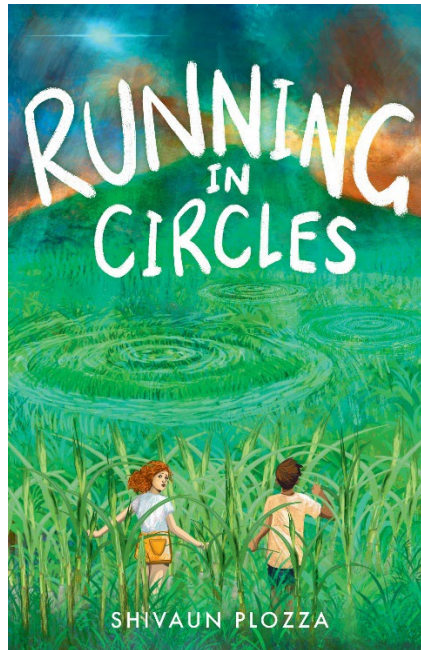


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

RUNNING IN CIRCLES

Shivaun Plozza



Teachers' Notes

Prepared by Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English)

ISBN: 978 0 7022 7104 5 / AUS \$17.99

Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	10
About the Author	10

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SYNOPSIS

Twelve-year-old Dell lives in the North Queensland town of Tully, the wettest place in Australia. Passionate about the weather and intent on becoming a climate scientist, Dell loves nothing better than to check her weather station and gather meteorological data. That is, when she's not helping her best friend, Teddy, search for extinct mountain mist frogs.

But a different kind of storm starts brewing when, after five years away, Dell's estranged mother reappears to investigate crop circles in the local area. Determined to keep her at arm's length, Dell goes into battle to shield her family from this unwelcome intrusion and the hurt her mother is bound to cause.

In a story about love, loss and truth, *Running in Circles* explores the fragility of rejection, the importance of trust and the power of acceptance.

THEMES

- Family; Relationships
- Acceptance; Forgiveness
- Coming-of-age
- Climate Science
- Crop Circles; Conspiracies
- Mothers
- Weather
- Friendship; Loyalty

WRITING STYLE

Told in first person, present tense, *Running in Circles* shares the story of Dell, a girl who is learning to pick her battles while maintaining her convictions. When Dell's mother chose her career as a ufologist over her family five years ago, it all but destroyed Dell, her dad and older sister, Summer; her younger sisters, Prim and Una, were too young to remember the fallout. Now that crop circles have reappeared in the farmland around Tully, Dell's mum, Andie, is back in town. Dell keeps the news hidden from her dad and sisters, hoping to protect them. When they bump into Andie in the supermarket, however, Dell's family is angry she kept the truth from them. Using weather and climate analogies to describe Dell's anguish, Shivaun Plozza cleverly juxtaposes facts with conspiracy to create a thought-provoking story about beliefs, values and truth. Throughout the story, extended metaphors build tension, as do allegories of introduced pests and deceptive Channel-billed cuckoos. The result is a coming-of-age story in which Dell is nurtured by other mother figures in her life, eventually allowing herself to be vulnerable and let her storm of emotions break. Original figurative language, well-formed characters and the pitch-perfect setting of Tully allows for the complex nature of family relationships to be explored. *Running in Circles* is suited to middle readers.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

STUDY NOTES

- Examine the cover and blurb of *Running in Circles*. What are you wondering about this story? What do you know about crop circles? Make predictions about the novel.



- The text begins with a description of Tully as ‘the wettest town in Australia’ (p. 1), and each chapter heading shares data such as temperature, humidity, rainfall, wind speed/direction and barometric pressure. Use Google Earth or online images of Tully to get a true sense of the township and its surrounds. How important is this setting to the telling of this story?
- We are told in the first chapter that ‘It rains “heaps” because [...] The clouds float in [...] and get trapped’ between the mountains surrounding the town (p. 2). How is this a metaphor for Dell’s emotions that get trapped, especially her tears?
- What role does Teddy play in *Running in Circles*? Why has the author given Dell such a quiet and gentle best friend? How does he help Dell?
- What is the connection between Teddy’s elusive search for mountain mist frogs, Andie’s endless quest to decode the crop circles and Dell’s battle to reconcile her mother’s actions?
- Why has a character such as Mad Dog Irene been included in the text? How would this story be different without her?
- Create a Character Profile of Summer. What is behind the anger towards her dad? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Why is Dell so determined to be a climate scientist? Why does Andie applaud this idea? How does Dell feel when Andie says they are both scientists trying to help the world?
- Dell’s narrative voice is very clear and strong. How has this been achieved? How does this help readers connect with her more readily?
- Throughout *Running in Circles*, Dell describes her thoughts, anxieties and emotions by saying her brain is filled ‘with centipedes. Creepy-crawly, ticklish centipedes’ (p. 5). Soon, they ‘migrate’ to her heart (p. 10). Track this

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

analogy as you read. What triggers these 'centipedes' into action? How does this help readers to empathise with Dell?

- How is Venus used throughout *Running in Circles* to reflect the disappearance and reappearance of Andie? Examples include:
 - *Unlike* Venus, my mum vanishes for years at a time. She promises to call every week and she promises to send postcards and she promises to come back, but she never does. She *lies*. (p. 10)
 - 'I think it might be Venus,' I say, feeling queasy again, but Summer only hums (p. 43)
 - Mum flashes her the Venus smile (p. 50)
 - Mum tricked her with her Venus smile, her pretty promises, her puppy eyes (p. 172)
- The weather is used as an extended metaphor in *Running in Circles* to represent brewing tensions and emotions. As you read, add to the list below to help explore this metaphor further:
 - When I burst out onto the nature strip, the rain has eased but inside my rib cage there's a Category 5 cyclone [...] I can feel the storm thrashing and rolling and twisting in there (p. 12).
 - My words have been sucked up by the cyclone in my chest (p. 13)
- What does Dell mean when she wonders if seeing her mum again is 'a bit like Teddy's lizard' (p. 14)?
- Why won't Dell allow herself to cry about her mum? What finally changes this? In the role of Dell, write a reflection about finally letting your tears fall.
- Why do you think there is so much arguing and bickering in Dell's family? How does this fit with the themes and metaphors used in the text? How would this story be different if there was more harmony in the Collymore household?
- Why, at first, does Dell resist telling her family that Andie is back in town? Why does she feel so 'icky' about not telling anyone about this (p. 19)? At which other times does she feel *icky*?
- Why does Dell's dad '[rap] his knuckles against the front door three times before he closes it' (p. 18)? How does this idea play out in the rest of the story?
- Dell often speaks of Summer's anger after their mum left. How does this influence Dell's actions in the story? Use evidence to support your ideas.
- What is the significance of the plastic stars on the bedroom ceiling? Why did Summer pull them off? Why have a few stray stars been left behind? What might this symbolise?
- Why does Dell's dad think she's a 'chihuahua: small and ready to fight *everything*' (p. 24)? Do you agree with him? Why does Dell also see Summer as a chihuahua?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Why does Dell say, 'I *hate* having sisters' (p. 26)? Is this true? Why? Have you ever felt this way about your siblings or other family members? Share in a reflection.
- Why does 'Teddy [curl] in on himself' when Noah Lyndhurst teases him (p. 27)? Why has Noah's bullying of Teddy been included in the text?
- With reference to the following excerpt, discuss the connection between introduced species and Dell's mother: 'Nothing good happens when you introduce a species to an environment they don't belong in' (p. 34).
- Discuss the various mother figures in *Running in Circles*, including Mrs Beekof and Mo-Mo. Why has Agnes been included in this story? How does learning about Agnes help Dell better understand her own mother?
- Why does Dell struggle when she realises how much Summer looks like their mum (see p. 43)?
- In small groups, re-enact the scene in which Dell and her family run into Andie at the supermarket. How do the others react when they discover Dell already knew Andie was in town?
- How is Dell like her dad? Why is he so tough on her? Give examples to support your thinking.
- Explain Dell's comment about the 'cause and effect' of her mother's return (see p. 62). Why is the line 'Not a coincidence!' used throughout this chapter?
- Why do you think Mo-Mo and Grandpa Four come to stay? How does Dell's dad, Greg, feel about this? How do the girls feel? How would this story be different had they not come?
- With reference to the theme of climate change, discuss the following comment of Dell's:

If there are secrets on this planet, we'll find them in the weather. More rain, hotter temperatures, unexpected floods, bushfires, cyclones. If you pay attention you can hear the Earth whispering secrets to us.

It's not even a whisper, it's a shout: *I'm sick! Help me!* (p. 69)

- What does Teddy mean when he says, 'The light's got nothing to do with it – it's what people think about it that matters' (p. 70)? How is this a reflection of Andie's estrangement?
- A storm needs 'instability in the atmosphere first' (p. 77). How is this a metaphor for the events that take place in *Running in Circles*?
- Dell can usually read Summer like a book. What has changed that now makes 'her face [...] unreadable. A blank page' (p. 94)? How do you know how those close to you are feeling? Share in a reflection.
- Why is there so much tension between Summer and her dad? Is it only to do with Andie or is there more to it? Discuss.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- What, really, is Dell so angry with her mother about? How does she eventually manage to let this anger dissolve?
- Why is Dell so outraged that her mother says she's 'growing up so much like [her]' (p. 119)?
- How is Dell's mum like a crop circle? Why does Dell say, '*It's a trick [...] Not real. Fake. A hoax. Don't get sucked in*' (p. 136)?
- Why does Dell think of her mum as a 'cuckoo bird, a channel-billed cuckoo sneaking into our nest to cause trouble' (p. 137)?
- Why, when Dell sees photos of herself and her sisters 'stuck all over the fridge' of the RV does she get 'a lump in [her] throat as big as Jupiter' (pp. 157–158)?
- Why does Dell find it hard to believe that Summer may have forgiven their mother?
- What is the significance of Andie tapping 'the bench with her fingernails, only twice' (p. 168)?
- What contributes to the superstorm 'Cyclone Dell' (p. 175) finally letting loose? Show your thinking in a graphic organiser.
- How does Mo-Mo help Dell to navigate this tricky time in her life? Who plays the role of Mo-Mo in your life? Share in a reflection.
- Dell questions how 'you know which [battles] to pick and which ones to walk away from' (see p. 181). What advice would you give her about this? What would Greg say? And Mo-Mo?
- Why does Dell describe the feeling in her stomach as 'electric ants' (p. 197)?
- Write an explanation of the following excerpt and its relevance to *Running in Circles*:

The night sky is full of stars and I remember reading that if you see a star it doesn't mean it's really there. Because of the way light travels – it takes so long to reach our eyes that even after a star is long gone, the light might still be visible from Earth.

What else have I been looking at without realising it's already gone?
(p. 199)

- After Summer leaves, why does Dell say, 'It feels like walking down stairs and accidentally missing a step' (p. 200)?
- Why does Dell's mum '[inch] closer to [her], her hand out like she's approaching a stray cat' (p. 212)?
- Discuss Dell's realisation that 'running Mum out of town doesn't fix the fact that she *didn't choose us*. It doesn't fix the bone-deep, rain-soaked hurt inside of me' (p. 214).
- Mrs Beekof tells Dell, 'you'll go blue in the face trying to talk people out of believing what they want to. Especially when they've been sucked into a lie,

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

no matter how silly' (p. 227). How does this help Dell accept her mother's decision and move forward?

- Why does Dell liken lies to ticks (see p. 227)?
- Why, after chatting with Mrs Beekof and her mum, Agnes, does Dell say, 'Instead of centipedes or electric ants, there's a lightbulb feeling in my head [...] ping! – I get it' (p. 228)? What exactly does she 'get'?
- What does Dell's dad really mean when he says, 'pick your battles' (see p. 228)?
- How does Dell finally let go of her hurt and anger? How does this help her? What have you learnt about anger, picking battles and letting tears fall from reading *Running in Circles*?
- What is the connection between Teddy's frog sauna and the themes of *Running in Circles* (see p. 235)?
- Discuss the closing lines of *Running in Circles*. Why has the book ended in this way?
- What is the significance of the book's title?
- Create a Story Map to record the main characters, settings and events in *Running in Circles*.
- Write the newspaper article titled *Beam Me Up, Tully! Thousands Descend on Quiet Queensland Town for Glimpse of UFO*.
- Retell a part of this story from Summer's point of view.
- Like Teddy and Dell, create your own frog sauna or weather station.
- Write and perform a monologue in the role of Dell to share your understanding of the themes, characters and events in *Running in Circles*.
- Create a Thought Tunnel by having students form two straight lines facing one another. Ask for volunteers to assume the characters of Dell, Summer, Andie, Greg, Mo-Mo and Teddy. As these characters walk through the Thought Tunnel, have students ask questions of them to further explore this story.
- Discuss the character of Grandpa Four. Why has the author deliberately included Mo-Mo's four marriages in this story?
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language in *Running in Circles*. Examples include:
 - Bulgun Creek snakes through town, wriggling south (p. 3)
 - We've stumbled into a large circle where all the sugar cane has been squashed flat. It's basically a giant grass mat as big as my house, the flattened stalks spiralling towards the centre (p. 5)
 - She breaks into a smile, as bright as Venus in the night sky (p. 7)
 - he scrunches up his face like he's smelling a dog fart (p. 9)
 - Mum laughs. It sounds like wind chimes. (p. 10)
 - The whip-crack of my voice finally wipes the smile off Mum's face (p. 11)

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- I turn away quickly, ignoring the prickle of guilt dancing in my heart alongside the centipedes (p. 11)
- fighting through the leaves that no longer tickle – they slap and tug and scrape against me (p. 12)
- I already know a whirlwind swept into town, a whirlwind with moon tattoos. (p. 15)
- the words are stuck like superglue (p. 17)
- She's tall for her age with spaghetti arms and legs (p. 20)
- My hair's not boofy. It just frizzes in the rain. Which is cool because it's like I'm a human weather station. (p. 22)
- She narrows her eyes at me as if I'm a bug and she's a bird and I'll get gobbled up if I'm not careful (p. 22)
- Prim [...] takes off running, elephant footsteps thumping through the house (p. 22)
- his jaw stubbled with tiny golden-brown hairs that barely cover the moon-crater divots in his cheeks (p. 24)
- his white socks are splattered with mud, little grey polka dots soaking into the weave (p. 27)
- it makes my skin sizzle like it's on fire (p. 31)
- I glare at the back of Noah's head, a fizzing inside me like the air before a thunderstorm (p. 31)
- the overgrown grass is damp, brushing against my bare calves like kitten licks (p. 34)
- She leans in, her sour breath slapping me in the face (p. 37)
- I fork cake into my mouth and swallow; it tastes like sand (p. 39)
- There's a pair of wicker chairs on the back porch, tall like thrones, the cushions creamy-white and lumpy (p. 40)
- she concentrates on painting her toenails green, bright like the leaves on a banana tree (p. 42)
- Dad does the dishes while he talks to Mo-Mo, and the gentle swish of water and the clinking of cutlery almost sounds like a lullaby that could send me to sleep (p. 43)
- she huffs, wriggling like a fish on a hook (p. 47)
- The glass doors whoosh apart and the aircon slaps me in the face (pp. 47–48)
- He's pushing Una in the trolley, making *choo-choo* noises like a cane train (p. 48)
- Her smile is so big that her eyes disappear in crinkles (p. 58)
- Mo-Mo comes at me with both arms raised like a zombie (p. 58)
- There are too many worries clogging up my brain like leaves in a drainpipe (p. 64)
- I focus on my book but the words blur, looking like spiders scuttling across the page (p. 66)

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- My stomach wobbles (p. 68)
- the cool metal kiss of his wedding ring feels like ice against my skin (p. 71)
- I can feel electricity in the air, like an oncoming storm (p. 73)
- Agnes just grinned like it was Christmas (p. 78)
- Fireworks go off in my brain (p. 79)
- My heart gallops (p. 79)
- Like a sloth, Teddy picks through his locker at the end of the day (p. 81)
- The woman is super old with big, meaty hands wrapped around a walking stick, her skin as thick as leather and short grey hair sticking up like a dunny brush (p. 84)
- A ball of rage comes rushing out of the sugar cane (p. 84)
- The disappointment stings worse than a gympie-gympie tree (p. 87)
- Every word she says feels like a bucket of ice water dumped over my head (p. 88)
- Grandpa Four's mouth is hanging open like a freshly caught fish (p. 92)
- Her hair is a curtain shielding her face (p. 92)
- a smile that doesn't reach her eyes (p. 101)
- Her whole face lights up, like the sun after a summer storm (p. 109)
- Her face scrunched up like a ball of paper because Mum was meant to call (p. 111)
- His voice was wet (p. 112)
- the air goes *whoosh* right out of my lungs (p. 115)
- Disappointment stings (p. 117)
- Grandpa Four watches them like a ping-pong game (p. 136)
- There's more venom in my voice than in a taipan bite (p. 145)
- grief leeches the colour from her face (p. 149)
- her ears flick around like satellites (p. 150)
- Dad snaps my name like a rubber band (p. 167)
- Summer [...] is spooning Corn Flakes into her mouth like a robot (p. 170)
- My Coco Pops taste like ash (p. 170)
- my stomach clenches like a fist (p. 171)
- The bags under his eyes are puffy and storm-cloud grey (p. 171)
- Summer shoots up like a rocket (p. 171)
- they're all lapping it up like cream (p. 174)
- Yasi was a beast. Ripped through town like a bomb. (p. 179)
- Summer's a raging bull as she marches up the front path (p. 182)
- But they just laugh at me, a sound like hailstones, bruising my skin (p. 187)

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- I shrink until I feel small enough to slip between the cracks with the electric ants (p. 189)
- Mo-Mo's legs jiggle like an earthquake (p. 193)
- four deep wrinkles etched across his forehead like paper creases that could never be smoothed away (p. 193)
- It feels like I inhaled all the asphalt clouds from today and now they're hanging low and heavy inside my lungs (p. 202)
- All I feel is the rain clouds of dread in my stomach (p. 204)
- I can feel the anticipation dancing along my skin like a lightning strike (p. 205)
- The air outside is so sticky it clings to my skin, weighing me down as I take the stairs into the yard (p. 224)
- She folds her features into a smile (p. 225)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When I was a kid, I was obsessed with crop circles. They were randomly appearing all over the south of England and everyone wanted to know: are they really the work of aliens?

The answer was no. It was soon discovered that they were mostly the work of two old men looking for a laugh and, suddenly, believing that crop circles were proof of alien life became a bit of a joke.

But as I grew up, and disinformation and conspiracy theories started to impact the world en masse, I wondered: what would happen if a crop circle appeared in Australia today? Would it be easy to convince people it was the work of aliens if you lied convincingly enough? Or would it be harder, with so much proof they're fake? It made me think about how conspiracy theories take hold and how disinformation spreads. And how young people navigate a world where 'truth' feels optional?

But as I started writing, nothing worked. I struggled so much with this story that I was sure I'd *never* finish. These were such complex, important ideas and I was scared I'd get it wrong. I think that's why Dell learns the lesson she does: to fight for the things that matter. Because writing this book was a fight, but an important one to stick with because the impact of disinformation on young people worries me. So I kept going, kept making mistakes, kept starting over, until I got it right.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shivaun Plozza is the award-winning author of *Frankie*, *Tin Heart*, *The Boy*, *the Wolf and the Stars*, *A Reluctant Witch's Guide to Magic*, *Meet Me at the Moon Tree*, *The Worst Perfect Moment* and *Summer of Shipwrecks*. Her writing has

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

been shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Award, the Queensland Literary Awards, the Australian Book Industry Awards and the Gold Inky Award. She won the Davitt Award for Best Young Adult Crime Novel in 2017. She lives in Geelong with her cat, Fenchurch. *Running in Circles* is her latest book.