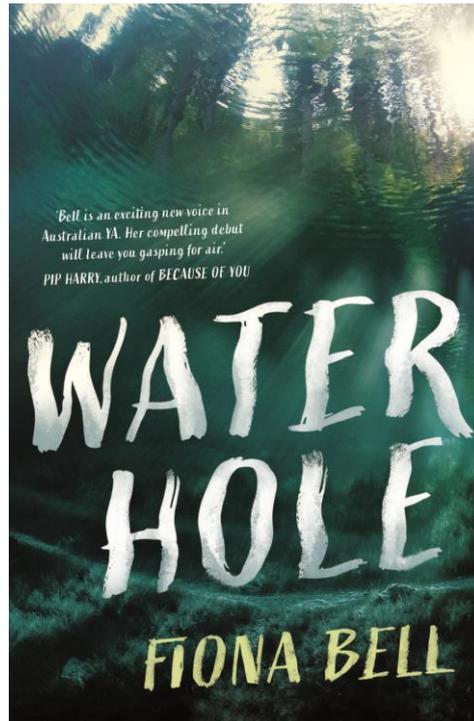


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WATERHOLE

Fiona Bell



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Following the death of her mother in a car accident, Sunny reluctantly returns home from boarding school to spend the summer holidays with her stepfather, Kevin. Feeling suffocated by the small-town mentality of Kelly's Crossing, she meets newcomer Matthew, a boy who has been quickly outcast by the community.

When local teenager Dylan Koslovski disappears, Sunny joins the search party, however, visions of her mother's ghost taunt her. Sunny finds herself drawn to the waterhole, a beautiful place haunted by several drownings, and she begins to question everything.

Waterhole is a novel about loss, loneliness and new beginnings.

THEMES

- Grief
- Acceptance
- Belonging
- Loneliness
- Faith
- Relationships
- Ghosts

WRITING STYLE

Waterhole is a contemporary ghost story for Young Adults that includes elements of the thriller genre. It traces the stages of grief and acceptance that Sunny undergoes as she navigates life without her mother. Written in first person, the text includes suspense, vivid description and much soul-searching to tell the story of a young girl's struggle for acceptance and belonging.

STUDY NOTES

- The opening lines of Chapter 1 instantly position the reader within Sunny's mindset. What can we tell about her character from this opening passage? How has the author been able to draw readers directly into the text so effectively?
- Why does Sunny avoid conversations (p3)? How might this be hindering the healing process? Why did the author include this trait in Sunny's character?
- We learn early that Sunny loves J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, seeing its main character, Holden Caulfield, as her fictional boyfriend.

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Find out more about Holden and the plot of *The Catcher in the Rye*. How are Holden and Sunny similar? Why does she relate to him so well? Why is he a safer option than pursuing a real relationship? If you had to choose a character from a book to fall in love with, who would you choose? Why?

- Sunny has a very matter-of-fact manner and sees through ‘broken people pretending to be all put together’ (p8). How is this character trait both a help and hindrance to her healing?
- After reading Chapter 1, discuss the author’s ability to hook readers, including her use of voice, pace and characterisation. Why is this important in the opening stages of a narrative?
- Throughout *Waterhole*, Sunny shares the pain of life without her mother through small observations and comments. As you read, track these moments. Categorise these into different moods, such as tenderness, frustration, anger and hurt. How do each of these fragments help her to navigate the stages of grief? How has the author used these to create a three-dimensional character in Sunny?
- How would you describe Sunny’s way of dealing with her mother’s death? What advice would you give her about processing this loss?
- Why does Sunny blame Kevin for her mother’s death? Why does she find it necessary to lay the blame on someone?
- Discuss the use of figurative language throughout the text. How does it contribute to the narrative? Examples include:
 - Time has carved deep channels and tunnels in the rock p1
 - Lead sinkers attached themselves to my heart p16
 - You don’t just uproot someone like they’re a lettuce that’s gone to seed p22
 - His fingers were thick beef sausages and his palms wide and flat like slabs of chuck steak p23
 - It seeped away like water through sand, like the residue of a pleasant dream that slips from your waking mind no matter how hard you grasp at the fleeting fragments p26
 - The white paint still flaking from the walls in sheets like tissue paper p26
 - Blood rushed to my face in a hot tsunami p42
 - Black anger crowded around my eyes p42
 - When his blue eyes finally narrowed on mine they darted away like frightened fish p47
 - Sweat leaked its own small river down my spine p67
 - I climbed over the minibus-sized boulders that lined the watercourse p67
 - Reggie snaked between my legs and began grinding his spine against my calf like some sort of pole dancer p73

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- It was just the fingers of a breeze that had grabbed the flimsy door and shaken it on its hinges p76
- A purple bruise had spilled down the side of my head and into the corner of my right eye, like day-old Gothic make-up p86
- The cloudless sky swelled with a hazy humidity p94
- I found a flat, shady rock, which seemed as inviting as a queen-sized bed p94
- Staring at the wisps that coiled like serpents in the dead air p104
- My dagger-shaped words had been flung p104
- His heart remained, as ever, an impenetrable fortress repelling my blades as mere trifles p104
- Kevin inhaled deeply and smoke residue leaked from his nostrils. I thought of dragons p104
- My words melted into the warm, black night p105
- A clicking fan turned up to the maximum hurled a hurricane of hot air around the small room p105
- A cloud of disappointment had descended on me p122
- Suddenly, like a dog that picks up a scent, he turned my way p123
- That night the waterhole flooded my sleep p123
- I could have fallen asleep there on the rock, like a lizard drinking in the sun. Time was stretched so thinly here it disappeared into the endless blue sky p152
- Maybe the roots went down to Rocket, wrapping around his body like tentacles, forming a husk around his blood and bone, distilling his remains into the beautiful crimson blooms p163
- He didn't even know it was my first kiss and that it would be forever imprinted on me like a gentle tattoo p176
- I was lying across him, pinning him like a lion over a dead gazelle p177
- Blood advanced up his neck like a running tide p179
- With Mum gone my life had unravelled like a pulled seam and I was desperately trying to hold the pieces together p213
- My eyes drifted to the lights hanging from ropes under the pub awning, their metal shades like oriental hats p222
- Tiny bugs hung like static around the bare bulb p224
- The sun sliced through a gap in the canopy, lighting up the water like a silver ribbon p239
- Country music blared in a distorted cacophony p251
- The drive back to Kingfisher Farm was a crawling eternity of hammering rain and ticking wipers p260
- Discuss Sunny's idea that the holes in cheese have to line up to cause an end result. How is this kind of thinking detrimental to the acceptance

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of her mother's death? Do you ever think in this way? Discuss with a friend.

- Sunny says that when she thinks about the accident, 'it starts a fluttering in my stomach. Then the shredded bits of my insides flap around and tie themselves in knots, wringing and wringing in my guts' (p12). Have you ever felt like Sunny? Write a reflection of a time a thought kept affecting you in such a way.
- By taking Sunny away from her boarding school and placing her in Kelly's Crossing, the author has made her a 'fish out of water'. Discuss how this is an effective way in which to create tension. Why is this essential in narratives?
- Sunny describes her relationship with Kevin as a cold war. Why has the author made their relationship like this?
- Sunny has a 'permanent feeling of being temporary' at Kelly's Crossing (p17). Discuss the use of this oxymoron in establishing her attitude towards the township.
- Why does Sunny say that Kevin 'seemed to absorb the bright country light and turn it into shadow' (p17)?
- In Chapter 4, Sunny goes back to her house knowing her mother won't be there. Discuss the author's ability to elicit in readers a strong sense of empathy with Sunny.
- Using the snippets of information given throughout Sunny's narration, create a character portrait of her mum, Lily.
- How does a simple object such as the 'World's Best Mum' teacup inject a powerful sense of Sunny's loss into *Waterhole*?
- Reread the passage on p40 in which Sunny enters her mother's bedroom, confused as to why her possessions have been removed. Why does she feel that the house is 'holding its breath'?
- Discuss the way in which insomnia becomes personified in *Waterhole*. Why is this such a disturbing yet powerful technique?
- Why, when Dylan's photo is projected onto the screen in the town hall, does Sunny find this liberating?
- Discuss the irony that Dylan's disappearance helps Sunny to find herself.
- Why does Sunny scrutinise people? (See p56)
- Discuss the use of flashbacks in *Waterhole*. How does this technique help to strengthen the telling of Sunny's story?
- In Chapter 7, Sunny feels an instant connection with Matthew Bright. In what ways does she find him 'unequivocally exactly my type' (p59)?
- Discuss the language features used in the first paragraph of Chapter 8. How has the author succeeded in creating such a powerful description of Constant Creek?

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- Sunny's mother was a Buddhist, whereas Sunny is an atheist. Later in the text, Leanne tells Sunny that she has to 'have faith' (p231). In what ways is *Waterhole* a story about faith?
- Why does Sunny feel like such an outsider in *Kelly's Crossing*? In what ways is *Waterhole* a novel about the importance of a sense of belonging?
- Discuss the symbolism linking the ghosts trapped in the waterhole with Sunny's entrapment in her grief and anger. What will enable Sunny to free herself from this sense of drowning?
- What comfort does Sunny find from being in the rainforest by herself?
- How does joining the search for Dylan help Sunny to find herself?
- Why is Sunny so reluctant to seek help from counsellors? Why is she so quick to dispel the thoughts she has, deflecting them with thoughts of how Greenwood would respond to such thoughts?
- What role do characters such as Zara and Leanne play in *Waterhole*? Why are such characters necessary?
- Use the descriptive passage of Matt's drawing on p97 to create your own sketch of the ghosts who have drowned at the waterhole.
- Why does Sunny find comfort in Matt asking her what her mother was like (p133)? What does this tell us about the process of grief?
- Sunny says that 'drowning is a silent affair. There's no splashing and screaming' (p141). How is this reflected in her own struggles in *Waterhole*?
- Sunny says that 'anger crawled over my body like a grassfire. It was always there; the pilot light of my resentment never went out' (p110). How does Sunny's anger prevent her from healing?
- Why does Sunny go to the effort of baking one of her mother's recipes, then throw her sponge cake in the bin (Chapter 22)?
- Why does Sunny feel that every exchange she has with Kevin 'drove another long nail into the coffin of our relationship' (p181)?
- What does Sunny mean by the term 'true outsiderism' (p198)? Write a reflection of a personal experience of this, whether you were a victim or bystander.
- What role does social media play in implicating Kevin in Dylan's disappearance? How is social media sometimes a dangerous tool?
- Before reading Chapter 25, write an email in the role of Sunny to your real father, David. Compare your email with Sunny's email on pp208–209. If you were David, how would you react to getting this email?
- Why does Sunny say that 'late-night phone calls belonged to misery and melancholy' (p209)?

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- On p210, Sunny recalls being told of her mother's death for the first time. Why does the author wait until this stage of the text before recounting this life-changing moment? Why is this scene so powerful?
- When Sunny hears Kevin crying in his bedroom, their relationship slowly begins to strengthen. Why is this the case?
- Sunny says that 'being alone was like trying to breathe without lungs' (p244). How are the themes of loneliness, belonging and acceptance integral to *Waterhole*?
- Throughout the text, the relentless heat and humidity of the North Queensland climate stifles Sunny, just as her grief and her anger do. Relief finally comes, however, when the wet season arrives: 'The heavens had opened and fat drops of rain were bouncing off the bitumen, forming cool rivulets that swirled and snaked into the dusty gutters' (p259). How does the coming of the rains symbolise the healing that Sunny is finally beginning to experience?
- Why does Sunny say that 'when you're angry, you're invincible. You can do anything. Nothing can hurt you' (p267)? Write a persuasive letter to Sunny as her friend, explaining that anger does not necessarily do these things.
- Why do you think Matt rings Kevin when Sunny is on her way to the bus? What does this tell us about Matt and his regard for Sunny?
- Why does getting the FJ Holden cause Sunny to lay the blame for her mother's death on herself? Discuss how realising that the accident was 'nobody's fault' (p273) allowed the blame and guilt to lift, and therefore the healing to begin.
- After finishing the novel, reread the prologue. In what way does the waterhole represent Sunny's grief?
- How does the recovery of Dylan's body symbolise Sunny's own recovery?
- What enables Lily's ghost to finally rest?

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Waterhole was partly inspired by the evocative setting of North Queensland, in particular the harsh dry bushland of the interior and a short drive away, the coastal rainforest adorned by clear streams springing from high in The Great Dividing Range. The sense of place and connection to the land is strong in people from these parts and this was something I wanted to convey in the story. The mystery and timelessness of the outback seemed a fitting backdrop for a story with themes of life, death and the great unknown. Sunny represents the adolescent who is at once connected to place and alienated by it. Another idea that interested me was the notion of the absent father, a challenge for many contemporary Australian families.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona Bell lives in tropical Cairns with her husband and four children. When she's not writing short stories or young adult fiction she can be found with a whiteboard marker in one hand and a classic novel in the other, trying to inspire teenagers to love English as much as she does. *Waterhole* is her first book.

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