



# Walker Books Classroom Ideas



## The River and the Book

by Alison Croggon  
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\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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## Outline:

In our village we had two treasures: the River, which was our road and our god; and the Book, which was our history, our oracle and our soul. Simbala is a Keeper of the Book, the latest in a long line of women who can read the Book to find answers to the villagers' questions. As developers begin to poison the river on which the villagers rely, the Book predicts change. But this does not come in the form that they expect; it is the sympathetic Westerner who comes to the village who inflicts the greatest damage of all.

Combining magical realism and fable, this lyrical tale is the story of a landscape and community destroyed by Western greediness.

## Author/Illustrator Information:

Alison Croggon is an award-winning poet whose work has been published extensively in anthologies and magazines internationally. She has written widely for theatre, and her plays and opera libretti have been produced all around Australia. Alison is also an editor and critic. She lives in Melbourne with her husband Daniel Keene, the playwright, and their three children.

## How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

| These notes are for:                                                                                                                                       | Key Learning Areas:                                                                                                                      | Example of:                                                                                                                                                        | Themes/Ideas:                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Secondary Years 7-9</li><li>• Ages 12+</li></ul>                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• English</li></ul>                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Novel</li><li>• Magic Realism</li></ul>                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sustainability</li><li>• Belief Systems</li><li>• Belonging • Change</li><li>• Emotional and Physical Journeys</li></ul>                                                |
| National Curriculum Focus:*                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>English</b><br>Year 7<br>ACELA1528<br>ACELA1529<br>ACELA1537<br>ACELT1619<br>ACELT1620<br>ACELT1621<br>ACELT1803<br>ACELT1622<br>ACELY1804<br>ACELY1722 | Year 8<br>ACELA1541<br>ACELA1542<br>ACELA1766<br>ACELT1626<br>ACELT1627<br>ACELT1628<br>ACELT1807<br>ACELT1630<br>ACELY1733<br>ACELY1734 | Year 9<br>ACELA1551<br>ACELA1552<br>ACELA1553<br>ACELA1557<br>ACELA1560<br>ACELA1561<br>ACELT1771<br>ACELT1634<br>ACELT1635<br>ACELT1772<br>ACELY1743<br>ACELY1745 | *Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian National Curriculum. However, this is not an exhaustive list of National Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text. |



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## Discussion Questions and Activities:

Before reading, examine the front and back cover of the book. What do you think the illustrations symbolise? After reading, revisit your answer and discuss the symbolism of the cover based on your knowledge of the story.

*The River and the Book* is told at two different points in time, the present is Sim as an adult living in the city and in flashback as Sim writes her story. What effect does this style have on the reader? How would it be different if it was told with a linear timeline? Find examples of other books that are told with a linear timeline and those that are told with a non-linear timeline. Compare and contrast the effects of these styles with *The River and the Book*.

What is the purpose of the chapter heads (the illustrations at the beginning of each chapter)?

*"They may seem small or petty concerns, but if a person is moved to ask something of the Book, it means it matters to them. It is not for the Keeper to judge."* (Page 17)

Discuss this statement in terms of whether or not a person should judge the concerns of others or compare them to one's own concerns.

*"They are caught between one world and another, and they no longer belong anywhere."* (Page 21)

The shantytown is where people who don't belong anywhere else come together. Why does Sim find comfort with the shanty dwellers? What does this show about how she feels about leaving home and about what she is seeking (besides her quest for the Book)? What is the importance of having a sense of belonging with a group?

*"My mother died the winter after I was presented at the temple. If she had been sickening, if there had been some warning, it might have been a little easier to bear."* (Page 27)

How does Sim's mother's death affect the family? How does this shape Sim as a character?

The people of the Tarn are referred to as the Tarnish. Based on their actions in the novel, discuss the wordplay that Alison Croggon has used in giving them the name "Tarnish".

*"Tariik was long dead, but Mizan had said that Tarn was still the same. 'Now there are new bosses, same as the old bosses,' he had said. 'Whoever is in charge, they are always rich.'"* (Page 37)

What point is Kular making about those in power? How do the Tarnish treat the Pembrar? Why do you think Kular is making this point?

Discuss the parallels between the environmental situation presented in *The River and the Book* and the present situation in our world. What point do you think Alison Croggon is making with this novel?

*"Human beings are selfish and greedy and they think that the world has been put there just for them."* (Page 41)

Why do you think Mely says this to Sim? Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

Describe the Book and Sim's connection to it. Why is she connected in this way? Why is she responsible for it? How does the loss of Book affect her? How will it affect the village?

Change is a major theme in *The River and the Book*. As a class, briefly discuss what change means, how and when people experience change and how it can be a positive and negative experience. Create a wordcloud or mindmap of how Sim experiences change in the novel. Create a Venn diagram showing Sim's characteristics at the beginning of the novel and how they have changed by the end, including her characteristics that did not change in the centre.

The Book tells Jane Watson *"What profit it a man if he gains the world and loses his soul?"* (Page 58). This quote is very similar to passages from the Bible (Mark 8:36 and Matthew 16:26). What does this quote mean? Why would the Book choose to give Jane Watson this message? Why would it choose this format, seeing as though the people of Sim's village have probably never seen a Bible?

*"That," Mely said, 'is a pack of lies.'"* (Page 64)

Is Sim a reliable narrator? Is the reader getting an objective and accurate recount of what happened to Sim and her village? Does this contradict what Mely says to Sim in chapter 6?: *"How can you make a mistake? It's your story."* (Page 23) Do you think it is more important for an author to be accurate or true to themselves?

What genre does *The River and the Book* fit into? Does it fit into more than one genre? Find examples from the text to support your answer.

Through losing the Book, Sim loses her sense of belonging. Without the Book, she has no place in her village, though she worries that if she finds the Book it will have lost its power and she will still have no place in her village. At first, she also feels that she doesn't belong outside of the village as she is not accustomed to cities. How does this loss of belonging affect her?

*"She had tossed a bomb into Yuri's world and then sailed off without another thought. I was stunned by her carelessness."* (Page 90)

What literary device is Alison Croggon using in this passage? What effect does it have on the reader? Find three other examples of metaphor in the novel and discuss how they enrich the story.



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*"Mely looked at me with her clear green eyes and swished her tail and yawned her delicate yawn. 'Why do you do it, really?' she asked. And I realized I didn't have an answer."* (Page 97)

Describe Sim's explanations that she writes about why she is searching for the Book. In addition to this, write what you think her true intentions or reasons are for continuing her quest.

As Sim goes further into her quest to find the Book, she loses conviction. Why do you think that is?

*"My people are not simple. There are things they don't understand, but that doesn't mean that they are stupid or even ignorant."* (Page 110)

Why does Jane Watson say that Sim's people are simple? Why does this offend Sim? Do you think Jane Watson is arrogant or misguided?

*"I think it is wrong of me to take their terrible experiences and compare them to mine, but I can't help it. That is how I felt when I saw Jane Watson on the television. I felt as if my soul had been violated."* (Page 111)

Why does Sim compare her feelings to those of rape victims? Do you think is an appropriate analogy?

What does Sim's dream in chapter 29 symbolise? Why do you think Alison Croggon included this sequence?

*"I said that perhaps he shouldn't make his mind up about what he thinks before he reads the book, but he is adamant that Jane Watson should be torn limb from limb."* (Page 114)

In the face of a life-changing event and a violation from Jane Watson, Sim manages to stay level-headed and rational. How do you think she manages this? How would you react in this situation? Do you think Sim is right to remain rational or should she be feeling angry/sad/confused?

This novel promotes discussion on the power of stories. Have a class discussion on the power of stories, thinking about major stories through history that have had a strong influence, how information can be changed when recording it objectively or as a story, how a story can change each time it gets told, etc. Does the author or the reader "own" a story? Why do you think that?

Hold a class debate on the subject of Jane Watson: hero or villain.

What message do you think Alison Croggon is giving readers about damaging the environment and damaging culture/beliefs?

Change is a major theme in this novel. Discuss how Alison Croggon explores this theme in general and in regards to the major characters: Sim, Jane Watson, Ling Ti and Mely.

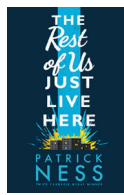
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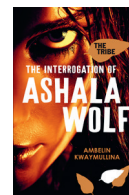
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