



## **PICASSO AND THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH**

Written by ANNA FIENBERG

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 10–14 YEARS OLD (YEARS 5 & 6, YEARS 7 & 8 SECONDARY)**

**GENRE:** Middle Fiction

**THEMES:** friendship, family and love; the healing power of nature; art and individual expression; school, bullying and bravery; death and forms of grief; anxiety and mental illness; secrets, loneliness and isolation

### **CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Visual Art
- Health & Physical Education

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## INTRODUCTION

*Picasso and the Greatest Show on Earth* is a stunningly written and evocative novel that explores a young girl's experiences of life, loss and friendship through the lens of art, nature, and a loveable spaniel called Picasso. It is an engaging and relatable story that would be an excellent novel study for students in Years 5-8. The storyline contains a great deal of depth; the author, Anna Fienberg, does not shy away from dealing with big feelings, and the ways in which children and adults attempt to deal with them. Simultaneously beautiful, lyrical, sad and joyous, the novel explores the themes of love, family, friendship, loss, grief, death, loneliness and isolation, the healing power of nature, art as a window to the soul and the destructive power of secrets. Younger students studying English can focus on the themes, characters, settings and storyline, while older students can explore the rich range of literary devices and imagery.

The novel has very strong links with artists, art styles and techniques, providing rich opportunities to connect with the Visual Arts curriculum. Further opportunities for cross-curricular study occur through the themes of friendship, family difficulties, isolation and grief. These directly connect with studies of emotional and mental well-being in Health & Physical Education.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Thirteen-year-old Frances has just moved to a new house in a new neighbourhood, is about to start a new school, and has a new puppy. However, this 'fresh start' is not what it appears to be. She doesn't know anyone, isn't looking forward to starting mid-year at a new school and is haunted by a mysterious family tragedy. Furthermore, the puppy, which she has named Picasso (after her favourite artist), does not endear himself to Frances. She finds him dirty and out of control and does not want to care for him or walk him, despite her mother's insistence.

Frances is obsessed with bacteria and viruses. She draws them endlessly and worries that her loved ones will become ill, especially her father who is a scientific journalist working on a story in Pakistan. Despite these fears, Picasso gradually drags Frances out in the world around her, enabling her to meet retired vet Peggy and her ominous neighbour Mal (who nearly runs Picasso over earlier in the story). When school starts, Frances meets tall and silent Kit in the library, who also seems to be hiding away from others. They discover they share a love of art and drawing, as well as hidden secrets they don't want to talk about with anyone.

As their friendship grows, we learn that Henry, Frances's younger brother, died as a young child, possibly as a result of Frances's distraction when he fell into a swimming pool. We begin to understand that Frances and her family are burdened by grief, each family member isolated from the others with their sorrow. Kit also has his own grief. He reveals he has had

a 'difficult year' that he is unwilling to talk about, but that resulted in him living with his grandfather in the country and learning about art.

For a while, everything seems to be better for Frances and Kit: Peggy's home becomes a safe place for Frances to visit; Kit joins the local soccer team and is immediately drawn into a new group of friends who hero-worship him; and Frances begins to see the world around her in a new light, appreciating the beauty of the bush and even learning to love Picasso's endearing qualities. The friends also embark on the painting of a mural at school, inspired by their shared love of art, nature and sunset (the 'greatest show on earth').

However, things quickly deteriorate. Frances's mother is depressed, and her father is avoiding coming home from his assignment overseas. Kit is distracted during a key moment in the soccer final, resulting in his team's loss and causing the team to berate and bully him. Worst of all, Kit finds an unflattering drawing that Frances made of him and refuses to be friends with her anymore. Frances is devastated, struggling to come to terms with the loss of Henry, the loss of her new friend, and the fracturing of her family.

The climax of the story occurs when Picasso runs off deep into the bush, towards a dilapidated house that Frances has never seen before. She chases him, meeting an unusual woman who ends up helping her rescue Picasso in a dramatic scene in the local dam. Frances and the woman return to her house, where Frances discovers that she, Sarah, is in fact Kit's mother. The secret he has harboured is that his mother is mentally ill (a hoarder) and that he is essentially her carer. The loss of her own mother, and estrangement from her father (Kit's grandfather), led to a destructive cycle and deteriorating mental health, which resulted in Kit being taken away from her for a while. Kit and Frances reconcile and return to her house to find her father back from Pakistan. In an emotional scene, the family is reunited and we find out that Henry did not die as a result of near-drowning, but had a deadly blood disorder that their parents hid from Frances in order to try to protect her.

The story ends in hope and reconciliation. Frances finishes the mural and her parents attend the school's unveiling of the artwork. Also in attendance is Kit's grandfather, who has finally reconciled with his daughter after years of emotional distance and damage. Both children can look to the future with hope, supported by their families.

## BEFORE READING

- Depending on your school's location, take students on a local bushwalk. Observe plants, flowers, trees, and any insect and animal life encountered. After walking, discuss how this experience made students feel. How is being in the bush/nature different to being in the classroom or around the school? What are some of the beneficial effects of being in nature? ACE9E7LE01
- Take students outside the classroom in order to encourage them to use their senses to connect with the natural environment. Start by sitting quietly and prompting students to close their eyes. What can they hear? What can they smell? Now, they

should open their eyes. What can they see? What does it feel like to touch trees, grass and flowers? While outside, prompt students to write a paragraph describing these experiences, reflecting on how it made them feel. AC9E5LY01

- Challenge students to explore Picasso's artworks through an image search or library books. After exploring, they should create a digital poster (using Canva or similar) that showcases their four favourite artworks. Ask students to pair up after completing their posters, so they can discuss what they have chosen and listen to each other's ideas and opinions. AC9E6LY02
- Some of the characters in this story have experienced anxiety. Support students to understand what this means by reading the [Headspace: Understanding Anxiety fact sheet](#). This can be returned to after reading the book, in order to highlight some of the signs and symptoms that Frances, Kit, Kit's mother and Mal all experience.
- Grief can be a difficult topic to discuss in a classroom environment. If you feel comfortable to, ask students to either discuss or write down what they think grief is. How might it affect a child and/or an adult? What changes might you see in their behaviour? How might it affect the way they see the world around them? Does grief only occur after the loss of someone you love? What other things might you grieve?
- In order to support students to predict characters, setting, and some of the plot elements of the story, conduct a [See, Think, Wonder](#) routine based on the front cover of the book. Give students time to write down everything they can see, then what this makes them think about, and then any questions they might have. AC9E7LY05

## Q&A WITH ANNA FIENBERG

### What inspired you to write this book?

'My novels tend to be inspired by big feelings. A tide of emotion, caused by a small or a big event, demands my attention. What should I do with these feelings, where are they coming from, why do I react this way, would anyone else respond like this? Writing down these feelings, before a story even starts, helps me to understand myself.'

'During the recent Covid years, many of us went through big losses. This book grew from a sense of loss, and a search for ways of living and growing with it. For many people isolation meant a loss of daily communication, a friend group; some grieved for beloved people and special events. I wanted to write about these big feelings, and the changes that were occurring in our lives.'

'I had a lot of time and silence to reflect. I'd started to think about these characters and their story, but I struggled to find my way. So, I went for long walks in the bush with my dog. Often, I'd come home and write about what I saw, and the characters and the storyline grew from there.'

'I think that finding words to express your experience is a kind of honouring of your mind. Your secret self. Some people paint or dance or play music or...lots of things, to feel this same way. When you do it, you're no longer a stranger to yourself. You feel more solid and whole. It's often a big struggle, this writing down and pairing of words and experience, but it's so satisfying. When I visit schools to talk with children, I often discuss this process and ways of finding those words, and the stories to go with them.'

### What do you see as the major themes /essence of this book?

'The essence of this story is friendship, which is such a rich part of life. I wanted to write about how change and loss can bring you closer to people than you ever thought possible. By listening to others' truth, gathering it in, it can help us to understand them. The story is therefore about the ways we can truly connect – with each other, and our beautiful world. Sometimes a loss of familiar people can feel so empty – like staring at a great big hole in the ground. But I wanted my readers to know that we can make wonderful new friends at any age, and they help us to understand life and ourselves. That's one of the amazing treasures of being alive.'

'This book is also about the importance of self-expression; how art and nature can help us do this, inspire us and heal us. It is about learning to tell the truth about what we feel – even if we are afraid – so that others understand us and we feel real.'

### What is the setting for the book and how does this connect to the story?

'The story is set in Oatfield, a quiet leafy suburb that is surrounded by bushland and a dam. The setting is inspired by my daily walks during the period of Covid isolation and its aftermath. I hugged trees, I looked at light jumping in the creek and water dragons plopping

from rocks into water. I often stayed in the bush to watch the sunset, the greatest show on earth.

'My loneliness abated. I began to feel a part of everything that was going on in that bushy, busy place. It was a relief to feel smaller and less important as a human being, and at the same time, have a stronger sense of myself in belonging to this magnificent world. I would come home and write about my experiences; my dog and his antics, the angophoras and frogs and the jumping light, and I'd feel so much better. Sometimes I drew the patterns made by the moths on the scribbly trees. In the story, Frances responds to the bush in a similar way, drawing it, absorbing it, as part of her healing process.'

### **Who inspired you when you created your main characters?**

'One day, after one of my long bush walks with my dog, I decided my two main characters, who each has a secret loneliness, would discover something new and liberating through each other, and nature. Their personalities and ways were different, but somehow, they would come to tell each other the truth, and be stronger and more alive for it. These characters would experience loss and grief but there would also be the adventure and mystery of art, of a growing friendship, with the gradual revealing of the secrets that had kept these two friends so achingly separate.'

## **CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES**

### **ENGLISH**

#### **LITERATURE**

Engaging with and responding to literature (Year 5: AC9E5LE02; Year 6: AC9E6LE02, Year 7: ACE9E7LE02, ACE9E7LE03, ACE9E7LE04, Year 8: AC9E8LE02, ACE9E8LE03)

- Encourage students to identify which character they liked most in the text and why. What did they find interesting or engaging about this character? Which aspect of this character's experience did they most relate to? What characteristics made this character relatable?
- Examine an 'unlikeable' character such as Mal or Brent. Find quotes to illustrate how the author uses language to position the reader to dislike these characters.
- As a class, discuss and record novels that students have recently read. Can they think of any books that share similarities in terms of themes, characters or storylines with *Picasso and the Greatest Show on Earth*? Which aspects of character, theme or storyline often occur in other novels aimed at this age group?
- Write the statement '*Picasso and the Greatest Show on Earth* is about art' on the board. Ask students to vote, on a scale of 1–5 (1 = strongly agree), the extent to which they agree with this statement. Use a random name selector to prompt

individuals to support their rating with evidence from the text and their own opinions. If students tended to disagree, what do they think the book is about instead?

- Look at the list of themes outlined earlier in these notes. As a class, vote on which five themes they think are the most important in the story. Next, prompt students to individually reflect on which of these five themes they personally think is the most important, providing reasons for their choice. Did everyone agree on the same theme? If not, why not? Explain that each individual reader brings their own context to the text, which causes different big ideas to have more prominence depending on their personal interests and experiences.
- Suggest students write a book review of the story. Start with a synopsis of the main characters, outline the plot, then provide an overview of the key themes. Next, include a personal response to the book, identifying and explaining what they enjoyed, what challenged them and what they did not like. Do they recommend the book to other readers of their age group? Why, or why not? Ask them to finish by rating it out of 10.
- Introduce the concept of 'universal themes' to students if they are not already familiar with it ([this article](#) provides more information if required). Which themes in the story do students think might be universal, and why? Which themes are not universal, and why?
- Explain that a [reader profile](#) is something that an author can write to help identify who their potential reader(s) might be. This can help the author to develop characters, themes and plots that might relate to the interests of their potential readership. Having read the story, who do students think the typical reader of this story might be? Ask them to write a paragraph describing the 'persona' of this typical reader. What age or gender are they? What are their interests? What other kinds of books do they read?

Examining literature (Year 5: AC9E5LE03 & AC9E5LE04; Year 6: AC9E6LE03 & AC9E6LE04; Year 7: ACE9E7LE05 & ACE9E7LE06; Year 8: ACE9E8LE05 & ACE9E8LE06)

- Support students to identify that the story is written from the first-person point of view, using the voice of Frances. Why does this make the story so effective? Rewrite a paragraph from the story in a third person perspective. How does this change the story? Which do students prefer and why?
- At the beginning of the story, Frances is obsessed with bacteria and viruses. She draws them, talks about them and worries about their power. Why do students think this is? What does this device help the reader to understand about her and her way of seeing the world?
- The setting plays a key role in the story. In the beginning, the bush is alien and unfamiliar to Frances. However, by the end of the story, she sees the beauty of the



bush and it provides her with a sense of calm. How does this change in perspective mirror the changes that are happening within the character of Frances?

- Discuss the role that the mural plays in the story. Recall what inspired it, and what it depicts. How does its initiation, development and completion mimic what is happening to the characters of Frances and Kit? How does the final mural represent what they have learned about themselves?
- One of the key themes in the book is secrets, and the loneliness and isolation that result from them. Identify the secrets that various characters are keeping (e.g. Frances, Kit, Frances's mother, Kit's mother, Mal). For each character, identify how and why their secret is causing them to feel isolated and lonely. As the plot is resolved, what how does the revelation of each character's secret help them feel more connected to those around them?
- The text references history and science books that talk about the bubonic plague and the Renaissance (see pp.179 and 189). If required, explain the history of the plague and how it wiped out a third of the population of Europe. What does Frances learn about the effects of the plague on art and society? How are these intertextual references used to help the reader understand some of the big ideas in the plot and overall themes in the story?
- The bush is regularly personified in the book. For example, on p.34, 'Trees stood around, saying nothing. Pale trees, with bark hanging in strips like bandages.' How is the bush personified in this quote? How is a simile used to further add to the imagery? What overall image do these two sentences convey and how does it help us to understand Frances's view of the world at this point in the story?
- The story is full of powerful metaphors. For example, on p.105 Frances laments that, 'Ever since Henry, a stone sat in my chest weighing everything down. The stone separated me from the world, keeping me out, keeping me in'. Find further examples of metaphors in the text, explaining how they help the reader to understand what the characters are thinking and feeling.
- Discuss the meaning of a literary symbol, then identify some symbols in the text (including bacteria and viruses, nature and water). Support students to identify how and why bacteria and viruses function as a symbol in the text. Next, look at nature as a symbol. How does this symbol function in the story? In what ways are these symbols opposites of each other? Which symbol 'wins' in the end and how is this related to the ways in which the characters change?

Creating literature (Year 5: AC9E5LE05; Year 6: AC9E6LE05; Year 7: AC9E7LE07; Year 8: AC9E8LE06)

- Write a newspaper report about the opening of the mural. Outline what the mural depicts and include a brief biography of the artists Frances and Kit. Include some quotes from members of the school community.



- Secrets (and misunderstandings) are a couple of the big ideas in the book. As a class, brainstorm a list of secrets that a child might keep, and the reasons they might not want to tell the truth to anyone (suggestions might include: accidentally breaking something; doing something embarrassing; doing something illegal). Prompt students to turn this into a plot outline, with the problem being the secret and the resolution being how the secret turns out. They can then draft their outline as a short story.
- Discuss the concept of perspectives in texts, identifying from whose perspective the story was written (that of Frances). Challenge students to write an account using the first-person form of one of the other characters (e.g., Kit, Frances's mum, Peggy or even Kit's mother or grandfather). Depending on the character chosen, model how to select a relevant point in the plot (such as when Kit finds out about Frances's giraffe drawing of him, or when Frances meets Kit's mum), then discuss how to write an account of the events from their chosen perspective. Model an example, then provide students with time to write their own, one-page retelling of their chosen event from their chosen perspective.
- Towards the end of the story, the bush is described in beautiful and lyrical terms because it represents Frances's healing and recovery from grief. However, she doesn't always feel this way. Create a short scene that would be placed at the beginning of the book, where Picasso has run off and Frances is lost in the bush. Describe the bush from her perspective at this point, making it seem threatening and even terrifying. Use literary elements such as personification, simile and metaphor.
- Reread pp.282–4, which describes Frances's discovery of her new 'spot' in the bush. Highlight examples of imagery. Next, explain that students are going to take elements from this description as a prompt to write a free-verse poem about the setting. Revise concepts of sound in poetry, especially alliteration, assonance, consonance and half-rhyme. Prompt students to start drafting descriptive lines that use some of these sound elements to describe this setting.

## LITERACY

Analysing, Interpreting, evaluating (Year 5: AC9E5LY03, AC9E5LY04, AC9E5LY05; Year 6: AC9E6LY03, AC9E6LY04, AC9E6LY05; Year 7: AC9E7LY03, AC9E7LY04, AC9E7LY05; Year 8: AC9E8LY03, AC9E8LY04, AC9E8LY05)

Use the following comprehension questions to help students understand key points in the text.

- On p.2, Frances states, 'My shadow shivered beside me. It seeped like watercolour into other ghosts shading the footpath – gum leaves, germ-shaped clouds, a power pole – and from the corner of my eye I caught the last glint of sun dying behind a house. The roof was lit up by a blood red smear'. Unpack what this imagery means, then explain what it reveals about how she sees the world?

- Introduce the literary device of 'foreshadowing' (the use of an object, symbol, character reaction or setting that hints to readers what might happen later in the text). Read the bottom of p.9, 'My mind drifted back to another time...Splash.' Discuss how the use of the word 'splash' foreshadows some of the key events in the plot (e.g. Frances believing that Henry's near drowning caused his death; Picasso almost drowning).
- We learn more about Frances on p.14, where she describes her thoughts after the near accident with Picasso and the man in the car. What do these thoughts reveal about her emotional state?
- We don't find out Frances's name until p.20. Why might an author conceal the name of their main character at the start of a novel? What message does this provide the reader about the character of Frances and the way she's feeling about herself?
- On p.23, Frances states that she felt like: 'Turning myself to the wall. I should stay there for practically my whole life'. What does this image reveal to us about how Frances is feeling at this point in the novel?
- The theme of loneliness and isolation is raised on p.29 where Frances is speaking to her mother and comments: 'There was so much to say. And nothing I could tell her'. What does this reveal about Frances's relationship with her mother?
- This theme continues on p.39: 'Sadness hunched in a lump at my throat. I couldn't speak over it or under it. We were three separate species, Mum, Picasso and me, each breathing away in our own habitat. It was the loneliest thing.' Explore the personification at the start of this quote, then unpack the way the author has used imagery to reinforce the sense of isolation.
- Read the metaphor at the top of p.48 that states 'we were in black and white'. What does this metaphor tell us about what Frances feels about the world around her?
- Later on p.48, we see an example of what Frances draws. What is described here? How is art being used in the story as a way of viewing both the character's interior thoughts and the way in which they view the world?
- Reread pp.60–62. As a character, Peggy challenges some of Frances's negative thinking patterns. Find examples and identify how Peggy's words might serve as an antidote to Frances's thoughts.
- On pp.65–67, we learn about Frances's first day of school. What images does the author use to describe this? How are the five senses used to bring to life the busy and drab world of high school?
- We first meet Kit on p.73. What metaphor is used to describe Kit and Frances at this point? How does it link to the theme of loneliness and isolation? How is this metaphor continued on p.74 as Frances narrates her time at school?
- At the top of p.79, we get the first hint that meeting Kit might change Frances's view of the world. What is it?

- Frances states that: 'I was still on the island, but now there were two of us. I stopped looking for myself in windows.' What does this reveal about the changes she is experiencing about herself and the way she feels about the world around her?
- On p.98, Kit and Frances talk about drawing things that make them angry. How might the experience of drawing something help people to deal with their emotions?
- Frances begins to experience nature differently on pp.103–4. What does she see through Kit's eyes, and what does she comment about this? How is Kit starting to help Frances to heal her grief?
- On p.126, Frances tells Kit that her little brother Henry drowned. Although this has been hinted at, it is the first time we hear her version of what happened. What does this revelation disclose about Frances's growing friendship with Kit? Why does she end the scene by commenting, 'I guess we both had our secrets'?
- Frances talks about her changing view of the world on p.132: 'I started to love this time of day. Before, when the sun was going down, I'd often felt anxious.' What bigger significance is twilight taking on in the story at this point? Why do you think the book was named after this time of day?
- On p.138 we learn that Frances is learning to love Picasso, and part of this process is because she has been drawing him. She goes on to say: 'Maybe when you pay attention to something for long enough, you stop being afraid of it.' Why might Frances have been 'afraid' of Picasso before now?
- 'Wang Wei believed good art could cure sickness. It could heal you like medicine' (p.146). How is art being used as 'medicine' for Kit and Frances?
- By the end of p.156, we learn the full story about Frances and Henry. What does she believe happened, and why does she think it is her fault?
- At the end of Chapter Nine, and the beginning of Chapter Ten, why has Kit's attitude to Frances changed? What does he not want to reveal about himself?
- The concept of the mural is introduced on p.184: 'We want it to be a big bright invitation'. At the end of the story, in what ways does the mural function as an 'invitation'?
- On pp.186–8, Frances talks about their shared idea for the mural. She says that she wants it to be magical, 'Like telling a story'. What does this reveal about how Frances has changed?
- Read the description of the bush from pp.204–12. Why do you think the author included this extended, descriptive scene? How does it link in with the themes of the story?
- On p.236, Kit misses a save in the football grand final, which signifies the start of the climax of the story. Predict what he might have seen, and how it links into the storyline so far.

- Kit starts to add to the mural parts of the landscape around his grandfather's house. On p.245 Frances states 'That's what we planned, to paint places we love'. Why, later in the page does her mind 'blur...Fear clouded everything'? What does this reveal about her thoughts and feelings?
- On p.251, Frances reveals that without Kit's positive outlook, she is struggling with the mural. Why does she say she is angry with herself?
- The author uses the simile of 'the eye of a hurricane' to describe Kit when he has seen Frances's drawing of him as a giraffe when the others are taunting him. Discuss this image in relation to the scene. What does it hint will happen next?
- Why do you think that Kit feels so angry with Frances on p.267?
- On p.270, Frances asks, 'What are best friends *for* then, if not to talk about the inside stuff? Is the inside stuff too private?' How does this quote relate to one or more of the key themes in the story? Later, she says, 'We both knew the prickly places, and kept away.' What does this reveal about their friendship?
- On pp.282–7, Frances finds peace in the bush, and imagines that Henry is there too? How and why is this experience helping her to process her grief about Henry? What message does this give the reader about nature?
- What does Frances say to her father on p.292 that later leads to a resolution in the story for her family?
- Elements of the story begin to converge towards a resolution when Frances is inspired to add the magical Henry-like figure at the front of the mural. What does this addition to the mural reveal about how Frances has changed in the story?
- Study the description of the woman on p.307. What do the small details the author includes reveal about her personality, e.g. the housecoat, the egg yolk stain?
- When Picasso is in danger, and is then rescued, Frances realises how much she loves him. Think back over the story; what has prompted this change in attitude towards Picasso?
- On p.317, how does the description of Kit's bedroom show that he is different to his mother?
- What does Frances say on p.327 that comforts Kit and helps him to understand that Frances does not judge Sarah for her mental illness?
- In Chapter 20, the truth about Henry's condition and death are revealed, but only after Frances confesses that she believes she is responsible. What does this conversation reveal about the danger of keeping secrets? How might life have been different for Frances if her parents had been honest with her, and she honest with them? What message does this scene convey to the reader?
- On p.368 we find out that Kit has added a giraffe to the mural. What message does this convey? What does it reveal about how Kit has changed in the story?

Creating texts (Year 5: AC9E5LY06, AC9E5LY07; Year 6: AC9E6LY06, AC9E6LY07, Year 7: AC9E7LY06, AC9E7LY07; Year 8: AC9E8LY06, AC9E8LY07)

- In the beginning of the story, Frances says to Picasso: 'You deserve to have an owner who's excited about you'. She doesn't want to own a dog and doesn't know how to care for one. Tell students that they are going to help Frances out and need to write an instructional manual titled 'How to care for a puppy'. Sections should include food, bedding, exercise and puppy training. Students may wish to work in pairs to research and develop their text.
- The story outlines different ways that various characters use to deal with their 'big feelings'. Some methods are successful, others are not! Prompt students to use the ideas from the book, and their own research, to write '10 Tips to help you cope with Big Feelings'. Students might like to present their work as a poster or infographic.
- Challenge students to develop a multimodal synopsis of the book in the form of a PowerPoint (or similar) that they will present live. They need to source images and music to illustrate key plot points in the book, retelling the story verbally as they move through the presentation.
- One of the underlying messages in the story is that dogs are good for your mental health; on p.5, Frances relays that her mother felt 'I should be out in the fresh air, playing with a dog'. Inform students that they are going to write a persuasive text either arguing for, or against, the statement 'Dogs are beneficial for your mental health'. Hold a discussion or debate first in order to brainstorm a variety of arguments. It may be helpful to revise the structure of a persuasive text, focusing on the use of an introduction (with attention-grabbing start), that outlines their arguments, two to three detailed paragraphs (one per argument; they may wish to use the [PEEL paragraph structure](#) to help) and a conclusion summarising the arguments and reaffirming their chosen perspective. As an extension, ask students to include the use of [ethos, pathos and logos](#) in their writing.
- It is inferred that Kit's mother Sarah suffers from a hoarding disorder. Learn about the disorder from the [Australian Health Direct information page](#), then reread pages 306 and 315–9, which describe the house's front yard and interior. Later in the story, Kit reveals his mother's past on pp.333–4. Write a paragraph to explain what triggers in Sarah's past might have led to the current state of her house and her mental health.
- Write an analytical essay answering the question 'How does Fienberg use the setting as a literary device? How does it contribute to the overall mood, themes, or character development in the novel?'

## LANGUAGE

Text structure and organisation (Year 5: AC9E5LA03, AC9E5LA04; Year 6: AC9E6LA03, AC9E6LA04; Year 7: AC9E7LA03, AC9E7LA04; Year 8: AC9E8LA03, AC9E8LA04)

- The chapters are numbered rather than named. Working in pairs, ask students to replace each chapter number with a brief title that hints at its contents; e.g. Chapter One could be called 'Chasing Picasso' or 'The Accident'.
- Within each chapter, there are small images of flowering gum leaves. What function do these images have? Why would an author choose to separate text in this way, rather than use a new chapter?
- Revise the structure of a narrative (orientation, complication, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) then discuss how authors of longer texts can build in additional problems to add to the rising tension before the climax. As a class, identify all the problems in this novel? How is each problem resolved in the end?

Language for expressing and developing ideas (Year 5: AC9E5LA05, AC9E5LA06, AC9E5LA07, AC9E5LA08, AC9E5LA09; Year 6: AC9E6LA05, AC9E6LA06, AC9E6LA07, AC9E6LA08, AC9E6LA09; Year 7: AC9E7LA05, AC9E7LA06, AC9E7LA07, AC9E7LA08, AC9E7LA09; Year 8: AC9E8LA05, AC9E8LA06, AC9E8LA07, AC9E8LA08, AC9E8LA09)

- The novel contains lots of specific vocabulary related to the Australian bush in South-Eastern Australia. Find examples of plants and animals mentioned, then conduct an internet search to find images of them. As a class, build a visual glossary of the bush around Oatfield.
- The story is full of vivid, emotive imagery in the form of similes, metaphors and personification. Go on an 'imagery' hunt in one chapter of the book, either highlighting or listing examples on the board. As an interesting challenge, reread a section of the chosen chapter without the imagery. How does this change the tone and mood of the story? Why is imagery so important in a narrative text?
- Stylistically, the author chooses to start many sentences with 'and' or 'but'. How do these choices help to establish the 'voice' of the narrator, Frances. If the author had used a more traditional sentence structure, placing commas before these words and adding them to a complex sentence, how would this change Frances's voice?
- Similarly, the author also often uses 'fragmented' sentences, that either don't contain a subject or a verb, e.g. p.152 'Loud as gunfire', or 'Something heavy. Important'. Interestingly, each of these fragments does contain (or imply) a complete idea. Why might the author have chosen to use these fragments? What is the overall effect on the narrative style?

### ENGLISH ASSESSMENT IDEAS:

- Write a paragraph to explain how one of the minor characters changes in the story (e.g. Mal, Frances's mum, Sarah (Kit's mum), Brent). What were they like at the beginning of the story? What was their issue? How have they changed at the end of the story, and how has their issue been resolved (if at all)?

- Develop a visual story arc to explain the plot, characters and themes in the story. The story arc should mimic a graph, with higher levels equalling larger problems / climactic incidents. At key plot events, write short notes about how this event relates to the main characters in the story and the major themes.
- Write a PEEL (Point, Evidence, Elaboration, Link) paragraph to explain how one of the settings in the story (e.g. the bush, the dam, the mural) works as a catalyst for either Frances or Kit to change. Include at least one quote as evidence.
- Write a 600–800 word analytical essay, answering the question ‘How is the theme of nature represented in the novel?’. Prompt students to think about Picasso (as an animal companion), the beauty of nature, and the ways in which the characters interact with nature. Students should develop an introductory paragraph, at least two main body paragraphs and a conclusion.

## ADDITIONAL LEARNING AREAS

### VISUAL ARTS – YEARS 5 & 6 / 7 & 8

Exploring & Responding (Years 5 & 6: AC9AV6E01; Years 7 & 8: AC9AV8E01); Creating & Making (Years 5 & 6: AC9AV6C01; Years 7&8: AC9AV8C01, AC9AV8C02)

- Learn more about the artist Picasso and his range of artworks via the [essay on the Metropolitan Museum of Art website](#). Identify the range of materials and processes used in at least 3 different Picasso artworks, then discuss what ideas Picasso may have wanted to communicate with these artworks (suggestion to explore one early artwork, a cubist artwork and then a surrealist artwork).
- Explore Picasso’s paintings and drawings, starting with one of his simple line drawings of his dog Lump. Picasso experimented (and perfected) capturing complex forms with minimal and simplistic lines. Challenge students to practise the technique by attempting to draw an animal using simple lines, or even one continuous line.
- When Kit first sees Frances’s drawings, he compares them to those of surrealist artists. Students could compile a digital portfolio of famous surrealist artworks, then develop a presentation about one surrealist artist, profiling their choice of materials, processes and subjects, and identifying the messages that the artworks convey.
- The Chinese artist Wang Wei inspires Frances and Kit with the way he captures landscape. Apparently, none of his artworks survive today (he was born around the year 700, in the time of the Tang Dynasty in China), artworks from this period do exist. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has some examples which can be found [here](#). View the images associated with the article, and try to identify the mediums he used, and how he captured landscape.
- Wang Wei was one of the pioneers of Shan Shui, a type of Chinese landscape art that used brush and ink to capture scenery and natural landscapes. The name literally translates to ‘mountain water picture’. The [New World Encyclopedia](#) states that: ‘When Chinese painters work on Shan Shui painting, they do not try to present an image of what they have seen in nature, but what they have thought about nature’.



How does this description of Shan Shui relate to the mural that Frances and Kit draw?

- Challenge students to create their own landscape inspired by the ideals of Wang Wei and Shan Shui art. They might like to get inspiration from modern artists proclaiming to practise Shan Shui, as seen at the [Saatchi Art website](#). Students should be encouraged to use either watercolours or inks to produce their artwork.
- Frances practises drawing sunsets using chalks, as taught to her by Kit. Practise using this technique to try to capture a typical Australian bush sunset. Add silhouettes of Australian trees in the foreground.
- Although the mural in the book is described, there is no image of it. Challenge students to reread the passages relating to the mural, then attempt to recreate an image of it. They could start with pencil outlines, then use acrylics to build up the layers from the background to the foreground.

### **VISUAL ARTS ASSESSMENT IDEAS:**

- Develop a PowerPoint to document conventions of traditional Chinese Shan Shui landscape art. Include one slide for each of the following: subjects, materials, processes, perspectives, and possible intentions.
- Challenge students to create an artwork that captures a landscape that is personal to them. Their landscape should communicate a time of day, and include elements in the foreground, middle ground and background. After completion, they should write a paragraph to explain choice of materials, process and intended feeling / message in the viewer.

### **HEALTH & PHYSICAL EDUCATION – YEARS 5 & 6 / 7 & 8**

Personal, Social & Community Health (Years 5&6: AC9HP6P01, AC9HP6P04, AC9HP6P06, AC9HP6P10; Years 7&8: AC9HP8P01, AC9HP8P04, AC9HP8P06, AC9HP8P10)

- At the beginning of the story, Frances does not have a very positive personal identity. Identify the contributing factors, including events, people and places, that might have led to the way she sees herself.
- How would you encourage a student to develop a positive self-identity? What should they do, think and say? Design a poster to support young secondary school students to develop their own positive self-identity.
- According to Frances, she quickly becomes 'best' friends with Kit. However, not all of the elements of their friendship are healthy and positive. Discuss with students how they would define a healthy friendship. Next, as a class, draw up a table on the board with the column headings 'Healthy habits' and 'Unhealthy habits'. What are some of the aspects of their friendship that are healthy? Which are unhealthy, and why?

- Discuss the statement: 'Friendships should be built on trust, respect and honesty'. What might be the benefit of friendships that have these foundations? Which foundations are missing in the friendship between Frances and Kit? How does the ending of the book start to build these foundations?
- Kit is clearly traumatised after being bullied at his last school. Explore the types of bullying that can occur in school (the [Kids Helpline page](#) might be helpful), then identify how Kit was bullied. Ask students to imagine they were at school with Kit at the time. What advice should they give him?
- Reread Chapter Fifteen, when the soccer boys attack Frances and Kit. What do the boys do to Frances and Kit that is unkind and unfair? How do Frances and Kit respond? What then happens that upsets Kit? How did he emotionally respond? How did the other characters emotionally respond? Challenge students to imagine they are there in the playground at this moment. What could each character say or do differently to improve, or even resolve, the situation? Draw a cartoon, with thought or speech bubbles over each character's head with their behaviour or comments that will improve the situation.
- Frances's family is shown breaking apart throughout the story. What does the family do in the end that helps to heal some of their hurt? Develop a top ten list of 'connecting habits' that families could practise to help keep them together.
- Grief is a key theme in the story. While this can be difficult to talk about with children and teens, a great way of explaining it is presented in the [video The Invisible Suitcase](#) by Child Bereavement UK. After viewing, discuss the message conveyed in the video. What did Frances do with most of her suitcase throughout the story? What actions did she take that helped her to 'lighten' the weight of her suitcase?

### HEALTH & PHYSICAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT IDEAS:

- Create a 'Healthy Friendships' poster. The poster should encourage children and teenagers to develop healthy friendships. What should they say, do and think to ensure that their friendships with others are positive? What advice would they give when friendships experience problems? How can friends work through problems to maintain a healthy relationship?
- Ask students to imagine they are on their school's Student Council, and that they have identified that there is a bullying problem in the school. What would they do? How could they reduce bullying? Develop a 10-point 'Stop Bullying Action Plan' that targets students, teachers and parents.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ANNA FIENBERG** has written more than forty well-loved books for children and young adults. Her career began when she worked as an editor for *School Magazine*, a NSW literary journal for children, which published her first story. She went on to win many awards for her novels and picture books, including the Children's Book Council of Australia award for *The Magnificent Nose and Other Marvels*, the Victorian Premier's Prize for *Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life*, and the CBCA Honour Book for *Horrendo's Curse* and *Borrowed Light*, the latter also chosen as an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults.

Anna writes for all ages, and has been published all over the world. Her ever-popular *Tashi* books, illustrated by Kim Gamble, have inspired an animated series for television.

## ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

**Sophie Honeybourne** is a teacher with a passion for children's literature. After studying English Literature at university in the UK, dabbling in a diverse series of jobs and engaging in some globe-trotting, she finally settled upon a career in teaching, completing a Master of Teaching at Sydney University. She held Primary teaching and leadership positions at schools across Sydney before moving to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, where she has recently diverted career paths to become a Secondary English teacher.

Sophie has written numerous educational literature units for the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, as well as producing materials for Educational Services Australia and the NSW School Magazine.

In her spare time Sophie loves to spend time with her two children and long-suffering husband, read and drink cocktails with her book club, sail, ocean-swim, travel, cook, garden and sleep.

## CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

### ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Headspace: Understanding Anxiety fact sheet:

[https://headspace.org.au/assets/Factsheets/headspace\\_understanding-anxiety\\_Fact-Sheet\\_FA01\\_DIGI.pdf](https://headspace.org.au/assets/Factsheets/headspace_understanding-anxiety_Fact-Sheet_FA01_DIGI.pdf)

See, Think, Wonder:

[https://thinkingpathwayz.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/4/4/104440805/see\\_think\\_wonder\\_template.pdf](https://thinkingpathwayz.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/4/4/104440805/see_think_wonder_template.pdf)

Universal Themes: <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/universal-themes-common-concepts-literature-life>

Reader Profile: <https://www.tckpublishing.com/reader-profile/>

PEEL Paragraph structure: <https://www.twinkl.com.au/teaching-wiki/peel-writing>

Ethos Pathos and Logos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkUB-ef6Oa4>

Health Direct Information: hoarding disorder: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/hoarding-disorder>

Picasso – Metropolitan Museum of Art:

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pica/hd\\_pica.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pica/hd_pica.htm)

Landscape Painting in Chinese Art - Metropolitan Museum of Art:

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clpg/hd\\_clpg.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clpg/hd_clpg.htm)

Shan Shui Art (New World Encyclopedia):

[https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Shan\\_shui](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Shan_shui)

Shan Shui paintings (Saatchi Art): <https://www.saatchiart.com/paintings/shan-shui/feature>

Kids Helpline – Bullying: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/bullying>

The Invisible Suitcase (grief): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmzy6fRLcCU>