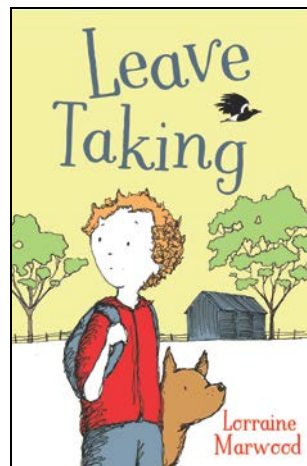


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# LEAVE TAKING

## Lorraine Marwood



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

When his parents decide to leave the family farm in order to make a fresh start, Toby feels drawn to the important places where he and his younger sister, Leah, spent many happy times before her illness changed everything. Although hurting from her passing, Toby slowly relishes the special memories he has. And his family understands too, giving Toby the time and space he needs.

*Leave Taking* is a tender verse novel for middle readers that explores the themes of love, loss and belonging through the eyes of a young boy who simply needs the space to say goodbye in his own way.

**THEMES**

- Grief
- Courage
- Resilience
- Belonging
- Love
- Relationships
- Poetry

**WRITING STYLE**

*Leave Taking* is a verse novel told in first person, present tense. It is the touching story of Toby's last days on the farm as he says goodbye to the places where he and Leah forged memories before she died of cancer. The five chapter-length verses give readers intimate insight into Toby's grief as he learns to accept Leah's death, slowly revealing the acceptance of his loss and the healing that comes with time. Through the use of perfectly nuanced poetic devices, the narrative is tangible, realistic and accessible to middle readers, and is extremely powerful in conveying the emotions of such a traumatic event in a young boy's life.

**STUDY NOTES**

- The first section of the book, 'By the track', introduces readers to Toby who is camping by himself on the farm. Why is he doing this? Why does he say that 'dark shadows hide the everyday world outside my tent' (p1)? How does this help foreshadow what's to come?
- Why is the family selling the farm and moving away? How would you feel about moving if you were Toby?
- What clues do we get that Leah was sick? How did you feel when you discovered she had died? Why did the author withhold this information until a little way into the text?

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- Create a character profile of Leah using evidence from *Leave Taking* to support your ideas.
- Discuss the rhythm and imagery used on p9 as Toby describes the sound of the milking machines.
- Why does Toby feel as though he's visiting the farm for the first time, when in fact it's close to the last time (pp9–10)?
- What does Toby mean when he describes the trees his mum plants as 'ladder steps to the sky' (p11)?
- What are 'growing-up falls' (p11)? Have you had 'growing-up falls'? Share with a friend.
- What role does Trigger play in Toby's life? What are some examples of their special bond?
- Toby cries and protests when he first hears his parents want to sell the farm. Why is this? Why does Toby slowly come to accept this decision? Have you ever had to get used to a change in your life that was difficult at first? Share in a reflection.
- What significance does the family of magpies living in the big sugar gum have in *Leave Taking*?
- Why does Toby think of Leah as he hoses away the manure? What does this reveal about their relationship and his sense of loss?
- Leah describes writing in wet cement as 'like writing on the beach in the sand' (p19). How does this help readers to better understand Leah's character?
- Why is it important that Toby sees his dad crying about Leah, even if it is difficult to witness? Why does Toby share that he too cries a lot now, even when he doesn't mean to? What does this tell readers about the importance of expressing emotions?
- Discuss the scene in which Toby and his mum 'chose a little history of Leah's life' by selecting which of her drawings to keep (p25). Why is this such a powerful verse? Why can't they keep all of Leah's things? Why will her discarded drawings be put 'in the heart of the bonfire'?
- Why does Toby brush the words 'my sister' away (p27)? Do you think he will always feel compelled to do this? Discuss.
- Why does Toby share the story of the sick calf that he tried to nurse? What message is the author sharing with younger readers when she writes 'farms are for new life and new death' (p28)? Discuss the powerful line 'We know' at the end of this page.
- Why does Leah's photo of the hay bale cubby make Toby smile? How does this reaction show that he is starting to heal?
- Toby says 'suddenly there are lots of things I don't understand' (p33). What does he mean?
- Why does Toby think he'd better start liking hugs more?

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- Why does Toby wonder if it's wrong that he wants to stop remembering special things about Leah? Why does he get tummy aches when he remembers?
- Explore the various poetic devices used throughout the text, discussing how they contribute to the narrative. Devices include:
  - Imagery – e.g. 'the faint silver of dawn' p1
  - Repetition – e.g. 'It's every morning, every evening, milking our herd, 150 cows trekking' p2
  - Rhythm – e.g. 'the stop and start of the motorbike' p5
  - Simile – e.g. 'The huge steel milk vat purrs like a big-stomached cat ready for endless thick milk' p9
  - Onomatopoeia – e.g. 'the rhythmical hiss and sigh of milking machines' p9
- Why has the author included the blue wrens in *Leave Taking*? What do they represent?
- Using evidence from the text, draw your own 'Leave Taking' map of the farm. Include new labels that add Toby and Leah's farm history.
- Explain why Toby wants a special goodbye tour of the farm before leaving. Why does he say that it is for Leah?
- Why is the farm called 'Deep Well Farm'? In what ways are the origins of its name and the fact that the well has been covered up connect with the themes in *Leave Taking*?
- Discuss the use of repetition in the verse at the top of p8. Why is this such a powerful verse? How does p7 use foreshadowing?
- In the role of Toby, write a series of diary entries describing what life is like on the farm.
- In a journal entry, reflect on the relationship you share with your sibling/s. How does a text such as *Leave Taking* help you to value that relationship more fully?
- Why does finding Leah's heart-shaped project make Toby cry? Make your own art project by hammering nails into wood and looping thread around the nails.
- Why has the author included the 'peep, peep of chickens and there I see a tiny puffball of gold' (p46)? What does this tell us about the circle of life?
- Why does Toby paint his and Leah's initials on the beam in the chook shed?
- Why does Toby say that 'saying goodbye is tiring work' (p49)? Later, both Trigger and Toby lie down for a rest (p88). Why do they need to do this, especially Toby? What does this reveal about the grieving process?
- Toby isn't ready for his friends to come around yet, and comments that they ask silly questions. What does he mean by this?

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- Why does Toby write 'To the moon' on the windscreen of Pa's old truck (p58)?
- What relationship does Toby share with Pa? How do we know this? Why do tears 'become a tiny waterfall' when he sees Pa walking down the dirt track?
- Why does Pa tell Toby to 'let it go' (p61)? How does Pa know that this will help Toby?
- Discuss Pa's advice to Toby that 'We can't bring her back, but we can live for her' (p63).
- Toby says that Pa's 'words are like a bedtime story' (p64). What does this reveal about their relationship? What kind of special bond do you have with your grandparents? How is this relationship different from the one you share with your parents?
- What role does anger play in Toby's grief? Why?
- Why does Toby like it that Pa knows the cats' names?
- Why does Pa tell Toby the history of the old truck? How does this help Toby?
- Why does Toby find it particularly difficult to say goodbye to Memorial Hill (p77–79)?
- Toby is fearful of forgetting Leah. What advice would you give Toby about this if you were his friend?
- Even though he hasn't told anyone about his goodbyes, Toby's family seems to know. Why do you think this is?
- Why does Toby's mum ask him to help her pack Leah's things (p84)? How would you feel about doing this if you were Toby? How might this help you?
- Reread the last verse on p91. Discuss the language features of the imagery in this passage. Try using these features in your own descriptive passage or verse.
- With reference to the entire context of *Leave Taking*, write a reflection in response to the following lines: 'I ... fling my arms out wide, look up to the sky and try to give this moment one huge final hug' (p92).
- Why does Toby 'half-wave, half-hide' when the clearing sale is on (p95)?
- Why does Toby take the smallest horseshoe from the old black smithy shed with him, but decide to leave the horseshoe nails for the next family?
- Why does Toby like the fact that his map has some dirt from the farm on it?
- What is the significance of Toby taking gumnuts from the farm with him to his new home?
- Discuss the symbolism of the bonfire on the family's last night at the farm. Write a description of the bonfire that 'roars like a wild dragon'

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(p110). Why does Toby think that Leah would like the ashes of her drawings being left at the farm?

- Why does Toby's mum bring lemon meringue pie to the bonfire?
- Draw a picture of the photo that Uncle Samuel takes of Toby with his parents (p118).
- Explain why the novel is titled *Leave Taking*. What does it mean to take leave of something?
- In what ways is *Leave Taking* a book about belonging?
- What parts of the farm is the family taking with them to their new property? Why do you think they've chosen those things?
- Find out more about the skill of water divining by reading the picture book *Water Witcher* by Jan Ormerod.
- Write your own verses to describe and share the things you love about your home. Include poetic devices such as imagery, similes, rhythm and repetition.
- With older students, share selected passages of *The Grief Book: Strategies for Young People* by Elizabeth Vercoe.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*Leave Taking* is a novel I had to write because of circumstances, timing and the overwhelming urge to write Toby's story was there. I had just struggled through a year of cancer treatment and a residency I had won was delayed until I was well enough to travel and be by myself to write this story.

Toby, my main character, unzips his tent on that first morning and I knew he had a whole tumult of grief to work through. Placing Toby in my own family's leave taking farm provided a real setting I knew inside out. We shared our grief together and believe me I cried bucket loads through the writing. It was a healing way to explore and come to terms with what I had lost and what Toby had lost. And what we had gone through.

Our private grief became public sharing and that is very hard, but my hope is that anyone who reads *Leave Taking* will take the burgeoning seeds of hope that Toby and I found, to sow in their own lives whatever the circumstances.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Lorraine Marwood was born and raised in rural Victoria and has lived for most of her married life on a dairy farm with her husband and their six children. Lorraine is an award-winning poet who has been widely published in literary magazines across Australia, as well as magazines in the UK, USA, New Zealand and Canada. She has also published several children's novels and collections of poetry. Lorraine was also the recipient of a May Gibbs mentorship in children's writing.

Her previous titles (Walker Books Australia) include *Ratwhiskers and Me*, published in 2008, and *Star Jumps* which was short-listed for the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards 2010, Lower Primary Category, a Notable mention in the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards, 2010 and won the inaugural Prime Minister's award for children's fiction in 2010.

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