

The January Stars

By Kate Constable

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Recommended for 9-13-year-olds



Summary

Fourteen-year-old Tash and twelve-year-old Clancy inadvertently kidnap their wheelchair-bound grandfather from his aged care facility and then decide that they need to find a more appropriate home for him with family members. They end up on a taxi-train-car road trip that takes them first to Pa's former home in an outer Melbourne bushland suburb, then to a bookshop in the CBD, an Ashram in the country and eventually to a beach shack on the coast.

Along the way there are many challenges for Tash and Clancy to overcome and in the process, they discover their own resourcefulness and resilience and that their differing strengths make them a good team – especially as mild-mannered young outlaws trying to do the right thing by their grandfather.



Kate Constable introduces the book's central character, Clancy, by having her fail to answer a phone call, which in turn allows the book's third person narrator to introduce each member of Clancy's family. Her clever use of details paints a rich picture of each character just as their reactions to the missed phone call tells us much about each personality. This is middle fiction writing at its best: it allows the story to move forward quickly without stopping the action to provide background details.

But it is the relationship between Clancy, her older sister Tash and their grandfather that really shows Kate Constable's writing skills: she is funny and poetic and demonstrates a keen ability to peer deep into her characters' psyches.

Use in the curriculum

This beautifully written book sits well with the classics of modern middle years fiction. As well as a recommended 'good read' or library book, it would make a rewarding class novel:

- as a text, read aloud novel or part of a literature circle
- to read alongside other novels which reflect the values of family, resilience etc. and so encourage connectedness between texts

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- as part of a study using the well-rounded characters and settings to exemplify core understandings, giving the students time for reflection and appraisal of their own values
- as part of an interdisciplinary study of one of the many themes: family, grandparents, old age, resourcefulness and a developing understanding of the world outside family

Themes

- family
- siblings
- grandparents
- resourcefulness
- resilience
- humour

Discussion questions

Characterisation: 'Tash loved to run; she played football; she was always in a hurry. Clancy preferred to take things slowly. And carefully.' (p. 18).

(a) Though they are sisters, Clancy and Tash are two very different people.

- In your own words describe each character's strengths and weaknesses, using examples from the book to illustrate your point.

(b) How does their relationship change by the end of the novel?

- Give examples of things they say or do – both early in the novel and later – that show this change.

'Aged and infirm':

(a) 'Pa laid his hand on his heart, gazed at the ceiling and murmured. He gestured all around, then pressed his hand to his heart again.' (p. 52)

Pa suffers from *aphasia* which means that he can't speak more than a few words. Yet he is very much able to communicate in other ways.

- Can you find examples other than the one above in the story where he makes his thoughts and feelings very clear?

(b) 'The woman smiled at Pa again, but this time it was not a playful, conspiratorial grin, but a pitying smile, and suddenly Clancy felt furious. Yes, it sucked that Pa couldn't walk, or speak when he wanted to, or even push his own wheelchair with his one good hand (not far, anyway) or live in his own house anymore. But this woman didn't even know him. How dare she feel sorry for him. How dare she look at him like that!'. (pp. 75–76)

- What do you think that Kate Constable, the book's author, might be saying here about how our society treats the elderly and infirm? Do you agree with this assessment?

Irony: 'Tash grabbed the handles of the wheelchair. "Come on. If you're lucky, you might catch the end of *The Great Escape*.'" (p. 25)

- Define the term 'irony' and write a short paragraph about whether you think there is anything ironic about elderly people sitting in an aged care home watching this particular movie?
- What happens early in Chapter 5 to emphasise this irony?

Literary Devices: Match the literary devices listed in brackets with examples of their use in the extracts below. (alliteration, personification, imagery, mood, onomatopoeia, simile).

'The sun slanted between the buildings and the glass of the skyscrapers dazzled white and gold. Seagulls wheeled above the slow brown ribbon of the river, pigeons strutted on the pavement, and sparrows darted for crumbs.' (pp. 79–80)

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'Clancy soon gave up looking for the moon...as she pushed Pa's wheelchair steadily up the street, past the cathedral and the town hall, past souvenir shops and shoe shops and banks and clothing stores, weaving the wheelchair between tourists and students and skateboarders, buskers and beggars and businesspeople in suits.' (pp. 80–81).

'The whole café was not much bigger than their cluttered living room at home...Pa's wheelchair nudged the flimsy furniture aside like a whale nosing through a school of dolphins...A pale freckled girl stood guard over the register; she wore a black T-shirt, and tattoos swirled over her arms and up the side of her neck.' (p. 81)

Genre: What does the term *magic realism* mean?

- What incident or incidents occur in the book to warrant describing *The January Stars* as a magic realist novel? [*Hint:* in your answer, be sure to include details about The Magpie Bookshop and Antonia Wildwood].
- Why do you think the author decided to include magical elements in her story? Did it make the novel more interesting for you?

Themes:

(a) 'Maybe no power in the universe could reverse the power of entropy, but it wasn't true that chaos was inevitable. Disorder could be transformed into order, more or less; all it took was a bit of energy.' (pp. 133–134)

"Do you ever worry about entropy?...So...gravity is the opposite of entropy?" (p. 221)

Clancy's family is no longer as close as when her Nan was alive. Tim (Clancy's father) has drifted apart from his brother and sisters emotionally as well as physically.

- How might the concept of entropy, energy/gravity, be used to describe her family's dynamics at the novel's beginning and end?

(b) 'Maybe the spirits don't want to be quieted, thought Clancy. Maybe they want to talk to us. Maybe they've got things to say...' (p. 194)

'Was this what Nan had wanted all this time? For the separate rocks and dust of everybody to merge together into one clump of family?' (p. 251)

- What might Nan have to say to Clancy about the importance of family relationships?

(c) Why do you think the book's title is *The January Stars*? In your answer talk about what stars and the moon represent in the novel.

Cover design: After finishing the novel, invite students to design their own cover for *The January Stars*. Remind them to carefully consider the image they would like to use, as well as the colours that would be appropriate and the best font for the title. After completion, encourage students to write a short paragraph explaining their choices.

Related texts/Further reading

Constable, Kate. *Crow Country*, Allen & Unwin, 2011

Constable, Kate. *Cicada Summer*, Allen & Unwin, 2009

Condon, Bill. *The Simple Things*, Allen & Unwin, 2014

Bateson, Catherine. *Rain May and Captain Daniel*, UQP, 2015

Foxlee, Karen. *Lenny's Book of Everything*, Allen & Unwin, 2018

Jonsberg, Barry. *My Life as an Alphabet*, Allen & Unwin, 2013. Also published in 2020 as *H is for Happiness*.

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In the classroom...



Murray, Kirsty. *Zarconi's Magic Flying Fish*, Allen & Unwin, 1999 and 2006

Paterson, Katherine. *Bridge to Terabithia*, HarperCollins Australia, 2009

Film:

H is for Happiness. Directed by John Sheedy, 2020. Based on *My Life as an Alphabet*

Author's inspiration

'The initial inspiration for *The January Stars* came from my own father, who suffered a severe stroke several years ago and has since become a wheelchair-user and suffers from aphasia, which has made communication extremely difficult. Despite his struggles, his personality has remained intact, and I was interested in exploring how the grandfather-grandchild relationship can still survive and even thrive, despite these obstacles.'

— Kate Constable

The author

Kate Constable was born in Melbourne but spent much of her childhood in Papua New Guinea, without television but within reach of a library where she 'inhaled' stories. She studied Arts/Law at the University of Melbourne before working for a record company while she began her life as a writer. Kate had stories published in *Meanjin*, *Island* and other literary magazines before realising she was actually a children's and YA author.

Kate has written ten novels for young people, including the internationally-published Chanters of Tremaris series and the CBCA award-winning *Crow Country*. Kate lives in a northern suburb of Melbourne with her family, a bearded dragon, a rabbit and a dog.

