

Each of the following reviews is the work of the named teacher and the views expressed are the teacher's own. The reviews were provided to Allen & Unwin for promotional use. They must not be copied or used for any purpose without permission from Allen & Unwin. If you are a teacher or librarian and would like to review for Allen & Unwin, please sign up for our educational newsletters at www.allenandunwin.com

***The Simple Things* by Bill Condon**

Many interviewers begin by saying Bill Condon is a very funny man, I will begin by saying that *The Simple Things* is a very funny book. Bill Condon's dialogue is a great example to years 3-6 on how to tell a story and develop characters through the dialogue.

Bill Condon uses humour, especially in the interplay of the characters of Dad and Auntie Lola with the main character of Stephen, to convey a feeling of warmth in this family novel. It is about the relationships between family members and friends of different ages, from 10 year old Steve to almost 80 year old Auntie Lola.

This book would be ideal as a serial read aloud to ages 9-10, independent reading, age 10-12. The discussion from each chapter would be completely relatable to children's own experience and could include family, relationships, friendship, ageing and death, humour and puns and family history. Other lines of inquiry could arise from environmental issues such as the sustainability of fishing and hunting.

It could lend itself to a literature circle reading group, the sequencing of the development of the relationship between Steve and Auntie Lola, graphic representations of communities and community members, plot analysis, characterisation and character mapping/comparisons.

With the richness of language and dialogue this fiction book lends itself to the analysis and writing of dialogue, the use of jokes and word puns in writing and the grammatical structure of sentences.

The storyline has a clear structure that could be mapped and serve as a guide in writing about their own families. This could be a process combined with a history unit comparing 'then' and 'now' and fiction writing compared to non-fiction. This could involve research into family heirlooms and mementos, oral histories and the mapping of place through time.

Jo-Anne Britt

To put it simply, *Simple Things* is a beautiful story. Told through the eyes of ten year old Stephen, it is a heart warming story about life and love. It is about growing up, and about growing old. And it is about learning.

The story revolves around the relationship between Stephen, the youngest member of the family, and Lola, his Great Aunt, whom he is meeting for the first time. As a reader, you are plunged straight into the story, and, with Stephen, you bump your way along the road to a growing friendship between the two seemingly very different characters.

Whilst reading the story I laughed a little – just gentle giggles – and cried a little, too.

Simple Things is the sort of story with which children between 8 and 10 can easily make connections. They are starting to develop a profound self of sense and are beginning to try and place themselves in context within their cohort and within society. It would be easy to relate to Stephen, and easy for them to recognise characters like Aunt Lola, and Mum and Dad, in their own lives. They would recognise, too, the fears and triumphs that Stephen experiences, and be able to say, "I remember when...", or, "I feel like that when...", making

this a great avenue for drawing connections between personal experiences and the world of texts ([ACELT1596](#)).

With a Year 3 / 4 class, I would read the story to them, and offer the opportunity to respond both verbally and in short, scaffolded written tasks (eg. personal connections, character developments, story boards)...

...but I would keep it light. It is the sort of story that deserves to be enjoyed for its own sake, and remembered fondly.

Catherine Whittle, Monash School, ACT

The book *The Simple Things* by Bill Condon was a beautiful and heart-warming story of family, childhood experiences and growing relationships. What I loved about this book is that it could be used in the classroom for any Primary age group (and even in Secondary classrooms). The book taps into the wonderful imagination of children, and gives insight a young boy's thoughts and experiences, that many students would be able to relate to.

Whilst reading the book, I could think of a myriad of different ways to use the book in my Grade One classroom. The main character, Stephen, has a fantastic way of describing the things that make him happy. His memories took me on a trip down memory lane to similar thoughts and experiences from when I was a child. In the classroom, I would use his experiences to lead discussions about what makes them happy. Do all classmates value the same things, or is everyone different? It could also be used in Social lessons focusing on appreciating the simple things in life or, integrated further, would tie beautifully into a History of Technology unit. Questions could be posed about whether we have become too materialistic and focused on new technologies rather than enjoying the simple things? It would also lead to great discussions surrounding Harmony day, or other cultures discussing how a lot of people don't have the same luxuries that we have, yet they still live happy lives. I plan to use this book in our Grade One 'family' unit to discuss the changing of relationships, discussing family bonds and creating family trees.

If nothing else, the book allows for taking stand alone incidents that occur within the story and creating fantastic 'What would you do if' questions (e.g. 'What would you do if you caught your first fish?'). Overall, I really enjoyed reading the book as an adult, and would recommend it to any teacher just wanting to share a feel good story and open up the classroom to social discussions. The versatility of the book only makes it that much more appropriate for classroom settings.

Melissa Nichols, St Aloysius Catholic School, Tasmania

Stephen receives a card with money twice a year: Christmas and his birthday. With his mum's encouragement, he writes a polite thank you note to his great-aunt Lola and that is about the extent of their contact.

However, Stephen's parents are becoming increasingly concerned about their aging Aunt Lola and plan a trip to visit her.

She is an aging spinster with no internet, Stephen an energetic young lad; how will they be able to get along?

But despite their differences and some early miscommunication issues, they get to know each other, respect each other and Stephen proves to be instrumental in 'fixing' some broken relationships, as he gets to know the neighbours. With help from Allie, the girl next door, he learns to enjoy small-town life, backyard cricket and fishing.

This heart-warming story of 160 pages is a great read for 8 to 12 year-old readers who are over fantasy and vampires. Norling's simple black and white illustrations head up each chapter, giving inkling as to what is coming up.

Nova Gibson, Massey Primary School. Auckland, New Zealand

Bill Condon's *The Simple Things* centres on that most universal of daunting childhood experiences – meeting a long-lost elderly relative. It is a situation likely to be familiar to young readers (and indeed the adults who may be reading to them). Stephen is a ten year old boy, who, with his parents, goes to visit his great-aunt Lola, who lives in the country and is approaching her 80th birthday. Stephen has never met her, but his family is spending several weeks with her. His first impressions of Aunt Lola and the view from her yard are bleak, and we know he is about undertake a personal journey as he reluctantly succumbs to his surroundings.

The characters in *The Simple Things* are beautifully drawn. Stephen is a quiet, gentle and slightly shy boy who finds Aunt Lola quite intimidating but is drawn to her nevertheless. His innate kindness drives him to keep initiating conversation (while she brusquely corrects his grammar and admonishes his slang!) Aunt Lola, despite her initially gruff manner, is likable and we see from the outset that her crusty exterior masks a cheeky sense of humour. Twelve year old Allie, the grand-daughter of the next door neighbour, is brash, confident and competitive and she encourages Stephen to come out of his shell and face his fears. Both children are great role models for young readers.

The story unfolds in a very reader-friendly way. The chapters are short and each begins with a whimsical illustration by Beth Norling which hints at the events to come. Much of the action unfolds through dialogue which is realistically portrayed in terms of brevity, pacing, and nuance. Stephen narrates, so we are drawn into his inner world as he processes the new experiences he encounters. Young readers will relate to his thoughts and feelings as he tentatively engages Aunt Lola, negotiates a new friendship with Allie, and processes his ambivalence over the first fish he catches – to name just a few of the 'simple things' he experiences. This is a beautiful story for ages 7 and up, with a number of possible curriculum links.

Curriculum links

English: this story could be used to explore the role and construction of dialogue in narratives, and to explore point of view.

HSIE: this story would complement a study of the past, as Aunt Lola shares her story with Stephen through conversation and sifting through the wonders in her old shed.

PDHPE: family relationships, resilience and cross-generational perspectives.

Ann Hall, Teacher Librarian, St John the Baptist Catholic Primary, Woy Woy South

We are introduced to Stephen's family in the first chapter. Up until now Stephen's only contact with Aunt Lola has been a birthday card twice a year. Now he is to spend holidays with her and his parents. He doesn't get off on the right foot with Aunt Lola or so it seems but Aunt Lola is not what she appears to be. Stephen's understanding of older relatives is the main theme throughout the book.

When reading the first couple of chapters the reader might feel that the development of the story is slow but as the book progresses the reader realises that this is the tone of the book. It gently meanders through each day showing the reader a little more of each character and what the main reason is for Stephen and his family visiting Aunt Lola. This gentle stroll is going to appeal to many readers and may resonate with them extending their knowledge and understanding of their own older relatives.

The book is written in chapters and at the beginning of each chapter the reader is given a taste of what the chapter is about through the illustration. The black and white sketches give enough detail to intrigue the reader and encourage them to continue reading and not stop at the end of a chapter. The text is accessible to a wide range of readers. The end is not predictable and Lola's big secret is only explored on the surface but this book is a great read particularly if you want to be left feeling contented and informed.

Roxanne Steenbergen, Windermere Primary School, Tasmania

Not a hint of technology! No DVDs! No iPods! No online gaming! Not even a suggestion of a TV or the Internet! Hooray! At last, a novel written to remind us all about exactly what the title says - *The Simple Things*. As we are dropped tentatively into the contented and settled life of 80 year old Aunty Lola, we realise she has lived the sort of life which has the right to do just what it likes, when it likes. The sort of life which has a lot to teach us.....a lot to remind us and how well it achieves both of these purposes!

While our modern, busy family lives bring us to breaking point for any spare time, we are shown a family who have managed to remain intact in the values and ideals of most families who inhabited Melbourne and no doubt, most capital cities in Australia during the 1960s. The days of uncomplicated, never ending Summer holidays. The days when extended family meant learning about life from grandparents and most of all, learning patience with older people.

Our main character, Stephen, is all this, and more. His journey from being totally grumped out about being dragged along on this family jaunt to visit elderly Aunt Lola, turns into a visual feast of experiences. We join him as climbs trees, catches his first fish and learns the rules of backyard cricket. We also accompany him during his lessons on trust, patience, growing up, getting old, and mostly those he learns about friendship.

This very simple story will be a priceless resource in a classroom setting, particularly when discussing the issues of how life was lived in another generation.

Adults, in particular, will thoroughly enjoy its message and children may discover what those adults already know about childhood!

Karyn Verity, Wheelers Hill Primary School, Victoria

This delightful story is one I recommend for teachers to read aloud to their primary school classes. It is a warm hearted, funny and touching story. It is a story that Children from Year 4 – Year 7 could read to themselves. It would also be fun for families to read aloud at home around the lounge room or as a bed-time story, or while travelling long distances in a car.

The reading of this story can be used to develop discussion about relationships. Children could ask their Grandparents and other aged relations and friend's to tell some stories about parts of their life. These memoirs could be shared in class by children relating these stories orally, or by paintings and drawing and / or in writing or audio recordings. Songs and dances maybe shared. Cultural celebrations shared. For children to listen and then share these stories within class will help develop an awareness in each child of other people's lives and needs and cultures. By doing this as a classroom exercise it may help to develop an ongoing interest, for children, in storytelling and may give children a model of different ways of communicating; their humour, their sadness, their happiness their fears, whatever. Stories shared about life and feelings help children relate to each other and their own feelings. It gives them ways to learn self respect and respect of others. This allows the curriculum needs to be met in various ways and for the creative arts to help this process. It allows the English, Social Studies (SOCE), Visual Literacy and Maths curriculums to be part of this process.

The story, *The Simple Things* illustrates the effect that children's demeanour can have on older people and vice versa. Even though there can be many years of age difference between them, the pace of life and thought can be similar for the young and old. Older people often have time to listen and laugh with children. Parents can be too busy to give relaxed time for listening and hence in this story we see the developing friendship between Lola and Stephen. As this very special bond develops we see how it changes Stephen and Lola's lives. They develop a respect for each other, something that modern day community needs assistance with to ensure a 'sense of community' and 'respect for elders' is maintained.

The characters in the story show us how important it is to assist older people with generous actions. Stephen's father finds jobs around Lola's house that will make a difference to her life. He and Stephen fix lots of broken things that would be too hard for Lola to fix at her age. She is very appreciative as she realises how cleverly they can repair things and how caring they are for her well-being.

In the story we see the strong bonds in relationships between;

Father / son

Great aunt and great nephew

Lola and Mr Green (neighbour)

Allie and Stephen (children)

The husband and wife (Stephen's parents)

Niece and Aunt

Each of these relationships are different, yet illustrate to us the many ways we can relate with each other and enjoy and cope with our differences.

It may help children who don't have easy relationships in their own house, or an ease with their own confidence, to hear about the ways other adults, children and friends can relate respectfully and playfully with one another.

Diane Lucas, Milkwood Steiner School, Darwin

The Simple Things is a good choice to add to Middle-Upper Primary reading lists for independent reading or as a class read-aloud text. It would also be suitable for Literature Circles. *The Simple Things* contains strong themes of family, as well as unexpected, broken and fixed-up friendships. Delightful characterisation and caring relationships are revealed through Bill Condon's use of simple and realistic dialogue interactions.

The main character of ten year old, Stephen, is an enthusiastic, 'asks too many questions' kind of kid who gets to know his ageing, fiercely independent great-aunt, Aunty Lola. Cross-generational comparisons are crafted between formal and modern language use and 'acceptable' childhood behaviour through Aunty Lola's initial reactions to Stephen. Ultimately though, Stephen's childhood openness and innocence builds an unexpected level of friendship and trust between Stephen and Aunty Lola.

Stephen also forms an unexpected friendship with twelve year old Allie, a strong, athletic girl, that challenges Stephen to be braver, climb trees and to thread worms on the fishing line hook. Stephen sometimes does curious and very literal things that allude to him being a boy that doesn't always cope well socially, perhaps even implicitly suggesting that he is on the Autism Spectrum. Stephen doesn't like hugs or kisses and says things that probably shouldn't be said out aloud. He is very shy and only has two friends.

Deeper meanings can be inferred from the text through Aunty Lola's family secret of an adopted baby; Aunty Lola's broken relationship with her neighbor, Mr Smith, due to his alcohol problem; reference to health issues of stroke and cancer, as well as the life/death cycle.

AusVELS Curriculum links can be made to the Literature strand-Level 4:
'Discuss how authors and illustrators make stories exciting, moving and absorbing and hold readers' interest by using various techniques, for example character development and plot tension'
'Create literary texts that explore students' own experiences and imagining'

Teaching activities could include: Whole class T-chart on Stephen and Aunty Lola-focus on how the characters are developed-through descriptors, dialogue and actions. Then replicate and extend this into student's own stories about cross-generational family members by creating their own T-chart and writing their own stories using dialogue interactions between characters.

An endearing, heartfelt story about the simple things in life that matter-love, friendship and having time to go fishing!

Sandra Harvey, La Trobe University-Bendigo, VIC

The Simple Things by Bill Condon is a new chapter book for young readers. The book tells the story of ten year old Stephen and his Aunt Lola and centres on the themes of fitting in, friendship, family and the 'simple things' in life. After his first meeting with Aunt Lola, Stephen initially finds her to be grumpy and scary and believes that they don't have anything in common. When his parents tell him they will be staying with Aunt Lola until her birthday, which is three weeks away, Stephen wishes they could just go home. As the chapter book spans, despite their age difference, Stephen finds an unexpected friendship beginning to develop. Throughout the story, Stephen learns important life lessons, told with gentle affection and humour by Bill Condon. It shows that first impressions aren't always accurate and the most surprising of friendships can develop in the most unexpected places. The inclusion of line drawings by Beth Norling compliments the simple writing style employed by Bill Condon. This is gentle and heart-warming story that many students will respond well to.

This book could be used as a class read in the classroom (Grade 2 upwards) and has many important themes that would also link in nicely with other curriculum areas, including Personal Development. Teachers may wish to discuss feelings of uncertainty that students might have also experienced, unlikely friendships that they have encountered and times when they have shown empathy towards others. We also purchased a copy for the school library and I found that the book was most popular with girls from Grade 3 to Grade 6. It would also make a great read aloud at home, with strong themes centring on families and growing up.

A delightful story that takes young readers on a journey about life, using a gentle and humorous approach.

Kathleen Temple, Yarrambat Primary School, VIC