

Six Seconds

Author

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Synopsis

For ten year old Michael, Christmas in 1988 was an excellent one. Both his parents had the day off work, his Grandma came to spend the day with them, and the coming year was filled with lots of things to look forward to. Starting his final year at primary school, hanging out with friends and family at one of the many local beaches, and most exciting of all entering the sand-sculpture completion with the possibility of a new bike as the prize if he won. But even as many of the things which Michael had been looking forward to come to pass, he finds himself becoming increasingly worried about all the possible disasters which might befall him and his family. He stops riding his beloved bike as it is clearly too dangerous, won't catch the bus in case it crashes, and frets about the possibility of an asteroid crashing into the earth and killing everyone. Even when he is given free tickets to watch his local NRL team, the Newcastle Knights, play a game, he panics at the sight of the crowd and runs away in fear of being crushed. One year on, even though Christmas 1989 was filled with gifts to encourage outdoor play and activities, Michael firmly intends to stay safely inside as much as possible. So when an actual disaster strikes Newcastle, after the most frightening six seconds of his life have passed, Michael surprises everyone with his response. For Michael the Newcastle earthquake of 1989 is both a terrifying disaster, and a chance to reassess his perspective on life, risk, and danger.

About the Author

Alan Sunderland is an award-winning journalist with the ABC and SBS. He has written numerous children's books, including *The Incredible Powers of Montague Towers*, and *My Australian Story: Refugee*.

Themes

Key Themes include: Family; friendship; world news; current events; anxiety; global tensions; natural disaster; Australian History; Newcastle earthquake; hope; and coping with danger.

Writing Style

Written in the first person from the point of view of ten year old Michael O'Keefe, the story is both chronologically straightforward and emotionally complex. Michael narrates his own story and presents his growing fearfulness and anxiety in a believably matter of fact manner. The emotions and concerns of Michael's family and friends are presented through a combination of Michael's perception of the import of their behaviour, and through his reports of the dialogue which he participates in and overhears. At times, while it is consistently still Michael's voice reporting on events, it is nevertheless made clear to the reader how the other people in his life are feeling even as Michael himself seems oblivious to this. Events that were current in the news at the time in which the book is set play a large part in the general action of the novel, and in Michael's growing understanding of the world around him. Sunderland's exploration of Michael's character, and how he is influenced by the world he is growing up in is both relevant and revelatory, and serves to highlight the way children are impacted by the events they experience daily, and by the wider world in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the story, as a class look closely at the cover and title, and discuss what you can learn from it about the book as a whole. Some things that you might like to include in your discussion could be:
 - What do you think the six seconds in the title might refer to?
 - What can you notice about the way the title is written that gives us information about the content of the book?
 - What is the subtitle of the novel and what does it tell us about when and where the story might be set?
 - What genre do you think this book might be and why?
 - What, if anything, do you know about earthquakes in general and the Newcastle earthquake in particular?
- 2) When Michael shares his scrapbook with his class, his teacher and his parents become quite concerned for him. What would they have found concerning about the scrapbook? Do you think that they are right to be concerned? Why/why not?
- 3) When Michael hears about bus crashes he stops riding the bus, and when he hears about a disaster at a British soccer game he is too frightened to go to the Knights game that he had been so looking forward to. Is Michael's response reasonable and proportional to what he reads about and hears in the news? Why/why not? What are some of the things that we can do to help ourselves maintain sensible levels of caution without being incapacitated with fear when we hear about or see scary things happening in the world? As a class discuss this and brainstorm a list of coping strategies that we can use to help ourselves develop a sense of proportion, and the resilience we need to cope with life.
- 4) Sometimes disasters really do happen, not just to people far away but to us as well. Some, like earthquakes, floods, or fires, are more likely to occur in one place than they are in another while other disasters like the Covid-19 global pandemic will affect everyone on the planet! What are the natural disasters that people in your local area have been having to deal with over the last couple of years? What have the people in your local community done to help everyone stay as safe as possible during the natural disasters which have affected your local area?
- 5) Earthquakes are fairly rare in Australia, but they are common in New Zealand, and even in Australia they do sometimes happen - just like the Newcastle earthquake in *Six Seconds*. Even though we can't always predict when an earthquake (or other natural disaster) might occur, we can learn about

what to do when one does happen, and make sure we are prepared. As a class research what is the best thing to do before, during, and after an earthquake. Think about how Michael curled up in the middle of the lounge room, and how all the bookcases and the TV fell over. What might have been a safer thing for him to do if he'd known about earthquake safety protocols?

- 6) An important part of emergency preparedness is having an emergency kit packed and ready to go. If you were in charge of packing a box or bag with emergency essentials for your family, what would you pack? In pairs or small groups brainstorm a list of important items to include in an emergency kit for your family. You might like to look online for suggestions from local, state, or federal agencies which deal with disasters and disaster preparedness. As a class share your lists with each other, and discuss what you have all included and why. Create an illustrated poster sharing your list, and your reasons for choosing the different items. Think about what Michael needed right after the earthquake hit - both what he did have, the things he struggled to get to, and the things he wished he had.
- 7) Before Michael arrived to keep her company, his Grandma was trapped and alone. How do you think she felt when she heard his voice and then again when he actually made it to where she was? Write a description of the day of the earthquake from the point of view of Michael's grandmother, being sure to include not just what happened, but descriptions of how she felt and what she was thinking at each point.
- 8) Michael's primary school was badly damaged in the earthquake, but the local community didn't want it to be demolished until after a proper assessment of whether it could be saved had been done. What do you think eventually happened to the two storey main building and why? In pairs or small groups research what actually did happen to The Junction Public School - was the main two storey building eventually saved or did it have to be demolished? Can you find old pictures (before 1989) of the school? What does it look like today?
- 9) How old is your primary school? How well do you think your primary school would survive an earthquake? In pairs or small groups research your school's history, and present your findings as a poster or slideshow. Be sure to include any pictures you can find from when it first opened and pictures of how it looks now.
- 10) What have you learnt about the Newcastle earthquake from reading Michael's story? In pairs write down all the facts that you have learnt from the story, and as a class use everyone's lists to create a class list of facts. Is there anything that isn't mentioned in the story that you would like to know about? Research the Newcastle earthquake and see what else you can find out about what happened then.
- 11) Before reading the story, did you know about the Newcastle earthquake? What other earthquakes have you heard about? As a class make a list of all the earthquakes that you have read about, seen on TV or online, or heard people talking about. Try to include information about both where and when they happened, and what damage they caused.
- 12) Create an artwork inspired by Michael's story. You can choose to depict a city after an earthquake has hit, to paint a close-up of a damaged part of the landscape, or even create an abstract painting that you feel conveys the emotions Michael experienced throughout the novel as a whole.
- 13) How do you think Michael felt after the earthquake, when he and his family had returned home and life had returned to normal? What sort of effect can experiencing a natural disaster like an earthquake have on people and why? Do you think that the earthquake changed Michael at all, and if so how, and in what way?

- 14) At the start of the novel Michael wins a sand-sculpture competition. Have a class sand-sculpture competition of your own in a local sandpit. Plan what your sculpture will be, and draw pictures of how you would like it to look, just as Michael did before the finals of the competition. You might also want to reread the section of the book where Michael talks about how to create a good sand-sculpture first for hints and tips! Take photos of everyone's sand-sculptures and use them to create a wall display for your classroom. After the competition is over, write a recount sharing what you enjoyed, what was difficult, and what you learnt from the experience.