



**RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA
READING GUIDES**

Starfish Sisters by J.C. Burke

Random House Australia
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Reading Level: Young Adult (14+)

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SYNOPSIS

*For the first time, three people actually knew who I was. The real me.
And the best bit about it was that they still wanted to be my friend.*

Georgie, Kia, Micki and Ace are thrown together at an elite girls' surfing camp. They're not friends straight away – there's jealousy, insecurity, secrets and lies to deal with first. Yet they soon realise that they need to stick together, because their friendship brings out the best in each of them. But will they all make the grade?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.C. Burke was born in Sydney in 1965, the fourth of five sisters. With writers for parents, she grew up in a world full of noise, drama and books, and the many colourful characters who came to visit provided her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations.

Burke decided to become a nurse after her mother lost a long battle with cancer. She specialised in the field of Oncology, working in Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplant Units in Australia and the UK.

A creative writing course at Sydney University led to a mentorship with Gary Crew and the publication of Children's Book Council Notable book *White Lies* (Lothian) in 2002. Burke has since written *The Red Cardigan*, also a CBC Notable Book, and its sequel *Nine Letters Long*. *The Story of Tom Brennan* won the 2006 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year: Older Readers award and the Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature 2006. *Faking Sweet* was published in 2006, and *Starfish Sisters* in September 2007.

J.C. Burke lives on Sydney's Northern Beaches. Her teenage daughter now provides her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations! J.C. Burke loves writing for young adults, as they still have an optimistic eye on the world.

Visit <http://www.jcburke.com.au> for more information about J.C. Burke and her books.

WRITING STYLE

J.C. Burke says:

'What was the most fun in using four different characters to tell the story was that the reader received more information than the characters themselves. Usually it's the other way around where the reader turns the pages to find out what is going on. In *Starfish Sisters*, often the experience was the reader turning the pages to find out when the other characters were going to make the discoveries that the reader already knows. Hopefully the reader is dying to find out what each character's reaction will be to the specific events.'

THEMES

- Friendship between teenage girls
- Surfing
- Rivalry/competition
- Coping with pressure
- Self-harm
- Drug use in a family member
- Truth versus lies
- Success
- Body image
- Being an elite athlete
- Romantic relationships
- Sexuality
- Sponsorship

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

Georgie

- What do you consider Georgie's 'story' to be? Do you feel it's resolved? Do you feel Georgie grows in the story? Comment on her journey.
- What are Georgie's strengths and weaknesses?

- Pressure is what Georgie struggles with. Pressure is not only experienced in 'elite sport', it's also encountered in everyday life. Discuss the different characters' approach to pressure and whether their methods are successful or appropriate. Design some strategies to help cope with pressure.
- Body image is another issue that Georgie struggles with. Compare the different ways that Georgie's figure is described by different characters in the book: for instance, Georgie calls herself fat (page 1); her mother says she has a 'muscular body and big bones' (page 3); her coach has said that she surfs like a boy (a positive comment); Ace criticises Georgie's eating habits and says she 'is showing just a bit too much leg' (page 90). Is body image a particular issue for girl surfers because of the pressure to look good in a bikini, or is it an issue for all women athletes – and for women in general?

Kia

- What do you consider Kia's story to be?
- What are Kia's strengths and weaknesses?
- Does Kia's character 'fit' with your picture of someone who self-harms?
- Imagine it was you and not Micki who finds Kia in the bathroom. How would you have handled the situation? Comment on how you think Micki handled the situation, and how the three girls handle the situation later on in the book. Was there more they could or should have done – for instance, should they have told an adult?
- Do you think there was any resolution of Kia's problem? What activities could help Kia to avoid self-harm in future?
- If you were the author, how would you have dealt with Kia's situation?
- Note that more information about self-harming behaviour, including help available, what to do if you're worried about a friend, tips and real-life stories can be found at <http://www.reachout.com.au>
- Consider the way J.C. Burke depicts Kia's relationship with her father. As a reader, does your perception of Reg change through the book, as you see him from Kia's point of view and from other characters' points of view, such as Micki? Do you think Kia's perceptions of her father (e.g. that he ignores her and constantly talks about Micki – see pages 13-17) reflect the truth of Reg's opinion of Kia, or is Kia's perception skewed? What does Reg's support of his friend's drug problem (Micki's father) tell you about him?
- Lying is a theme of Kia's story. Identify Kia's lies and how they affect her and those around her.

Micki

- What do you consider Micki's story to be?
- What are Micki's strengths and weaknesses?
- Micki is the youngest in years, yet her childhood experiences have in some ways made her act older than her age. Why do you think this is so? What are the advantages to seeming older than your age? What are the disadvantages?
- If you were Micki, would you have trusted Kia, Ace and Georgie with your family secret?
- What did J.C. Burke set up early in the novel to make the scene where Micki finds Kia more dramatic and confronting for Micki?

- What do you think about the last one-on-one conversation between Micki and Kia? Comment on the changes in their relationship; the potential obstacles they meet; the catalyst for bringing them closer and the resolution.
- Write a diary entry as Micki after the camp finishes, recording how she felt about telling Kia her secret and how she thinks Kia took it.

Ace

- What do you consider Ace's story to be?
- What are Ace's strengths and weaknesses?
- Ace feels the pressure from the media, her boyfriend, friends and society to look a particular way. Do you feel the same pressure in your life?
- Discuss the way Ace is perceived and treated by the camp organisers and the girls? Does she receive special or different treatment because she is considered to be famous?
- As an elite-level surfer, what are the advantages of having a sponsor? Are there disadvantages?
- What do Ace's relationships with boys tell you about her? Is she confident in herself, and in her relationships?
- How are Tim and Jules different in their attitude to Ace?
- Ace is too afraid to admit that Tim has dumped her as she thinks she's judged by who her boyfriend is. Do you think this is a situation for many girls, or just girls in the 'spotlight' like Ace?
- Do you think Ace deserves what happens to her at the end of the novel?
- Sometimes it's hard to tell your friend the truth about what is happening to them when you see it more clearly than they do. Do you think the other girls should've intervened earlier to warn Ace?
- In a different way to Kia, Ace is also very self-centred. Do you think she becomes less self-centred through the course of the story? If you agree, what lines in the novel would tell you this?

General

- Comment on the writer's technique of using four narrators to tell the story. Is tension and suspense maintained through this technique? How does the author avoid repeating each day's events when swapping between characters? Do you feel that the book is enhanced by having four different perspectives on the same events? What would have been different if the story had been narrated from only one character's perspective?
- How do the girls' individual problems/stories fuel the overall story – how does the story intensify when the girls are all together? Does one character seem to dominate, at particular points or as a whole? If so, are the dominant character's problems more important or urgent, or is it the strength of their personality that makes them seem more dominant?
- Did you think there was a distinct tone and sound to each voice? If so, what specific things gave each voice its own sound? If you don't agree, what techniques could the writer have employed to make these four voices more distinct?

- Instead of a traditional 'blurb', the cover includes a quote from each of the four characters. What did it tell you about the characters? What did it leave out? Was it an effective way of making you want to find out more about the four girls?
- Read J.C. Burke's thoughts on writing the book under the heading 'Writing style' above. Comment on your experience as the reader, in relation to this.
- Do you think the four girls will remain friends? J.C. Burke is planning to write a sequel to *Starfish Sisters* – what would you have happen in the sequel if you were writing it?
- Analyse some of the motifs of the book: for instance, the ways each girl experiences and describes the ocean; the different ways bikinis are represented; the significance of the fashion parade at different points of the book.
- With a friend(s), pick a scene between the girls and make it into a short play. Consider the setting; the mood of the girls; what's just occurred beforehand.
 - Some scene suggestions;
 - P20–23 Micki and Kia meet for the first time
 - P33–38 'meet and greet' where the girls introduce themselves
 - P45–47 the first meal
 - P62–62 Ace and Kia
 - P77–79 Kia tells lie to Ace and Georgie about Micki's mum
 - P119–122 Ace braids Georgie and Micki's hair
 - P134–137 Kia and Georgie's fight
 - P154–156 Micki finds Kia
 - P174–179 Ace and Georgie discuss 'pressure'
 - P198–200 Trying to get Kia to wear a bikini
 - P220–225 Finding Kia
 - P234–237 Georgie and Kia
 - P245–249 The Starfish Sisters make a pact
 - P252–255 Truth or dare game
 - P260–264 Ace and Georgie
 - P278–280 Micki and Kia
 - JC Burke uses the technique of 'showing' not 'telling' her readers. In your scene, study what the writer has each character doing with their body and face. What does it show you about the character? Incorporate this into the acting to get a first-hand experience at the 'show don't tell' technique.
 - Afterwards, ask the audience if this helped them understand more about what was going on in the scene and how each girl was feeling, or was it just dialogue that gave them the clues?
 - Afterwards, discuss how you felt about practically applying the 'show don't tell technique' and how you think it could add to your own creative writing.

Visit <http://www.randomhouse.com.au/readingguides> for information on other Random House Australia books for teenagers and young adults. Reading Guides are also available for J.C. Burke's other books.