

Teachers Notes

by Marcia Phillips

A Small Free Kiss in the Dark

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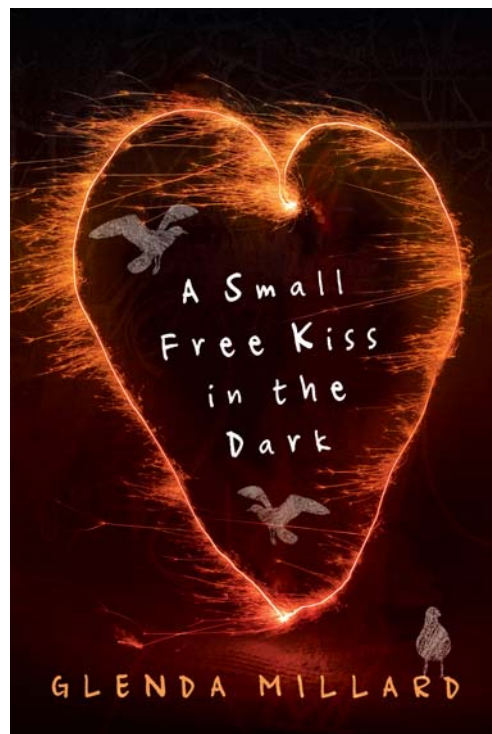
Glenda Millard

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Recommended for ages 12-14 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

PLOT SUMMARY

11 year old Skip has faced many difficulties in his short life. His mother has left him years before and his father, a war veteran, when no longer able to cope with life, has placed Skip into foster care. Many schools and families later, Skip makes the decision to leave his foster home to live on the streets of a big city. Skip is a gifted artist and it is Skip's fascination and love of art that gives his life meaning and hope. Over time he is befriended by a homeless, older man, Billy and his life settles into a pattern of sorts. Billy introduces Skip to the State Library and here Skip discovers the treasures of the art book collection. However, his world is plunged into further chaos when war breaks out and he is caught in a struggle for survival as are the many other citizens of the city. When it appears the State Library is no longer a safe haven, Billy and Skip make the decision to take Max, a six year old boy they discovered sheltering in the library waiting for his mother to return, with them on their journey to find safety.

Billy takes Skip and Max into No Man's Land and an abandoned amusement park becomes their home. It is here they meet Tia and her baby. Together they form what Skip has been longing for, a family. But this is a flawed family and one that must meet many challenges and face many demons in their quest to find sanctuary and a home.

This is a powerful story of loss and longing and the struggle to survive against all odds. It is the redemptive story of one boy's search to find a home and a family to belong to and care for.

Themes: Identity, Homelessness, Conflict, War, Human Frailty, Survival

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Skip is recalling the period of time in his life when he left foster care and escaped to the city. He recalls the events leading up to and including the start of the war. Is he a reliable narrator? Are our memories always correct? If we asked Billy to record his version of the story would it differ from Skip's?

The story is a first person narrative. How effective is this? Would we have connected with the character if it was told in the third person?

The title of the novel is an intriguing one. Before you start reading, ask students to reflect on the title and the front cover. Ask them to predict what they think the story may be about.

The Prologue

Why does author Glenda Millard begin her book with this piece of writing? Read aloud to the class and ask students to again predict where the story will take them. Think about the idea of 3 being the perfect or the ideal. Think of everything that comes in 3's that is perfect or ideal. For example a pyramid, a tripod, the Holy Trinity, Olympic medals of gold, silver and bronze; alternatively, what doesn't work well as a threesome: a cricket team, a musical quartet, a relay team.

Chapter Titles

In *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark*, author Glenda Millard gives her chapters titles. Discuss the significance or meaning of each chapter title. For example:

- Weapons of Max Destruction
- Song for Sixpence
- Chickening Out

CHARACTERS

SKIP

At the start of the novel Skip has shed his old identity for a new one because "getting a new name is a bit like being born all over again". (p. 3) Skip leaves his old life behind to start again in the city living on the streets. He is a resilient and independent character who has been in foster care due to the breakdown of his family unit. He says of his age "They told me I was nearly twelve, but sometimes it felt like I'd been around a lot longer." (p. 11)

- "I wasn't going to let things happen to me anymore." (p. 190)
What does Skip mean by this statement. What does it tell us about his life?
- Why was it so important for Skip to make this decision to act?

BILLY

Skip meets Billy in the Mall and it is their appreciation of the street art that first brings them together.

- Skip describes Billy as an "old man" (p.10) How else does Skip see Billy?
- Explain how Billy evolves as a character. Through adversity does Billy change at all? Discuss the idea of redemption. Is this what occurs in the novel?

MAX

- What does Max come to mean for Skip?
- In relation to Max, what scared Skip the most?
- What was the significance of the Indian headdress that Skip made for Max (p. 173)?

TIA

Tia is a fragile and damaged fifteen year old girl who Skip tries very hard to 'rescue'.

- What does Skip want Tia to be? How does he go about trying to help her? What do we know about Tia and her past?
- What does Skip mean when he says, "Some people like my dad, have invisible scars; others like Tia have scars you can see. I was afraid Tia might be like Vincent who had both kinds of damage." (p. 134)

SIXPENCE

- What does baby Sixpence signify in the story?
- In what ways is she like Skip, Max and Billy?

MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Birds

References to birds and flight occur throughout the book. Compile a list of the various birds mentioned and discuss their relevance to the story.

- Explain what Skip means when he says "The thought of Max finding his mother was as lonely as an albatross." (p. 105)

Artists

The artistic works of Monet and Van Gogh are explored, in particular, Monet's 'Water Lilies' and Van Gogh's 'Starry Night over the Rhone River'. Also mentioned is Salvador Dali (p. 116). Find examples of these artists' work and display.

Colours

Colours are used to emphasise feelings and moods:

- "Red is for danger. Red was the colour of the ballerina's coat" (p. 109)
- "Red is brave, happy, loud and fast, and sometimes dangerous or angry. Black is soft, slow, silent and sad but it can be angry too." (p. 37)

Find other examples where colour is used to denote feelings.

Coats

- Skip has his dad's coat, which he took with him to the city. It is damaged but Skip cannot part with it for what reason?
- Cecily says to Skip "... home is where your winter coat is." What might she mean by this statement?
- When Skip first sees Tia he mentions her coat. Why?

Names

- Not many of us get to choose our own name. Skip chose his name when he decided to start his new life as a runaway in the city. Does this name suit him?
- Tia chose to call Skip 'Skipper'. Why did she do this? What is a skipper?
- Think about nicknames: How do people acquire their nicknames? Choose a nickname for yourself based on your interests and how you may want people to see you.
- Sports stars and people in the news often have a nickname. For example, Ian Thorpe was known as the Thorpedo. Make a list of at least 10 famous people and their nicknames.
- The baby is nameless until Skip and Billy name her Sixpence. Why do you think Tia has not named her baby?
- When Max meets Albert Park on their way to the amusement park, he tells Albert their real names (p. 80). This was a problem. Why do you think this was so?

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

- When has war come to Australia in the past? Research to find out when and what happened. Write a diary entry for one of the events.

- Investigate the role of The Red Cross in a war zone. Also look at their many other roles in our community and in other countries. Why is this organization trusted by so many countries and governments?
- War means displacement of people because homes are destroyed, or it is not safe to live in them. Read the picture book *My Dog* by John Heffernan and Andrew McLean. Define what a refugee is. Are Billy and Skip refugees in their own country?
- What are “peace keepers”? What is their role in a conflict? Are there really ‘rules of war’? If so, who has made these rules? Are these rules fair?
- Discuss the questions: Can a war ever be justified? On what occasions might going to war be right?
- Homelessness. Research figures of homeless adults and kids in your city or nearest town. What support services are there for people like Billy and Skip? What more as a school community could you do to help the homeless?
- Map the route Billy and friends took out of the city. What clues are in the text to help you know which way they travelled?
- Prepare a map of the amusement park. Include the entrance and all the rides and buildings. Enlarge the map to take in the neighbourhood with the houses, hotel and shops.

ART

Art references abound in this novel, especially references to Monet and Van Gogh. Use these references for an exploration of the paintings mentioned.

- How did art empower Skip? Why were the art books so important to him?

At the beginning of the novel we learn about Skip’s fascination with and understanding of light and how it influences what we see. Use the picture book *Luke’s Way of Looking* by Nadia Wheatley and Matt Ottley to explore how an artist may represent his or her world.

MUSIC

How is music featured in this novel? On what occasions does Billy play his harmonica? What is the effect of it on the others? Tia hears music in her heart, as does Skip (p. 126). What does this mean?

There is a reference to the lyrics of two Bob Dylan songs (p. 182). One of them is the ‘Blessing Song’ (the actual title is ‘Forever Young’). This song is used as a prayer with the gathered people. Discover the lyrics and display them in class. Try to find a recording of this song to listen to and learn to sing as a class.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Write a poem describing how it would feel to be alone in a big city with nowhere to stay and very little money. First build a bank of words then incorporate them into a poem.
2. Imagine you are a newspaper or television reporter sent to interview Skip after the war is over. List 5 questions you will ask him. Use another member of the class to role-play Skip and ask him to answer the questions.
3. Describe the main characters. What do you think they look like physically? Compare with the rest of the class.

4. Write poetry; try writing a cinquain (A cinquain has 5 lines and none rhyme. The first line is one word and introduces the subject. The next 3 lines develop the subject and the final line is one word that sums up the topic.)
5. Write a Haiku poem using the theme of birds and flight.
6. Write a school report for Skip in Maths and in Art. What do you think his teachers would write about him?
7. Predict the next couple of chapters and write what you think might happen next. Do you think the author will write a sequel to this novel?

QUESTIONS AFTER READING THE NOVEL:

1. Skip leaving his foster home was a risk. Was it a justifiable one? Do you think he had thought through all the risks before embarking on his plan?
2. What would you have done if you were Skip? Would you have made the same decisions and followed a similar plan? As 12 year old boy, what choices did Skip have?
3. Discuss the concept of a family unit. Were Billy, Skip, Max and Sixpence a family? What does it take to be a family?
4. How do you think Skip felt at the end of the story? Why is Skip telling us his story? Did he behave in a way you expected?
5. Reflect on what it was that made Skip's dad different from most other fathers?
6. Skip liked to plan and to have solutions to potential problems. List a number of problems the escaping soldier, Skip, Billy, Max and Sixpence may have encountered on their journey to Max's grandfather's farm. Were they fortunate to arrive safely?
7. Is Skip correct when he speaks about the power of words? "That's what words do when people mean them: they get inside you and change everything." (p. 106)
8. After reading the novel are there unanswered questions about the story? For example, we never find out who the invading army is and why they have blown the city to 'smithereens'. (p. 182) Do we need to know some of these answers?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The title of the book is intriguing. Why do you think the author chose this title for her book? Suggest alternative titles and as a class vote for your preferred book title.
2. Look at the cover of the book. Why was this cover chosen? Does it reflect the story? What image could the publisher have used to grab the reader's attention?
3. Skip was a resilient character. How do we as humans learn to cope with loss and to be resilient?
4. Different people respond to the same situation in a variety of ways. Does our personality type determine how we might act in a crisis situation?
5. 'What if' scenarios to discuss. For example: What if Australia was invaded by enemy forces? What if a volcano erupted and our town/city was in danger? Develop some other scenarios like these and work in groups to devise practical plans of action one could take to lessen the impact on our lives. How would these situations challenge our thoughts about our current lifestyles and what we hold to be important? How might our thinking change?

RELATED READING

WAR

Picture Books

My Dog by John Heffernan

Rose Blanche by Roberto Innocenti

When the Wind Blows by Raymond Briggs

Novels

The Bombing of Darwin: The Diary of Tom Taylor, 1942 by Alan Tucker

Jimmy Moran Regular by Ken Catran

Once by Morris Gleitzman

Then by Morris Gleitzman

Tomorrow when the war began by John Marsden

HOMELESSNESS

Picture Books

Mutt Dog by Stephen Michael King

Way Home by Libby Gleeson and Greg Rogers

Novels

Sleep Rough Tonight by Ian Bone

ART

Picture Books

Luke's Way of Looking by Nadia Wheatley and Matt Ottley

ABOUT THE WRITERS

GLENDA MILLARD

Glenda Millard is a Victorian author of many books for children and teenagers. About *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* she says:

"Like many writers, I suspect, I collect found objects...just in case I find a use for them later on. Sometimes they're physical things, but I also collect memories of things I've seen, felt, heard or even smelt. I started collecting for *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* long before I began to write the story. The first thing I found was a headline in the *Age* newspaper: 'Urban Tribes'. I wrote it down and added a few notes about the images those two words conjured up for me. Much later, I read an article about 'Freegans': people who survive on what others waste. I immediately linked the two and began to think about what life would be like for a young homeless boy. Would he have a support network of some kind? Would he become part of a group? How would the group form? Would it be by choice or some other reason? Perhaps they might be thrown together by circumstances beyond their control. Maybe that circumstance could be war.

"When I mentioned to a family member that I was considering writing a story set in a war zone, he commented that no matter how resilient the human spirit is, war is disempowering. I knew that was true and for a while I felt discouraged about starting to write because I didn't want my story to be without hope. Then I began to think about what hope is. The dictionary says it's a feeling of expectation and desire and I believe that these are things that can come from inside a person regardless of what is going on outside. And so I began to write.

"The third and oldest item from my collection was a carousel. Almost forty years after I left school, I discovered that one of my high school teachers had restored a carousel. I spent a wonderful day with him, learning about the very labour-intensive process of restoration. Subsequently I rode the carousel, which had been relocated to Geelong, and then I went to Luna Park and there I rode the carousel of War and Peace that I had ridden when I was a little girl. I love it now as I loved it then and I knew I had discovered the perfect backdrop to my story: a fun fair, a contrast between the carefree pleasures of childhood and the bleakness of war.

"This is the first story I have written in the first person. I think I did this to help me express Skip's feelings and thoughts in a way that was true to character."

In 2008, Glenda Millard was an ambassador of the Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge. School visits by Glenda can be organised through Show and Tell:
http://www.showtell.com.au/victoria/authors/glenda_millard.htm

MARCIA PHILLIPS

Marcia Phillips is a secondary school teacher librarian and teacher of English who is currently head of a large school library. She has worked for many years as a teacher librarian both in the primary and secondary areas. In 2004 and 2005, Marcia was the Victorian Judge for the Children's Book Council of Australia, a role she relished both for the reading and the opportunity to speak to many groups in the community on the CBCA and the books selected. Marcia's involvement with the CBCA continues with her role as Regional Director of the CBCA (Vic) Ballarat Branch.