructs the circumstances around Athena's death and locates her final resting spot. With

the murder investigation resolved, the Poulos family can mourn in peace and Evie can begin the process of mending the broken ties within her own family.

### **Nine Letters Long**

In *The Red Cardigan* Evie was coming to terms with the fact that she can see things that other people can't. Now she's accepted her gift, but that doesn't make it easier to bear. When her friend Poppy suggests that the three friends, Evie, Poppy and Alex, conduct a seance, Evie is reluctant – but she agrees. The letters on the board start spelling out one name over and over – C-A-Z. Caz has a frantic message for Evie: 'She says you will help me. She says, she says ...' When Evie asks Caz who 'SHE' is, Caz begins to spell A-T-H-E-N-A' and Evie knows she's been contacted.

Victoria, her grandmother's friend and a gifted clairvoyant herself, supports Evie as she tries to contact Caz again. Caz is afraid to talk to adults, so afraid that she hides her secret in cryptic messages that Evie must learn to unravel, and Caz's mother's tantrums are more than Evie can handle – but the coincidences start to pile up, and Evie knows there is another mystery to be solved. She'll need help from her friends – if only Alex would stop mooning over her new Romanian boyfriend, Zac. And then there's Evie's mum and dad, who want her to be open and honest with them, but it's still early days in Evie and her mum's tentative steps to a stronger relationship.

Caz won't be free until Evie solves the mystery, reveals the secret and releases Caz's sister, Paris, from the horrors of the past.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

J.C. Burke was born in Sydney in 1965, the fourth of five daughters. With writers for parents, she grew up in a world full of noise, drama and books, and the many colourful characters who came to visit provided her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations.

Burke decided to become a nurse after her mother lost a long battle with cancer. She specialised in the field of Oncology, working in Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplant Units in Australia and the UK.

A creative writing course at Sydney University led to a mentorship with Gary Crew and the publication of Children's Book Council Notable book *White Lies* (Lothian) in 2002. Burke has since written *The Red Cardigan*, also a CBC Notable Book, and its sequel *Nine Letters Long*. *The Story of Tom Brennan* won the 2006 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year: Older Readers award and the Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature 2006. *Faking Sweet* was published in 2006, and *Starfish Sisters* in September 2007.

J.C. Burke lives on Sydney's Northern Beaches. Her teenage daughter now provides her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations! J.C. Burke loves writing for young adults, as they still have an optimistic eye on the world.

Visit <http://www.jcburke.com.au> for more information about J.C. Burke and her books.

## WRITING STYLE

Written in the third person present, the story is immediate and powerful. The action unfolds around the characters and reader at the same moment, tightening the suspense. Clues and spectres spring out with shocking suddenness. J.C. uses a series of flashbacks to gradually reveal Evie's past – the grounds of her fears and nightmares. These techniques closely control the flow of information and clues, keeping the reader at attention throughout.

Long-running dialogue and quick-witted exchanges maintain a suspenseful pace; the constant interaction between Evie and her friends, her parents and her inner demons adds a conversational quality that teens will love. J.C. convincingly captures the two-pronged language of teenagers: the catty gossip, endearing nicknames and bitter remarks of teens among teens; and the plaintive cries, angered accusations and calls for help of teens among adults.

## THEMES

Themes in *The Red Cardigan* and *Nine Letters Long* include:

- Crime
- Mystery
- Clairvoyance / psychic ability
- Identity
- Family
- Friendships
- Vintage clothing and markets (*The Red Cardigan*)
- Secrets
- Murder and sexual abuse
- Codes, puzzles and cryptic crosswords (*Nine Letters Long*)
- Refugees and building a new life in a new country (*Nine Letters Long*)
- Art and creativity

J.C. describes *The Red Cardigan* as a thriller: 'It's a mystery where the consistent signs and clues throughout the story eventually fall into place. It's a story about psychic powers, vintage clothing and missing persons. But it's also a story about the complex relationships of families, the expectations of parents, the growing bond and trust between friends and the realisation that we are who we are.'

Combining her fondness for psychics and vintage clothing, J.C. often ponders the questions: do we leave a sense of ourselves in the clothes we once wore and would a psychic be able to 'read' and 'know' the personalities of previous owners of, say, a red cardigan purchased in an op shop? These imaginings form the centre of *The Red Cardigan*. The missing persons theme evolved from the many faces the author viewed on 'have you seen me?' posters on the way to her local video shop and the ability of a psychic to solve their disappearances.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

### **The Red Cardigan**

- Discuss the book's epigraph concerning friendship and how it applies to the various relationships within *The Red Cardigan*.
- The influence of Evie's family (and extended family) on her life is very significant. How do they affect her decisions and behaviour?
- The Jeff Buckley lyrics, 'feel no shame for what you are', emphasise a very important theme in the book: feeling confident with who you are. How does Evie grow in confidence? How do other people help her in this journey? What people in your life help you feel comfortable with who you are?
- Evie shares a very special relationship with Athena, a person she's never met before. How does their relationship change throughout the course of *The Red Cardigan*? Have you become friends with someone you've never met and how is that friendship different?
- Evie receives psychic messages in a variety of ways through her mind, body and senses. How does her 'gift' reveal the different ways we all experience the world?
- On p. 191, Evie comments that, 'In the last seven days I have learnt more about myself than in the sixteen and a half years I've been alive.' Discuss the change Evie goes through. What times or events in your life have forced you to learn more about yourself?
- In what ways do you think Evie's life will be different after the novel?

### **Nine Letters Long**

- Discuss the book's epigraph – does it only apply to Caz and Paris's secrets, or could it apply to Evie's relationships with her friends and her parents?
- Though she has accepted her gift of clairvoyancy, the knowledge alone isn't enough to make Evie's life easy. How does the knowledge help her in her task, and what does she do in the book to become more comfortable with who she is?
- What messages does *Nine Letters Long* send about body image?
- At the end of the book Evie realises there are things happening around her in the real world, things concerning her best friend Alex, 'right under her nose' yet she has missed them. Discuss how often humans fail to see the things closest to them. What are the reasons for this?
- Evie faces a difficult decision at the end of the book – she must reveal Caz's secret, but it will cause Caz's sister, Paris, and her mother a great

deal of pain. Are there situations in real life when secrets should be revealed? How can you judge whether it's right to reveal someone else's secret?

- The character of Nora Cuza, a refugee from Romania, works hard so that she can make her life and the life of her children better than the one she left behind. Discuss the notion of what makes people flee their own country. Perhaps take a look into the history of Romania and the reign of Ceaușescu's government.
- Explore the idea 'we are who we are.'
- Sometimes Evie's messages are transmitted through her other senses of smell and taste. Often memories we have are recalled through stimuli to these senses – ie the smell of coconut sunblock; a roast dinner baking; the touch of scratchy wool on your neck; the sound of a song ... What provokes your memories?
- Cryptic crosswords play a part in solving the mystery – look at some real cryptic crosswords and see if you can piece together the clues.
- *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* states an 'anagram' is a 'transposition of letters of word or phrase, to form a new word or phrase'. Make up some of your own anagrams, swap them with your friends and try to crack the puzzle.
- The image of the 'cages' give the reader clues to both the inner and outer storylines. Comment on this imagery and if you felt it added to the story.
- Discuss the insidious strength of secrets and the power it can hold over people.
- The character of Seb is further developed in *Nine Letters Long*, and we see that he enjoys puzzles and anagrams. Why did the author give him this characteristic?

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