



TEACHERS' NOTES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary
Ages 9-11; years 4-6

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Literacy, Critical and creative thinking, Ethical understanding, Personal and social capability, Intercultural understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- CBCA award-winner Shirley Marr brings young readers another gentle, heartwarming story with deeper themes that encourage discussion and study.

THEMES

- Adjusting to changes in the family (parents separating)
- Making new friends
- Resilience
- Memory and perspective
- Time travel
- Nostalgia
- Cultural differences

PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

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Countdown to Yesterday Shirley Marr

PLOT SUMMARY

James wishes he could go back in time. Back to when his mum and dad were together, when he had one home, when his family laughed and climbed hills and went to the movies.

After meeting the enigmatic Yan, a girl who looks at the world differently, James discovers time travel might not be impossible after all.

But if James can live forever in one of his six favourite memories, which one will he choose?

From the incredible mind of multi-award-winning Australian children's author Shirley Marr comes a beautiful story for young readers about memories, family, friendship, *The Australian Women's Weekly Children's Birthday Cake Book*, David Bowie and time travel!

REVIEWS

- 'Marr's ability to capture the essence of her characters and the complexities of their experiences shines, and with a twist that delivers an emotional impact that lingers long after the final page, this novel explores the depths of human emotions in a touching and thought-provoking way. *Countdown to Yesterday* is a timeless addition to the world of middle-grade fiction and is bound to leave a lasting impression on readers aged 9 and older' Emma Pei Yin, *Books+Publishing*
- 'One part time travel, two parts birthday cake and a whole lot of nostalgia, *Countdown to Yesterday* is as gentle as it is powerful. As always, Shirley Marr tackles a challenging topic with sensitivity and heart. It's impossible not to love this book.' Reece Carter, author of *A Girl Called Corpse*
- 'The kind of story that makes you smile without even realising, and leaves your heart feeling bigger than it did when you started, this is a smart, lively adventure story through mind and memory, with a little bit of science and a whole lot of cake. This beautiful tale of family, friends, loneliness and hope feels as close as your backyard, and as big as the universe. It's a retro-cool book about looking back, falling forward, and changing your own story. *Countdown to Yesterday* already feels like a classic; if I could time travel, I would, only to read this book for the first time again.' Fiona Hardy, author of CBCA Notable Book *How to Make a Movie in 12 Days*
- '*Countdown to Yesterday* is a space odyssey about a wide-eyed kid, travelling at the speed of life and caught between the past and future. I adored James and his friendship with Yan as they marvel at the delicate things that they've made. Get ready for an emotional rollercoaster with snapshots of grief and joy that tie together a complex life of an Asian-Australian family working their way through problems that science and logic cannot solve. Throw in a bit of Bowie and generous servings of cake, and you have a sweet story about love and loss, with a twist that will hit you hard, long after you put the book down.' - Oliver Phommavanh, author of CBCA Notable Book *What About Thao?*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shirley Marr is a first-generation Chinese Australian living in Perth and an author of young adult and children's fiction, including YA novels *Fury and Preloved*, and children's novels *Little Jiang, A Glasshouse of Stars, All Four Quarters of the Moon* and *Countdown to Yesterday*. She describes herself as having a Western mind and an Eastern heart. She likes

to write in the space in the middle where they both collide, basing her stories on her own personal experiences of migration and growing up in Australia, along with the folk and fairy tales from her mother. Arriving in mainland Australia from Christmas Island as a seven-year-old in the 1980s and experiencing the good, the bad and the wonder that comes with culture shock, Shirley has been in love with reading and writing from that early age. Shirley is a universe full of stars and stories and hopes to share the many other novels that she has inside her.

Find out more about Shirley at shirleymarr.net

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Shirley Marr says:

Countdown to Yesterday is based on my own personal experience of a marriage breakdown and the effect that this had on my then eight-year-old son. I wanted to write a book that he, and all children going through this experience, could personally relate to.

At the very beginning of this journey, I often got the feeling that he wished everything would go back to the way it was. Sometimes I too would think of the good times and wish for the same thing. Then I had the realisation that maybe I was looking at the past through rose-coloured glasses – that I was imagining that things were better than they really were. It was the start of an idea!

This book is dedicated to everyone who yearns for the past for any reason, whether it be due to loss or unwanted change. This book, like my others, is about resilience in the everyday, the beauty of the present and the possibilities in the future.

WRITING STYLE

Countdown to Yesterday is written in a first-person voice and in present tense. The book begins with a flash-forward to a scene in two weeks' time.

- Why has author Shirley Marr chosen to write this story in first person, from James's perspective? How would the story be different if it was written in third person, or even second person (like Shirley's previous book *A Glasshouse of Stars*)?
- Often books will feature flashbacks to the past, to deepen our understanding of the characters. *Countdown to Yesterday* instead starts with a flash-forward to a scene around two weeks in the future. Why has Shirley Marr chosen to start the story this way? How does this first scene create intrigue and interest? What did you think the story would be about when you read this first scene?



GENRE

Countdown to Yesterday is a contemporary, realistic story but with an element of science fiction.

- When you started reading the book, did you think James would really be able to travel back in time? How did your opinion change throughout the story?
- Have you read any other books that feature a time travel element or that are realistic but with an element of magic or science fiction? Here are some other books you might like to read that have similar story elements:
 - *A Glasshouse of Stars* by Shirley Marr has aspects of magical realism, such as Big Scary, the house that becomes a character, a magical cat and a magical glasshouse.
 - *Zadie Ma and the Dog who Chased the Moon* by Gabrielle Wang stars a girl who writes magical stories that sometimes come true.
 - *The Book of Wondrous Possibilities* by Deborah Abela is a contemporary story featuring a magical book.
 - *The Shark Caller* by Dianne Wolfer features a magical underwater world.
 - *The River Charm* by Belinda Murrell features a timeslip from contemporary times into the past.
 - *Playing Beatie Bow* by Ruth Park is a classic Australian story featuring a timeslip to Sydney in the past.
- How does the time travel element of the story add to James's understanding of the world? What does he learn?
- Would you like to travel in time? What time period would you go to?

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Take a close look at the cover of the book before you read it. From the type and illustrations used, what do you think this book might be about?
2. What genre do you think the book will be? What elements on the cover give you that impression? Can you think of other books, movies or television shows that might be in the same genre?
3. What do you think the title means?
4. Read the blurb on the back. How close were your guesses as to what the book was about? Did you guess there would be a time travelling element? How is this indicated on the front cover illustration?

KEY STUDY TOPICS

Adjusting to changes in the family

- James is sad that his family is changing and breaking up. Can you relate to how he is feeling? Why or why not?
- James starts to see his mum and dad in a different light as the story progresses, and learns things he didn't know about them. What examples in the book can you find? (For instance, James's mum loves colour; James's dad has a motorbike he wants to fix.) What things have you learned about your own parents or caregivers that make you see them as individuals with their own hopes and dreams?
- Family separations can be hard on everyone. What things do James's parents do to make things easier for James? (For example: finding new routines and taking James for fun outings.) What other things could James and his parents have done to make this challenging time less stressful?
- Why does James's mum want to make the Rocket cake?

Memory and perspective

- James takes comfort in the poster of David Bowie on the back of his bedroom door. Do you have a space or an object that brings you comfort? How is this connected to memories you have of your family or friends?
- James has six favourite memories from his past, but he starts to realise that the way he remembers those times may not have been accurate or there may have been other sides to the story. Choose one of James's memories and compare his original memory with what he sees when he travels back in time. What is different, and how does it change James's perspective?
- To look at something 'through rose-coloured glasses' is to view it overly optimistically or positively without considering the potential negatives. Do you think James is looking at his memories through rose-coloured glasses? Why/why not?
- Choose a scene from the book and write it from another character's perspective (such as Yan or Roscoe). What would that character experience or see differently?



Symbolism and motif

The Australian Women's Weekly Children's Birthday Cake Book

- What role does this iconic Australian cake book play in the book?
- What does James learn about other people from their reactions to the book?
- Why are the parents at the school so serious about the cake competition?
- Why do you think this real-life recipe book, which is over forty years old, has endured in its popularity for so long?
- What would it mean to James to have his mum make a cake from the book, and what do you learn in the story about why it's difficult for his mum to do so?
- What does Yan's family think about the cake book?

Major Tom

- An iconic fictional character created by singer David Bowie for the song 'Space Oddity', Major Tom is sent into space and loses communication with Ground Control.
- What does the song mean to James?
- What different explanations do his parents give about what has happened to Major Tom, and what do their explanations say about their characters?

Out-of-date books and computers and the 'On the Way Out' room in the library

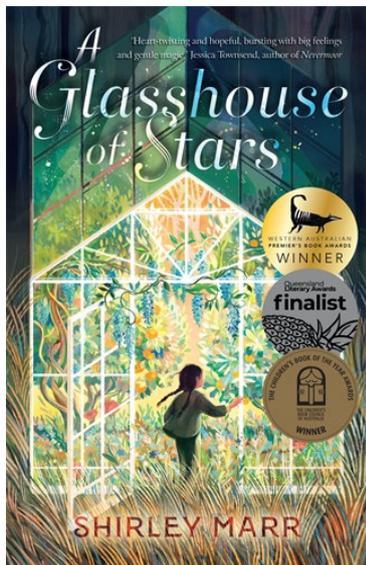
- 'Because it's been scientifically proven that even if something doesn't make sense now, it doesn't mean it won't make sense in retrospect,' replies Yan. 'The mind is a mysterious and malleable machine! One that needs to be stretched! You should try it sometime.'
'No thanks,' I reply. It sounds painful.
'Well, don't blame me if you miss out on a subconscious clue that relates to something in the future!' (pp. 142–143)
- Why do you think Yan reads old, out-of-date computing books? Why does the room in the library filled with old, broken furniture, out-of-date textbooks and defunct technology feel like a safe space to Yan?
- What do these old technologies symbolise in the story, with James wishing that he could go back to the past? Does Yan also wish she could go back to the past, or is she reading the books for a different reason?

KEY QUOTES

1. 'Everything has changed. Sometimes all it takes is one variable' (p. 16) What small and large changes happen in James's life that give him a new understanding of the people around him?
2. 'I heard someone say once, or maybe they sang it in a song, that they wished they could live forever inside a photograph. I think I understand that feeling now.' (p. 54) Have you ever had this feeling? Why does James want to live forever inside a photograph? Do photographs represent reality, or are they a constructed version of events?
3. 'That's not a good enough reason [to go back in time]. It needs to be for a very special, individual, distinctive, vital reason driven by the Human Condition.' (p. 69) What does the 'Human Condition' mean to you? Read the definition James's mum gives on p. 81 and see if you agree.
4. '[Anemoia is] when someone feels wistful for another time and place, one that they've never known before.' (p. 83) Have you ever had this feeling? What time or place were you thinking about?
5. 'I often wish I could live inside a photo,' says Yan, completely unexpectedly. 'Like when I see one of a field of sunflowers, or a scene of a quaint cottage with the lights on inside and a curl of smoke coming out of the chimney.'
'Just for the rest of time to stop,' I say.
'Just to be in that feeling,' says Yan.
'I don't want to go back and for time to move forward again to the present day. I want to go back to that one moment when everything was perfect, when I was happy, like really happy, and stay there forever.' (p.p. 122–23) What does James learn about this wish during the novel? Is it an impossible dream? Why/why not?
6. 'Time and place and circumstances are complicated. The future is too huge and unknowable. Even the present is overwhelming. It would be much easier to go back to one moment in the past and exist in that forever. Safe and predictable and perfect.' (pp. 159–160) Why does James think this? What changes his mind?
7. 'I think of Dad, reading about how scientists have discovered that Jupiter is big because in the past it swallowed micro planets in its path like a Pac-Man. I think about Mum, letting go of things because they are 'just cake'. I think about Yan practising the violin for no clear reason other than she has to. I listen to the rain and I think of each of us as a coordinate and about the space between us. Tonight, we do not seem so far apart.' (p. 179)



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



A Glasshouse of Stars
by Shirley Marr

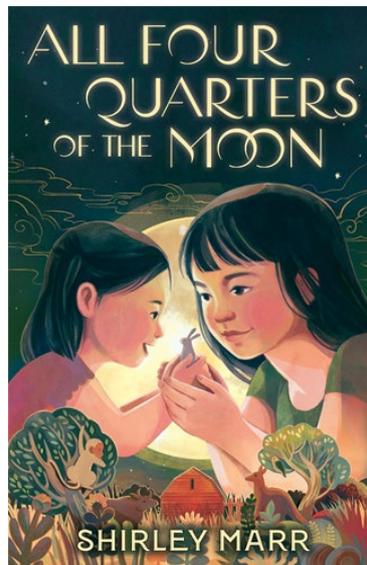
Winner of the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year - Younger Readers 2022.

Meixing Lim and her family have arrived at the New House in the New Land. Everything is vast and unknown to Meixing – including the house she names Big Scary. She is embarrassed by her second-hand shoes, has trouble understanding the language at school, and is finding it hard to make friends.

Meixing's only solace is a glasshouse in the garden, which inexplicably holds the sun and the moon and the secrets of her memory and imagination.

When her fragile universe is rocked by tragedy, it will take all of Meixing's bravery to find her place of belonging in this new world.

[Teachers' notes available.](#)



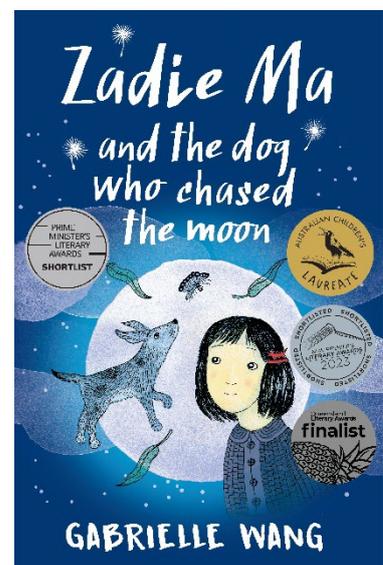
All Four Quarters of the Moon
by Shirley Marr

Making mooncakes with Ah Ma for the Mid-Autumn Festival was the last day of Peijing's old life. Now, adapting to their new life in Australia, Peijing thinks everything will turn out okay for her family as long as they have each other - but cracks are starting to appear.

Her little sister, Biju, needs Peijing to be the dependable big sister. Ma Ma is no longer herself; Ah Ma keeps forgetting who she is; and Ba Ba, who used to work seven days a week, is adjusting to being a hands-on dad.

How will Peijing cope with the uncertainties of her own little world while shouldering the burden of everyone else? And if Peijing's family are the four quarters of the mooncake, where does she fit in?

[Teachers' notes available.](#)



Zadie Ma and the Dog Who Chased the Moon
by Gabrielle Wang

Zadie Ma has a special talent for telling stories . . . and it seems that some of Zadie's stories come true. Zadie's dearest wish is to have a dog of her own and so she starts to write the story of a poor unwanted dog called Jupiter, who's just waiting to be rescued by a loving girl like Zadie.

But a series of unlucky events means that Zadie can't write the happy ending she dreams of for her story, and now she may lose her beloved Jupiter forever.

From one of Australia's most esteemed and award-winning children's authors and Australian Children's Laureate for 2022–23 comes a heartwarming story set in postwar Melbourne about courage, friendship, the magic of stories and one girl's unwavering love for her dog.

[Teachers' notes available.](#)



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
Countdown to Yesterday	Shirley Marr	9781761340598	4-6	\$16.99		
A Glasshouse of Stars	Shirley Marr	9781760899547	5-8	\$16.99		
All Four Quarters of the Moon	Shirley Marr	9781760899554	4-6	\$16.99		
Zadie Ma and the Dog Who Chased the Moon	Gabrielle Wang	9781761046513	5-6	\$16.99		
TOTAL						

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