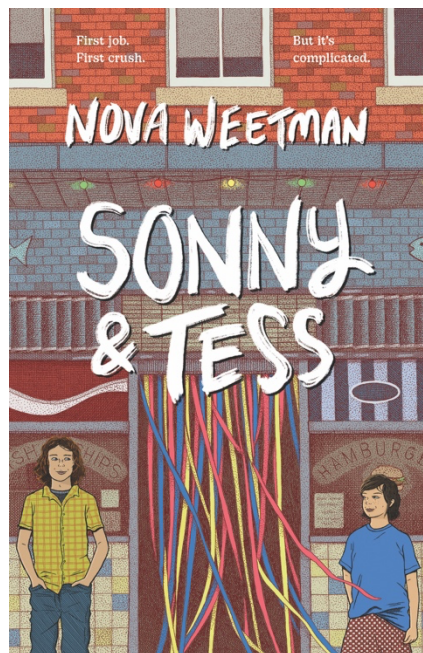


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SONNY & TESS

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Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS

With his mother remarried in England and his geologist father working in remote northern Australia, Sonny is staying with his aunt and uncle above their fish and chip shop in Melbourne. Working downstairs with the music-loving, nostalgic Frank and finishing year seven at his new school, Sonny has plenty to contend with.

Tess is tired of being responsible for her nine-year-old twin brothers and desperate to earn some cash of her own. Noticing a job ad in the window of the local fish and chip shop, she decides to take a chance. Little does she realise she's about to collide with fate – and an extremely cute boy.

Sparks fly but, having never had a serious crush before, neither Sonny nor Tess quite knows what to do. What if their feelings aren't reciprocated? What if they're destined to just be friends?

Sonny & Tess is a coming-of-age story filled with the awkward angst of first crushes and the excitement and promise of *what ifs*. It is a romance destined to be gobbled up, one hot chip at a time.

THEMES

- Relationships
- Romance
- Coming of age
- Change
- Responsibility
- Parental expectations
- Family dynamics
- Friendship

WRITING STYLE

Sonny & Tess is a contemporary dual narrative told from the first-person, present-tense perspectives of both Sonny and Tess. Interwoven into their stories are the complexities of teen–parent relationships as the two characters grapple with the dynamics of their respective families. With his parents divorced and his mum living in England with her new family, Sonny is struggling with feelings of abandonment, especially as his dad often travels out bush for geological fieldwork. Sonny has often accompanied his dad, but leaving the city and all that it offers has become far less appealing now that he's in high school. Tess, meanwhile, craves independence and freedom as her parents rely on her to babysit her younger brothers, stifling her social life. Fed up and frustrated, she secretly takes a job at the local fish and chip shop. The last thing either of them expects amid the turmoil of their lives is romance, but when fate brings Sonny and Tess together, the attraction is palpable. *Sonny & Tess* is an extremely relatable story about relationships, first crushes and the space to explore new feelings. Middle readers will devour this text, which captures the

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angst, wonder and thrill of romance in an accessible and age-appropriate way. It is suited to readers aged 11–14.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, discuss the cover and blurb of the book. Make predictions about the characters, settings and events of *Sonny & Tess*. Upon finishing the text, return to this discussion. How does the front cover capture the storyline and themes so aptly?
- The opening pages of *Sonny & Tess* introduce readers to Frank and his fish and chip shop. How does the depiction of this setting draw readers in? What else makes this text so relatable?
- In the role of Sonny, write a reflection about your relationship with your aunt and uncle. How do they help you navigate your early teens?
- Why does Frank call Sonny 'boy'? How does Sonny feel about this? Do you have a nickname? How did it evolve? Do you like this name? Why? Share in a reflection.
- What role does music play throughout *Sonny & Tess*? How would the story be different without it?
- What does Sonny mean when he says Frank is 'stitched together with nostalgia' (p. 3)? What evidence is there of this throughout the text?
- In a dramatic performance, re-create the scene in which Sonny and Tess first meet.
- What clues do we get that Sonny and Tess are attracted to one another?
- Sonny says, 'I was always stepping in and out of friendships' (p. 9). Why would this be difficult for him? What advice would you give him, if any?
- Why does Tess 'hate people thinking I'm bad at things' (p. 9)? Have you ever felt this way? Share with a friend.
- In the role of Sonny, write a journal entry about your 'scattered' family (p. 10) and what it is like for you.
- Why does Tess pretend to be a reader in front of Sonny (p. 12)? Later, when Sonny wants to talk on the phone to Tess, why does she find this such an unusual thing to do? Why has the author included these details in the text?
- When Tess realises she has a crush on Sonny, she says, 'It's not that I don't think about this stuff, it's just that I have no idea how to do it' (p. 13). How does this vulnerability help readers to identify with her?
- Why is Tess so determined to get a job at the fish and chip shop? What does she hope this will achieve?
- Describe the relationship between Frank and his brother. How does their bond help Sonny? Why does Sonny say, for example, that 'Going to the footy isn't really about the sport for me. It's about sitting between the two men who watch out for me' (p. 25)?

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- Why might people assume that Marion is Sonny's mum? Why does neither of them correct such assumptions (p. 27)? Describe the role Marion plays in *Sonny & Tess*. How does Sonny feel towards her? How do we know?
- How does Sonny feel about his dad's decision to work in remote parts of the country rather than stay in Melbourne? How would the story be different if this was not the case?
- What do Sonny and Tess have in common? Why do they find it so easy to be around one another? What does this tell us about the foundations of lasting relationships?
- Why does Sonny say he likes how his hair 'hangs down over my face and gives me somewhere to hide' (p. 51)? What might he be hiding from?
- What role does Tin play in the story? Why has he been included in the plot? How does his relationship with his father tie in with other important themes in the text?
- How does Tess feel about herself? Give evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Why does Tess say that, like Rapunzel, she's 'locked in the castle' (p. 69)? If you were Tess, how would you navigate the situation with your parents?
- As you read *Sonny & Tess*, create character portraits of Frank and Marion. How are they similar and different? Annotate your work with evidence from the text.
- Why does Sonny say of his dad, 'sometimes I wonder if he'd prefer to live with rocks than with people' (p. 107)?
- Discuss the symbolism of the rocks in Sonny's collection. Why does Sonny feel like the smoky quartz (p. 108)?
- Jemma describes Tess's character traits as 'dramatic, impulsive, stubborn, determined, outspoken, loyal, but not wise' (p. 116). What evidence is there in *Sonny & Tess* of these traits? How would your friends describe your traits? Why?
- Why does Jemma initially distance herself from Tess after discovering they have a crush on the same boy? Why has this been included in the story?
- What does Sonny mean when, during a conversation with Tin about Tess, he says, 'it makes my feelings real, and that's something worth squirming for' (p. 152)?
- When Tin writes a song about his dad, Sonny says that 'new songs can tell a powerful story too' (p. 155). With a friend, compile a list of music that tells powerful stories. Share your selections with another pair and, time permitting, listen to some of these songs while viewing their lyrics. Why do you think this idea has been included in the text?
- Tess says, 'I often replay every moment of a conversation with someone new, wondering if I could have been wittier or friendlier or even more interesting, but with Sonny I'm just sort of me' (p. 173). What does this reveal about the nature of their bond?

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- Why does Tess describe Sonny as being 'like a reverse Christmas present' (p. 173)?
- How is Sonny's dad like the magpie defending the eggs (p. 180)?
- Why does Frank insist on keeping the kitchen table even though it is too big for the apartment (p. 181)? What does this share about him as a character?
- What does Sonny mean when he says of his father, 'Words are as precious to him as rocks' (p. 185)? How would realising this help Sonny?
- How are the impurities in the rocks a metaphor for the characters in *Sonny & Tess*? Why does Sonny focus on the clump of amber, 'imagining the insects trapped inside' (p. 190)? Why has the following line been included:
 'People think the hairline crack is a fault, but it's not. It's just an admission that a rock can't hold everything. That it needs help. That it needs support.' (p. 193)
- Why does Sonny say, 'I might take after Dad physically, but Frank understands me in ways that Dad never will' (p. 191)? Do you think Sonny's dad already realises this? Discuss.
- Before reading further, make predictions about what may happen when Tess leaves the twins at home while she goes to work (p. 199). Why has this been included in the plot?
- Compare the relationships that Sonny and Tess have with their mothers. How are these relationships similar and different?
- Create the Christmas card for Frank that Sonny draws on p. 221.
- Jemma teaches Tess to 'pick [her] battles' (p. 231). What does Tess mean by this?
- What is the significance of Sonny giving Tess the mantle xenolith for her birthday? Why does she say, 'It's like a rock being hugged' (p. 239)? Why, when she places the rock into her pocket, does she say the moment feels 'so heavy. So weighted' (p. 240)? Is this a good thing? Discuss.
- Imagining *Sonny & Tess* is being made into a film, work in small groups to complete the following:
 - Decide which actors should play the lead roles. Why these actors?
 - Design wardrobes for the main characters. Either sketch their outfits or create vision boards to reflect their personas.
 - Create a playlist or soundtrack suitable for the film adaptation, linking your choices with their respective scenes.
 - Design the set for one of the film's settings, such as Tess's bedroom, Tin's bungalow, or Frank and Marion's apartment.
 - Create a poster to promote the film.
 - Create a movie trailer to capture the essence of the film.
- Describe a special relationship you have with an aunt, uncle, grandparent or close family friend. Share in a reflection.
- In the role of Tess, write a journal entry about getting caught having lied about your part-time job.

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- How does *Sonny & Tess* show the diversity of family structures? Why is this important?
- Make predictions about the future of Sonny and Marion's relationship. Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- In the role of Tess, write a journal entry about your friendship with Jemma. How does it change and grow as the novel progresses?
- At what point does Sonny realise he wants to stay in Melbourne? What is it that draws him to this decision?
- With a partner, choose a scene from *Sonny & Tess* for which to write a script. Perform your piece to the class.
- Form a Thought Tunnel by lining up students in two lines facing one other. Choose some students to assume the roles of characters from *Sonny & Tess*. As these characters walk through the tunnel, ask them questions about their thoughts and actions during different stages of the novel.
- Share the story of *Sonny & Tess* in a six-word summary.
- Devise a series of twenty questions to ask Sonny and Tess.
- Which character/s in *Sonny & Tess* are you most and least like? Why? Share in a reflection.
- Write the first chapter of a sequel to *Sonny & Tess*.
- In the role of Sonny or Tess, retell this story in no more than two pages.
- Discuss how figurative language is used to engage readers in *Sonny & Tess*. Identify the types of figurative language used, and experiment with these in your own writing. Examples include:
 - I just want this Friday afternoon to keep going forever in a loop, like it's a film stuck on replay (p. 13)
 - A hundred smiles are bubbling up and all I want to do is beam them at him (p. 13)
 - Colourful plastic strips hang down like a curtain over the shop's doorway, keeping out flies (p. 16)
 - I step inside into a wave of hot oil and vinegar (p. 16)
 - I start backing out of the shop like I'm moonwalking in some 80s music video (p. 21)
 - I'm like Cinderella without the slippers or the dress or a fairy godmother (p. 21)
 - I'm just a girl with a stain of embarrassment on her cheeks (p. 21)
 - the skin inside my mouth puckering from all the chicken salt (p. 22)
 - his voice wraps around the song (p. 33)
 - I wait at the first window, my stomach starting to whirl (p. 53)
 - He's like an ancient turtle setting his own speed (p. 76)
 - she pummels me with questions like bullets firing into the air (p. 114)
 - we shuffle down with all the other hungry students, desperate to reach either sunlight or food. It seems that sometimes we're a little like vampires (pp. 136–137)

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- I'm aware that my face is doing that thing that fish do when they open and close their mouths without any sound (p. 140)
- I feel like I've been punched in the stomach (p. 145)
- It's like being trapped in an American film without knowing the ending (p. 145)
- Three of the walls are so thick with [music posters] it's like a live music venue (p. 151)
- I start vomiting apologies (p. 168)
- He looks at me and I can't look away. It's like there's no air. It's all been sucked out (p. 172)
- It's like Dad's been stretched (p. 185)
- He places a small reddish lump on the table. It's like hardened toffee (pp. 186–187)
- Both the fans are on in the shop, but all they're doing is smearing the warm air around the place (p. 200)
- My fingers touch his hand as I grab the stick, and I swear there's a charge of something so intense that I almost step away (p. 201)
- I drop my phone on the bed like it's a bomb that's about to blow up (p. 207)
- my fingers meet her warm skin, and we both yank our hands out as though we've been burnt (p. 219)
- He's always eating cereal. If we run out, then it's like his petrol has been turned off at the pump (p. 225)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

For many fiction writers, our real lives flavour the themes and stories we write. Having spent the past ten or so years grieving the loss of a number of special people in my life, my middle grade books have often been sad in tone. I decided that I wanted to write something lighter – something I would have loved to read when I was thirteen, with the drama coming from the characters trying to work out how to be that age. How do they have agency, how do they set boundaries, how do they know what to do when they have a crush on someone?

The world is a hard place in which to be a young person and, instead of adding to that, I wanted to offer an escape – something that captured the joy of this age. With *Sonny & Tess*, I was consciously trying to write a book that celebrates all the best things of being nearly fourteen, but without all the heaviness my work often holds.

Sick Bay is my most successful middle grade novel, and I think part of that is because it's a dual-protagonist story, so we hear from two characters about how each informs the other. I wanted to attempt that again but, instead of a friendship story, I wanted to write a romance. It was important to the burgeoning

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relationship between Sonny and Tess that we hear from both characters, and we can watch them grapple with how to like someone while also dealing with the difficult stuff in their respective lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nova Weetman lives in Melbourne with her family. She has written for TV and is the author of many middle grade and young adult novels. *The Secrets We Keep* was shortlisted for the Readings Children's Book Prize, the Speech Pathology Book of the Year Awards and the ABIA Awards. The sequel, *The Secrets We Share*, was a 2018 CBCA Notable Book and won the KROC Kids Reading Oz Choice Awards, NT – Best Fiction for Years 7 to 9. It was also shortlisted for the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards. Nova's middle grade novel *Sick Bay* was a CBCA Notable Book and shortlisted for the ABIA Awards. In 2022, *The Edge of Thirteen* won the ABIAs Small Publishers' Children's Book of the Year and was a CBCA Notable Book: Younger Readers. In 2023, *The Jammer* was a CBCA Notable Book: Younger Readers and shortlisted for the ABIAs Book of the Year for Older Children.