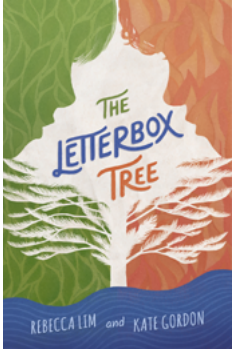




# Walker Books Teacher Notes



## THE LETTERBOX TREE

Rebecca Lim and Kate Gordon

9781760656201

03/05/2023

\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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## Outline:

**Two of Australia's most acclaimed and high-profile writers co-author a sensitive and ultimately hopeful story about our growing climate crisis.**

With sea levels rising, and the land deforested, over-mined and affected by bushfires and drought - Tasmania is increasingly marooned, its people abandoned. Nyx's father wants them to leave while they still can but, for Nyx, West Hobart is all she's ever known, and where her mother is buried. She seeks solace in the single surviving tree near her home - an 80 foot pine that has defied all odds. Bea, too, finds solace in the tree, and facing a move to the mainland herself, leaves a despairing note, wedged into a hole in its trunk. Nyx finds the note, and writes back. But Nyx and Bea don't realise how special their tree truly is ...

## Author/Illustrator Information:

**Rebecca Lim** is an award-winning writer, illustrator and editor and the author of over twenty books, including *Tiger Daughter* (a Victorian Premier's Literary Award-winner), *The Astrologer's Daughter* (A Kirkus Best Book and CBCA Notable Book) and the bestselling *Mercy*. Her work has been shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, NSW Premier's Literary Awards, Queensland Literary Awards, CBCA Book of the Year Awards and Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Awards, shortlisted multiple times for the Aurealis Awards and Davitt Awards, and longlisted for the Gold Inky Award, the Margaret and Colin Roderick Literary Award and the David Gemmell Legend Award.

**Kate Gordon** grew up in a very bookish house, in a small town by the sea in Tasmania. After studying performing arts and realising she was a terrible actor, Kate decided to become a librarian. She never stopped writing and, in 2009, she applied for and won a Varuna fellowship, which led to all sorts of lovely writer things happening. Kate's first book, *Three Things About Daisy Blue*, was published in 2010. Her most recent publications are the middle-grade novels in the "Direleaf Hall" series, and *Aster's Good, Right Things*, which won the CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers.

## How to Use These Notes:

**These notes are for:** upper primary, lower secondary

**Curriculum Areas:**

- English
- Humanities
- Social Sciences
- The Arts
- Science
- Technologies

**Cross-Curriculum Priorities:**

- Sustainability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

**Themes:**

- Climate change
- Friendship
- How today impacts tomorrow
- Change-makers
- Courage
- Bullying
- Family
- Hope



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## PLOT SUMMARY

Nyx lives in Tasmania, in 2093, seventy years in the future, in a world affected by climate change. It is a place where little grows, where the unrelenting heat has killed the flora and fauna, where riots and unrest have destroyed culture and society.

Bea lives in Tasmania too, but it's the Tasmania we know now, filled with wild and beautiful stretches of forests and waterways, of thriving townships, 'one of the safest, cleanest, most stable places on Earth' (p 12).

Even though they are years apart, the two girls have much in common. They are both lonely and isolated and are both being forced to move from their homes - and away from the twenty-five-metre-high pine tree that is their refuge and their only friend. Nyx writes down her frustration about leaving her home and her anger towards her father and stuffs the note into a hollow in the tree, not knowing that seventy years in the past, Bea will find her letter.

The two girls communicate through the tree, which they christen the Letterbox Tree, not realising at first just how far apart they truly are. A close bond forms between them and when they discover the truth - that Nyx is from the future - they find a way to help each other. Nyx's plight forces Bea to leave her protective shell and she calls on all her courage to share what she has learned about the future so she can save Nyx from the ravages of her world. Together with her parents, students from school and her community, she builds a refuge for Nyx to find in the future. With Bea's help, Nyx convinces her father and some of her community to leave their homes, which are now threatened by rising flood waters, and to take a dangerous journey to find the refuge Bea has built.

Written by two award-winning Australian

authors, this moving and impactful time-slip novel shines a light on a world teetering on the brink of climate catastrophe, while providing hope and the possibility of redemption through the actions, friendship and courage of two young people and their communities.

## GENRE

*Curriculum Links:* English, Humanities and Social Sciences

*Cross-curriculum priority:* Sustainability

- *Wikipedia* describes climate fiction (cli-fi) as 'literature that deals with climate change. Generally speculative in nature but scientifically grounded, works may take place in the world as we know it or in the near future. The genre frequently includes science fiction and dystopian or utopian themes, imagining the potential futures based on how humanity responds to the impacts of climate change.' ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate\\_fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_fiction))
- Discuss how *The Letterbox Tree* fits into the genre of cli-fi. What other books and movies do you know that can be described as cli-fi? How is *The Letterbox Tree* similar or different to these books? You may like to consider the following titles which fall under the umbrella of cli-fi (please note that some of these titles are for older readers):

*How to Bee* by Bren MacDibble (ISBN 9781760294335, Allen & Unwin)

*Mammoth* by Chris Flynn (ISBN 9780702263439, University of Queensland Press)

*Dry* by Neal Shusterman (ISBN 9781406386851, Walker Books Australia)

*The Secret Runners of New York* by Matthew Reilly (ISBN 9781760559076, Pan Macmillan)



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Australia)

*Floodland* by Marcus Sedgwick (ISBN 9781858817637, Hachette)

*The End of the World is Bigger than Love* by Davina Bell (ISBN 9781922268822, Text Publishing Company)

## SETTING

*Curriculum Links:* Humanities and Social Sciences; The Arts

*Cross-curriculum priority:* Sustainability

**Quote: ‘I look around me, at all the green, and I think how lucky I am, we are. We live in the middle of a city and yet it’s not grey here. It’s not smog and grime and rubbish. It’s so green. There are trees in every street and the mountain watching over us and ten minutes in every direction takes you to bushland.’ (p 116)**

**Quote: ‘Tasmania’s, lutruwita’s, a dust bowl, only the edges of which are drowning. The rest of it is hot and gusty, gritty and dry, most of the ancient forests gone, along with regular snowfall, which I’ve only ever seen pictures of.’ (p 2)**

- The story is set in lutruwita, Tasmania. Find a map of lutruwita, Tasmania and mark the main regions discussed in the story: West Hobart, Knocklofty Reserve, Wrest Point Tower, the Tasman Bridge and so on. Find current-day images of these areas then discuss the contrasting settings of Nyx’s lutruwita, Tasmania seventy years in the future and Bea’s lutruwita, Tasmania of the present.
- Create an artwork that shows the difference between one of the regions discussed in the book as it is now and how it might look in Nyx’s time. Your artwork may be a painting,

a diorama, photoshopped images, a graphic novel-style series of illustrations and so on.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

*Curriculum Links:* English; Humanities and Social Sciences; The Arts; Science

*Cross-curriculum priority:* Sustainability

**Quote: “Nature’s turned her back on us,” my teacher told my class sadly, one of the few times we were all together in the one place, “because we turned away from her first.” (p 3)**

- The central theme of *The Letterbox Tree* is climate change. Find examples in the text that highlight the impact climate change has had on Nyx’s world. Discuss the impact climate change has on the characters’ lives.
- Climate change doesn’t only affect the environment, flora and fauna. It also changes how we live as a society. Why does this happen? Discuss how this is shown in *The Letterbox Tree*.
- Nyx lives only seventy years in the future and yet the world as we know it has completely disintegrated due to climate change. What can we do – what can YOU do – to make a difference to climate change?
- Greta Thunberg has said ‘You must take action. You must do the impossible. Because giving up is never an option.’ Discuss how action is not only necessary to make a difference to the future of the world but how action can also be the antidote to despair.
- Conduct research on the current impacts of climate change in different regions (see <https://www.rescue.org/article/10-countries-risk-climate-disaster>) and discuss the potential consequences.
- Break into groups and allocate each group



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one of these regions. Discuss the role of governments, communities and individuals in addressing climate change. Choose a spokesperson for each group to share your findings with the rest of the class.

- Design a poster or infographic that raises awareness about climate change and its possible consequences.
- Community engagement: Organise a community event or campaign to raise awareness about climate change. How can you use this campaign to inspire action? You might like to invite local experts to speak about environmental issues and possible solutions. Consider how you and your classmates can become involved in community initiatives related to sustainability and climate change.

## BE THE CHANGE

*Curriculum Links:* English; Humanities and Social Sciences;

*Cross-curriculum priority:* Sustainability

**Quote: ‘Please leave something at my house that will live on, like our Letterbox Tree. So that everyone that passes my house, even after I’m gone, will look up and wonder that something green and wonderful could grow in a hot, horrible dusty place like this. Can you do that for me?’ (p 112)**

- How do Bea and her community effect change for the future?
- Reflect on your actions and their potential impact on the environment and society. What is one small thing you and your classmates can change today to make a positive difference to tomorrow?
- Bea says, ‘And it’s up to people like me to make changes for people like Nyx . . . so many people – kids, adults, and my family in

particular – have come together to pull this off. I realise that it’s the first time in my life when I’ve really had a *village*.’ (pp 116-117) Why do we need to work together to make change? How can you work with other people – friends, schoolmates, your community – to effect change? What does Bea mean when she says, ‘it’s the first time in my life when I’ve really had a *village*’? Why is it important to have a village?

- Discuss the quote ‘It takes a village to raise a child’. What do you think this means?
- How would it feel to be isolated from community the way that Nyx is? How would having a ‘village’ change Nyx’s life? By the end of the novel, Nyx has created her own community. Imagine how her life plays out after the novel has ended and write a short story about her new life.

**Quote: ‘Where’s the rule . . . that says we should not trust children? In my opinion, children are the ones who should be trusted the most.’ (p 164-165)**

**Quote: ‘If the adults won’t do something for the kids of the future – the kids of the present have to.’ (p 175)**

- Discuss these two quotes. What are the authors telling us about the role young people can play in making a difference?
- Research Greta Thunberg’s role in influencing young people to make a stand for climate change.
- In one of her letters to Bea, Nyx says, ‘You’re just paying it forward all the time and I’m just sitting here hoping that your acts of kindness make it into my present, so that I can see them.’ (p 150) Discuss ways that you, your friends and your classmates can ‘pay it forward’ to make a difference to someone’s life.



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*Curriculum Links:* English, Technologies, The Arts

*Cross-curriculum priority:* Sustainability

**Quote: ‘At the edges of my school playground there are gum trees and pine trees, lined up like guards, protecting us from the world.’ (p 26)**

- Discuss the significance of the Letterbox Tree as a communication portal between Nyx and Bea. Why do you think the authors chose a tree as the portal?
- Discuss how trees are used as a symbol of hope throughout the novel.
- Why is the giant pine tree important to each girl? Why do they have such a strong emotional connection to the tree? What does it symbolise for each of them?
- Discuss other books and movies that you know that use a device such as the Letterbox Tree as a portal between worlds. Choose your favourite and compare and contrast each book. Some books you may like to consider are:

### Younger Readers

*Time Travelling with a Hamster* by Ross Welford (ISBN 9780008156312, HarperCollins)

*The Boy Who Stepped Through Time* by Anna Ciddor (ISBN 9781760526443, Allen & Unwin)

*A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L’Engle (ISBN 9780141354934, Penguin)

### Older Readers

*Timeless* by Alexandra Monir (ISBN 9780385738392, Random House)

*Wildwing* by Emily Whitman (ISBN

9780061724527, Greenwillow Books)

*Waterfall* by Lisa Tawn Bergren (ISBN 9780764234569, Bethany House Publishers)

*Proof of Forever* by Lexa Hillyer (ISBN 9780062330383, HarperCollins)

## CHARACTER

*Curriculum Links:* English; Humanities and Social Sciences

**Quote: ‘My hand-me-down uniform and home-cut hair are pathetic. My glasses make me look like a frog. The fact that I have hearing loss and sometimes have to ask our teacher to repeat things . . . that was flipping bizarre. I am bizarre.’ (Bea, p 11)**

**Quote: ‘Maybe she’d seen me and been disappointed at my uneven hair . . . my worn-out clothes . . . and my dirt-streaked face, arms and legs. I’m just . . . brown. The brownest kid in my class . . .’ (Nyx, p 63-64)**

- While Nyx and Bea appear to be very different to each other at the beginning of the story, the authors gradually reveal their similarities. Discuss their common experience of loneliness, isolation and impending dislocation. Analyse how this creates a bond between them.
- Nyx’s mother has died and Nyx lives with her father. Bea lives with her overly protective mother and father. How does each girl’s family situation influence their world views and affect who they are? Find examples in the text to explain your answer.
- Explore the girls’ individual frustrations, anger and their connection to the Letterbox Tree. How are they similar? How are they different? In what ways are they both outsiders?
- How does each girl display courage? How



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do they make each other brave? Find quotes to support your answer.

## FRIENDSHIP

*Curriculum Links:* English; Humanities and Social Sciences

**Quote: ‘What if she doesn’t like who I really am? I mean, I don’t really have friends, in real life. Nobody else seems to like me. They think I’m a freak and a weirdo and a loser. Why should I expect that Nyx would be any different? But . . .’ (p 43)**

- One of the themes of *The Letterbox Tree* is friendship. Why do you think the two girls are drawn to each other and form such a strong bond, even though they can only communicate through messages, not in person?
- Why is friendship so important to human survival? Discuss the importance of friendship in overcoming isolation and finding support by discussing how this is explored in *The Letterbox Tree*.
- Nyx attends a ‘virtual school’, while Bea attends school as we experience it today, but both girls experience isolation and loneliness. Discuss.
- How do Nyx and Bea change each other’s lives?

## BULLYING

*Curriculum Links:* English; Humanities and Social Sciences; The Arts

**Quote: ‘It was like they marked me out, on our first day of school – I was “different”.’ (p 10)**

- Why do you think Bea is a target for the mean girls at her school? Do you think her parents

are doing the right thing by moving her out of the school?

- Being bullied can have a devastating effect on the person who is targeted. Encourage everyone in your classroom to (anonymously) write an anti-bullying message on a scrap of coloured paper and then stick all the messages to a large sheet of paper to be displayed prominently in your school. Encourage other classes to do the same.
- As a class, discuss the consequences of your choices and the importance of empathy and compassion.

## FIRST NATIONS HISTORY

*Curriculum Links:* Humanities and Social Sciences

*Cross-curriculum link:* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History and Cultures

**Quote: ‘At Risdon Cove we plant the next, and this feels somehow sacred. This place is a site of so much sadness for the people this land belongs to. Planting something that belongs here feels like an act of repentance.’ (p 117)**

- Research what happened at Risdon Cove in 1804. Discuss the notion of ‘acts of repentance’. Do you think such acts can help heal the trauma inflicted at places like Risdon Cove? Can symbolic gestures and rituals help acknowledge historical wrongdoings?
- How does this quote emphasise the need to recognise and learn from the past?
- Explore the history of your area and create a PowerPoint presentation to share your findings with the rest of the class.



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## CREATIVE WRITING

*Curriculum Links:* English; The Arts; Technologies

*Cross-curriculum Link:* Sustainability

- *The Letterbox Tree* is written by two award-winning authors, Rebecca Lim and Kate Gordon. What does the collaborative process between these two authors bring to the novel? Do you think the novel would work as successfully without the two different authorial voices? How might working with another writer change each writer's work?
  - Think about the themes presented in the novel (for example, climate change, friendship, how we can impact the future). How might these themes have been enriched by the collaborative effort? Explore how the authors' different perspectives might have influenced these themes.
  - Identify and compare the writing styles of the two authors. How do their unique voices contribute to the narrative?
  - Choose a writing partner and write a story from two different points of view, similar to the device used in *The Letterbox Tree*. You may want to use the writing exercises suggested below.
  - Write your own vision of a world affected by climate change.
    - » Where will you set your story? Somewhere familiar or will you create your own world? Will you set your story in the future, the current day, a parallel world?
    - » What technology will you create for your world (think about Nyx's world and the persmap, biosynth band, etc).
    - » What is the landscape in your world? What has happened as a result of climate change?
    - » What has become of society in your world?
    - » How will you bring hope and redemption into your world?
- Write a short story about a personal experience you've had that relates to one of the themes in *The Letterbox Tree*.

## MUSIC AND FILM

*Curriculum Links:* The Arts

- Several songs and musicians are mentioned by Bea (p 116 and p 144). Listen to these musicians and decide if you like their music. What songs or pieces of music would you choose as a background for *The Letterbox Tree*? Would your music be different for Bea and for Nyx? Play one of your chosen pieces of music for the class and explain why you think it suits the novel.
- Imagine you are creating a film version of *The Letterbox Tree*. Who would you cast in your film?

## About the note writer

Belinda Bolliger worked as an editor and publisher of children's books for over twenty-five years. She was the Children's Publisher at Hodder Headline (now Hachette Australia) for 11 years and Children's Commissioning Editor and Publisher for ABC Books/HarperCollins. She has worked with many award-winning authors and illustrators, including Libby Hathorn, Garry Disher, Frances Watts, Judith Rossell and Matt Ottley. Most recently, Belinda was editorial manager for Australian Standing Orders (Scholastic), where she reviewed and selected the most suitable new releases from Australian publishers to send to schools around the country. Belinda now works as a freelance children's editor, project manager and writer.