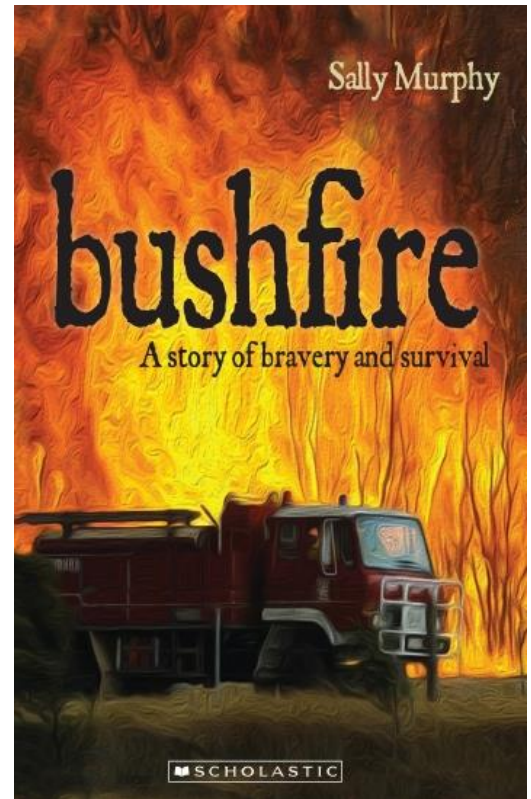


My Australian Story: Bushfire

Author

Sally Murphy



Synopsis

It's January 2009 and Amy's life in Healesville is looking a bit empty. The summer holidays are here, but her big brother Aaron has left to spend a year in Europe, and now Mum has headed off to Europe too, for a conference about climate change. Dad is busy on call as a volunteer firefighter so Amy heads to Marysville to stay with Gran. Gran's house is full of memories, and she has lots of fun planned, trips to the waterfall, and bushwalks in the beautiful mountain ash forests that surround them. And then there's Jackson. Suddenly the days are full and fun. It almost seems a pity to head home. The first week of school arrives, and so does a heatwave. Gran suggests heading back to Marysville for the weekend, where her aircon is working. The idea of cool air and seeing Jackson again convinces Amy. But on the morning of Saturday 9 February, the heat rises, and fires are burning all across Victoria. Amy starts to worry about her dad, who she knows will be in the midst of them. When the power goes out in Marysville and the bushfires sweep down into the valley, the entire town is threatened. Amy knows that she and her Gran must flee for their lives. Their courage is tested to the limit, as they join other survivors at the town's oval, and wait to be rescued from the worst fires in Australia's recorded history.

About the Author

Based in the South West of Western Australia, Sally Murphy is an author, poet, speaker and educator. She has a Doctorate in Creative writing, has written over 30 books, and is a qualified and experienced teacher, having taught all ages from preschool through to university level. Her verse novel *Pearl Versus the World* won the Indie Award, 2009 and was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, Western Australian Young Readers Book Award, CBCA Children's Book of the Year Awards, Young Readers Category in 2010. She is also a mum, granny, wife, daughter and friend. While this all sounds

like a lot of things to be at once, she still finds time to read books, walk on the beach, cook, clean and a million other things.

Themes

Themes include: 2009 Black Saturday bushfire; Australian bushfires; survival; the environment; climate change; heatwaves; water conservation; family; courage; danger; fire; natural disasters; Australian history; resilience; friendship..

Writing Style

Written in the first person from the point of view of Amy, the author takes on the voice of an 11-year-old girl. The narrative structure is chronological and incorporates use of email correspondence between Amy and her brother, and also excerpts from a book that Amy is reading, that add background depth both the character of Amy and the situation she finds herself in. The story takes place over a few months, from late 2008 to early 2009, and is told in the present tense. The language used is simple appropriate to the age of the characters as well as to the intended audience, but also incorporates use of descriptive language, especially regarding the landscape. The pacing and use of and emotive language increases in the climax of the story, when the bushfire rages, and which strengthens the sense of danger the characters must face and the fear they feel and in doing so Murphy makes paints a vivid picture of this terrifying event.

TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the book, as a class discuss the title, cover and read the blurb. Some things to include in your discussion are:
 - What do you think the story will be about?
 - Where do you think the story might be set?
 - What genre do you think this book is?
 - What do you think the main themes of the story will be?
 - What do you think will happen to the characters?
- 2) In pairs or small groups, discuss what you already know about bushfires. Then as a whole class, create a 'discussion wall' with:
 - Questions you would like to investigate further
 - Predictions of what could happen in the book
 - Statements of things you already know about bushfiresWhilst reading *Bushfire*, refer back to the discussion wall to see how your knowledge has grown. Remember to add any more questions that may come up as you progress through the book.
- 3) This story is set in 2008-2009. Has much changed since then for a child of 10 to 12 years old in terms of school and recreation? Create a Venn Diagram to show what has changed and what is the same?
- 4) In pairs or groups look at current warning systems used during natural disasters in Australia. In particular, how are apps used, alongside broadcast media? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

- 5) Australia has had several catastrophic bushfires in the past century including the Black Friday fires in 1939 and the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983. Write a short report on another Australian bushfire.
- 6) Bushfires can be both destructive and regenerative. What does this mean?
- 7) The town of Marysville was decimated in the 2009 Black Saturday fires. What has happened to rebuild the town since? How have bushfire protections been put in place?
- 8) Australians living in bushfire-prone regions are encouraged to have bushfire survival plans. In a group, create a survival plan poster and present it to the class.
- 9) Bushfires are started by several reasons, including lightning strikes, electrical faults, and also, sadly, arson. What were the established causes of the Black Saturday fires? How could the devastation of the fires have been prevented or reduced?
- 10) Amy's mother is a climate change academic and researches renewable energy. Research and write a report on the different types of renewable energy, and what sorts of renewables are used in Australia compared to overseas.
- 11) Using Google Maps and street view, explore the town of Marysville and its surrounds. Can you locate places that Amy and her Gran visited in the story? Create a map of Marysville and its surrounds. Locate and plot the places that Amy and her Gran visited in the story.
- 12) The environs around Healesville and Marysville are known for their trees, in particular the mountain ash forests, the tallest trees in Victoria. A famous tree is known as Big Tree, standing at 85 metres, which has been towering above the forest for 400 years. Research other sorts of trees that grow in the Yarra Valley region of Victoria. Create a fact sheet so tourists can learn all about the trees found in the Yarra Valley region.
- 13) Amy, Gran and Jackson visit the Steavenson Falls, one of the highest waterfalls in Victoria. Have a look. What other waterfalls are in Australia? Which one is the highest?
- 14) The Taungurung clans of Aboriginal peoples were the original inhabitants of Marysville. Why did later European immigrants choose Marysville as a place to build a town? Research the history of the town, and the reasons that made it an attractive place to settle for both the Taungurung clan of Aboriginal people and European immigrants.
- 15) In Chapter 10, there is a description of the forest around Healesville. *'The trees are amazingly tall, with bare trunks that reach high towards the sky. I can only see tiny patches of blue between them – there are so many, there is barely space between them. At their base are lush green ferns, and it almost looks like their wide leaves are waving at us in the breeze as we pass by.'* Choose a place that means something to you and write a paragraph or two of descriptive prose to paint a picture of the landscape.
- 16) Amy is obsessed by Australian natural disasters. Make a list of natural disasters that occur around the world. What sort of disasters is Australia susceptible to and why?
- 17) When Amy gives her presentation on climate change, the class helps by making posters of small changes to help combat climate change. Make a poster that includes the ones in the story and add any other small changes that might also help preserve the environment.
- 18) Choose a natural disaster mentioned in the book and write a report about it. In your report explain when and where it happened, what the natural disaster was and why it was so significant.

- 19) Refer back to the discussion wall, in pairs discuss what you have learned during reading *Bushfire*. Did your predictions come true?
- 20) Write a newspaper article about the Black Saturday fires reflecting on everything that you have learned from reading this novel.