

BAD THINGS,
REALLY BAD THINGS,
NEVER LEAVE YOU.

PROMISES AND OTHER LIES



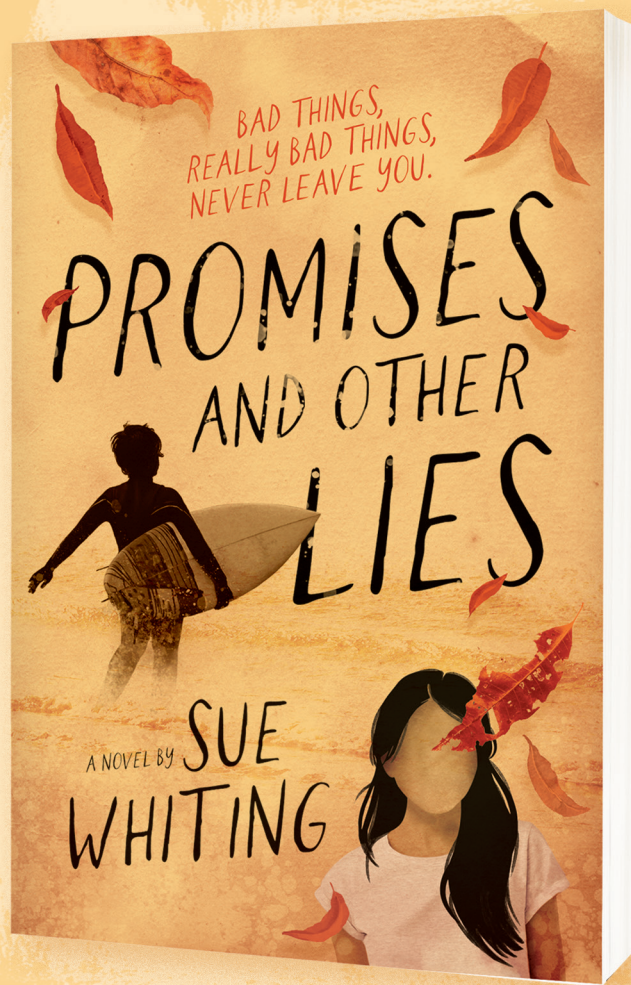
A NOVEL BY SUE
WHITING



TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Belinda Bolliger

WALKER BOOKS



PROMISES AND OTHER LIES
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*A GRIPPING MIDDLE-GRADE MYSTERY
FROM AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR SUE WHITING, IN WHICH A SMALL
COASTAL TOWN IS TORN APART BY MORE THAN JUST A BUSHFIRE ...*



One year on, the small coastal town of Wangaroo Bay is still reeling. Fletch's family lost their home, and his best friend Immie lost her beloved dad, a volunteer firefighter. Throughout it all, Fletch and Immie have had each other ...

Immie's grandparents push for the Bay fire investigation to be reopened, but Fletch's mum, dad and elder brother Cooper want to put the past behind them. And when a local, one of their own, is charged with arson, emotions flare, sides are taken and promises – and secrets – are at stake.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUE WHITING is an award-winning children's and YA author, editor and former primary school teacher. Sue writes for many age groups, from picture books through to YA, including the bestselling *Missing*, the acclaimed *The Book of Chance* and several CBCA Notable Books. Sue's latest books are *Tilda*, a historical novel for readers 10+, and the second book in her middle-grade fiction series, *Pearly and Pig and the Lost City of Mu Savan*. As a storyteller and schools' performer, Sue has informed, inspired and entertained thousands of kids across the country. Sue is passionate about the power of story and is an advocate for reading and writing for pleasure.





FOR AGES 10-14

CONTENT WARNING: death of parent, trauma, PTSD

THEMES: Loss and grief; friendship and loyalty; truth and justice; community and conflict; resilience and recovery; environmental awareness and responsibility; secrets and consequences

CURRICULUM LINKS: English (literature, language, literacy); HASS (Humanities and Social Sciences – Civics & Citizenship); Science (Earth and Space Sciences); Health and Physical Education (HPE); The Arts (visual arts, drama)



CROSS-CURRICULUM LINKS: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures; Sustainability; Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

TEACHER NOTES

BACKGROUND

In the 'Acknowledgements' section at the end of the book, the author explains that she was inspired to write the story in the aftermath of the Australian Black Summer Bushfires in 2019/2020.

- What do you know about these fires? Use the internet to research what happened.
 - In your research, focus on human interest stories that show how people were affected by the fires and by losing so much of what was important to them.
 - When you've finished reading *Promises and Other Lies*, have a class discussion about how the book compares to the news stories that you read. Do you think the author has successfully described the fear, loss and grief of the fires, as well as the resilience and hope of the affected communities?
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CHARACTERS

- Choose three or four key characters and create profiles for each of them. In your profile, include:
 - Key traits (eg, loyal, secretive, grieving)
 - Personal losses or challenges
 - Major decisions or turning points
 - Quotes that reveal personality
 - Symbols or colours that represent them
- Bertie the camel is a wonderful character with many of his own special characteristics. Create a character profile for Bertie too. Research more information about camels and create a poster presentation about them. Include the following topics:
 - What are camels?
 - Types of camels
 - Which type is found in Australia?
 - When were camels introduced into Australia? Why?
 - Who were the Afghan cameleers? What was their contribution to Australia?
 - Camels and exploration
 - Feral camels
 - Modern uses of camels in Australia
 - Fun facts (did you know that camels can close their nostrils to keep out sand?)

THEMES

Promises and other lies

- Discuss the title of the novel. What promises are made and what lies are told?
- Do you think it's fair to be asked to keep a secret? Discuss in relation to Cooper and Fletch.
- Is it ever okay to protect someone by keeping a secret? Discuss times when you think it's okay to keep a secret and times when it isn't.
- Write a journal entry from Fletch's point of view about the secret he is asked to keep. How does it make him feel? What are the effects of keeping the secret?
- Cooper's mother and stepfather lie to protect Cooper. What is the result of the lie? Is it ever okay to lie?
- What responsibility does a person have if they know someone is guilty – or innocent?

Loss and grief

Each of the main characters in *Promises and Other Lies* has lost something.

- How do they cope differently with their losses?
- How do grief and trauma shape the choices of the characters?
- Fletch and Immie have lost more than just loved ones – they have lost trust, stability, even parts of their identity. Can places, routines or futures also be things we grieve?
- How does grief affect loyalty between the main characters?
- What happens when grief leads people to make decisions that hurt others?
- Some of the townspeople of Wangaroo Bay become vocal and angry when the investigation into the fire is reopened. Others shut down. Do you think there is a right way to manage loss and grief? How do different coping styles cause conflict in the story?
- Immie's grandparents are grieving too – not just for their son, but for the future they imagined. How do the older characters express or suppress grief differently from the younger ones?
- Do you think it's true that 'Bad things, really bad things, never leave you'?

Community and conflict

- How does the fire impact the relationships in the small community of Wangaroo Bay?
- What happens when people are forced to take sides?
- Do you think the fire had any positive effects on the community?

Courage

- Who do you think shows courage in the story? Find quotes from the text to support your answer.
- Are there different types of courage? What are they?
- What does 'doing the right thing' mean in *Promises and Other Lies*?
- What would you have done in Fletch's position?

Build windmills

Quote: 'When the winds of change blow,' Immie tells the palm trees, 'some build walls, others build windmills.' (p 58)

Quote: 'When bad things happened to Nightbirde, she didn't put up walls around her, she built windmills. She couldn't stop the bad stuff, she couldn't change it, but she didn't let it stop her. She wrote songs. She performed on TV. She showed people she was more than the bad stuff.' (p 71)

- What do you think the proverb 'Some build walls, others build windmills' means?
- Can you think of a time when someone you know (or a character in the book) built a 'wall' or a 'windmill' in response to change or hardship?
- How does Nightbirde inspire Immie?
- In what ways do Immie and Fletch try to 'build windmills' after the bushfire?
- Are there times when characters build 'walls'? What are the consequences?
- Divide a piece of paper in two and show a wall on one side and a windmill on the other. On the wall side, write or draw things you (or other people if you prefer) might do when they feel overwhelmed or afraid. On the windmill side, depict positive actions and coping strategies.
- Find a real-life example of a person who has built windmills instead of walls (a famous person, someone in your community, a historical figure) who embodies this idea. Create a mini-poster with the quote, your interpretation of the quote, your chosen person and how you think they have built windmills instead of walls.

Environmental responsibility

Quote: 'But we were very wrong. As the impacts of climate change continue to worsen, we need to rethink. We are in uncharted territory.' (p 95)

- Discuss what Gilmore means when he says this on Marie's podcast. What does he mean by 'uncharted territory'? Why does he say 'we were very wrong'? What assumptions or beliefs is he challenging?
- Work in pairs to find two recent Australian news stories illustrating climate change effects. Summarise: What is happening? Which communities, species or ecosystems are affected?
- On a poster or PowerPoint, present:
 - o The article headline and source
 - o A one-sentence summary
 - o How it connects to Gilmore's quote (eg, 'This shows why we're in uncharted territory because ...').

Some possible topics are:

- o Torres Strait Islanders losing land and culture to rising sea levels
[sbs.com.au/news/article/little-recognition-of-this-threat-climate-report-condemns-government-inaction/t184n3ssg](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/little-recognition-of-this-threat-climate-report-condemns-government-inaction/t184n3ssg)
- o Toxic algal blooms in South Australia as an 'eye-opener'
[theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/15/deadly-algal-bloom-in-south-australias-coorong-an-environmental-eye-opener-ecologist-says](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/15/deadly-algal-bloom-in-south-australias-coorong-an-environmental-eye-opener-ecologist-says)

o Drought in Victoria and NSW and its impacts on farmers
[theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/11/parts-of-australia-are-suffering-another-devastating-drought-but-you-wouldnt-know-it-in-the-cities](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/11/parts-of-australia-are-suffering-another-devastating-drought-but-you-wouldnt-know-it-in-the-cities)

- As a class, brainstorm ideas about what you can do at home and school to lessen the impact of climate change.
 - What can communities do to prepare for bushfires and other natural disasters?
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FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL BURNING PRACTICES

- On pages 95, 145 and 291 there are references to First Nations cultural burning practices and Indigenous knowledge about looking after Country.
 - What are the cultural burning practices used by First Nations people? What purpose do these practices serve?
 - How can we learn from these practices? What difference could they make to townships like those affected by the Black Summer bushfires?
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LANGUAGE

- Discuss the way the author uses flashbacks at the beginning of chapters.
 - o What purpose does this serve?
 - o How does it add to the narrative?
 - o How does it build suspense and mystery?
 - o What do we learn about some of the main characters through these flashbacks?
- Throughout the novel, the author uses powerful and evocative language to describe fire. Re-read selected passages in *Promises and Other Lies* that describe the bushfire and its aftermath. Highlight or note powerful verbs, similes, metaphors, personification and other figurative language that the author uses to bring the fire to life.
- What kind of mood or tone does this language create? How does it make you feel about the force of fire? In what ways is fire both a destructive and renewing force in the story?
- Choose one natural force: fire; water; wind; earth; ice. Decide whether you want to focus on its destructive power, its life-giving force or explore both sides. Write a short creative piece, up to 500 words, that brings this natural force to life through descriptive language and figurative devices. It can be a short story, a poem or a descriptive personal reflection.
- Create an artwork or mood board to accompany your writing using colour, texture and imagery to reflect the mood of your piece.

Fire as metaphor

- What does fire symbolise in this novel?
 - o Destruction, change, renewal, anger, cleansing/new growth, danger, power – which of these are relevant to the story? Find quotes to illustrate your answer.

- How does fire reflect what the characters are feeling or going through?
 - Are there moments when the fire mirrors the characters' emotional states (grief, fear, fury, guilt or resilience)?
- Can fire represent both danger and transformation?
 - In what ways do the characters emerge changed after the fire – physically, emotionally or in their relationships?
- Does fire cleanse or scar?
 - Explore whether fire in the story is a force for healing or harm – or both. What does it leave behind?
- Compare the literal fire to the figurative fires in the story.
 - What other kinds of 'fires' do the characters face (grief, trauma, truth-telling, broken promises)? Are they put out or do they continue to smoulder?
- In groups, create a visual 'map' of fire as a metaphor in the story. Use imagery (flame, smoke, ember, ash etc) to represent different ideas. Label parts of the fire with related character moments or quotes (for example, flames = anger, embers = memory, ash = aftermath).
- Reflection writing: Choose a character and write two diary entries in their voice:
 - Before the fire: what are they worried about or hiding?
 - After the fire: What has changed in them, in their relationships, in how they see the world?
- The author cleverly reveals clues as to who the true arsonist is. Did you at any point guess who was guilty? What clues did you use to make your conclusion?
- How does the author build suspense throughout the story? Discuss how the suspense builds and builds.
- How did you feel when Immie and Fletch broke into Marie's house and when they were being pursued through the junkyard?
- Discuss how Immie, Fletch and Bertie each play an important part in bringing the culprit to justice.

ACTIVITIES

Podcasting

- In the story, Marie has a regular podcast. Podcasts are a creative and often powerful way to tell a story. Listen to some suitable podcasts, eg Six Minutes (Gen-Z Media) or Greeking Out (National Geographic Kids). Discuss narrative features such as tone, music, sound, structure, character voices, suspense.
- Plan and/or record a short podcast episode of your own. You might like to choose a community issue, a recent news story or a podcast episode inspired by the events in the novel. There are a range of tutorials on YouTube to help you create a podcast.

Affirmation wall

- Immie creates a chalkboard wall where people from the community can write affirmations and positive things that came from the bushfire disaster. Create a class affirmation wall where you and your classmates can write positive things about each other, about the school and about life in general. Create guidelines about what can and can't be written about on the wall. Remember: positive affirmations only!

Roleplay

- Hold a mock town hall meeting with students playing characters from Wangaroo Bay to debate reopening the fire investigation.

Mapping

- Design a map of Wangaroo Bay with key story events and locations marked and explained. Discuss how geography and environment play a role in the story's tension (eg when Immie and Fletch are pursued through the junkyard).

Bushfire awareness campaign

- In small groups, design a bushfire safety or recovery awareness poster or digital campaign for the town of Wangaroo Bay. Include tips, emotional support ideas and a unifying message for the community.
- Alternatively, you might like to create a poster or campaign about bushfire awareness/readiness for your own community.

Debate

- Conduct a debate on the topic: Is it better to forget the past or uncover the truth, even it causes pain? Use evidence from the novel to support your arguments.

Collage

- Create a collage (either digital or physical) representing one of the book's themes such as resilience, loss or community. Include words, phrases, images and colours that reflect that theme.