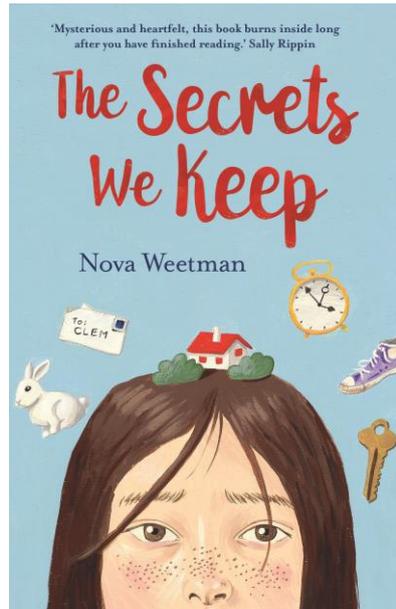


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THE SECRETS WE KEEP

Nova Weetman



Teachers' Notes

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

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	5
About the Author	6

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SYNOPSIS

When a fire tears through Clem's home, it destroys more than just her possessions; it undermines the very foundations of her world. Finding herself in a new neighbourhood and a new school, wrenched from all that feels safe and familiar, Clem must learn to trust and heal in ways she never thought possible.

She soon tells a girl at her new school that her mother has died in the fire. Ellie, whose mother is terminally ill with cancer, immediately connects with Clem – but has Clem got in over her head?

The Secrets We Keep is a moving story about friendship, trust and the importance of acceptance.

THEMES

- Family and Friendship:
 - Clem misses her best friend, Bridge, and is nervous about making friends at her new school.
 - Clem has a close relationship with her father but is angry with her mother.
 - Clem forms a special friendship with her new neighbour, Maggie.
- Acceptance:
 - Clem is reluctant to accept her life as it now is. Her first instinct is to run from reality.
 - Clem finds it difficult to accept her mother's actions.
- Trust:
 - Clem learns that without trust, relationships can't develop.
- Depression:
 - Clem slowly comes to terms with the effects of depression on her family.
- Grief:
 - Clem is angry about the loss of her mother, while her new friend Ellie is drawn to Clem as she prepares for the death of her own mother. Their two stories, however, are very different.

WRITING STYLE

The Secrets We Keep is told in first person, present tense. Clem's voice is honest and relatable; the narrative is realistic and tangible. Nova Weetman's

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use of dialogue, description and figurative language gives the text a literary quality that is both raw and compelling.

STUDY NOTES

- Discuss the cover of the book. The title, images and blurb all work to draw the reader directly into the narrative. Make predictions about the text based on the cover. After reading, consider how the elements of the illustration play out in the novel.
- What do the opening pages of *The Secrets We Keep* reveal about Clem's character? How does the author 'show' rather than 'tell' us about Clem?
- Discuss how the author manages to directly draw the reader into the text through the use of description of the house fire. Pay particular attention to the physical fire as well as the emotional turmoil it is unleashing.
- Discuss your perceptions of Clem's character. What words would you use to describe her? Use examples from the text to support your thinking.
- Create character icebergs about the main characters in *The Secrets We Keep*. Above the surface, note what we are directly told; below the waterline, include information that must be inferred.
- Choose one of the minor characters in *The Secrets We Keep* on which to develop a character portrait. Select an episode from the text and write a chapter from this character's perspective.
- Create a graphic organiser that shows the different relationships that Clem shares with each of her parents. Give examples from the text to help support your ideas.
- Examine the effective use of figurative language throughout the text. Examples include:
 - 'It seems to burn in on itself, like a marshmallow on a stick when you go camping' p1
 - 'Makes me feel tinier than an ant' p12
 - 'It smells like dirt from the gardens and fancy perfume, as if both my parents have been knitted together into the wool' p16
 - 'Mum's scent is fading a bit now' p16
 - 'I must look like a fish, my mouth flapping open with no sound' p27
 - 'The question I want to ask is wedged somewhere in my chest. I can feel it sticking there like a piece of hard bread. I cough but it refuses to shoot free.' p65
 - 'Picturing the blackened lumps of my life' p66
 - 'Kids scatter like pins in a bowling alley' p179
 - 'The ants gather around our feet like little kids rushing at Santa' p201

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- ‘Like my tears, I can’t stop the words from bubbling up inside me’ p202
- Write a reflection of a time when you were new to a school or a group. How are your experiences similar to or different from Clem’s?
- What does Clem mean when she says, ‘he needs me to pretend that I’m fine. Just like he’s pretending. It’s a Timmins family tradition, don’t you know?’ (p15).
- Speculate on the role Clem’s mother will play in the text as it unfolds. Record your predictions, and note if they change as you read.
- When feeling alone and fragile, Clem chooses to wear her dad’s old jumper. Using evidence from the text, discuss why she finds so much comfort in this jumper (p16).
- Why doesn’t Clem want her story to be revealed to Ellie as early as it is?
- Nova Weetman deliberately takes Clem from her comfort zone and makes her a ‘fish out of water’. How has she done this? Why is this an effective narrative tool?
- Clem describes her life as ‘an unequal triangle version of my once perfectly shaped life’ (p29). What does she mean by this? Is she correct, or is she choosing to see her past unrealistically? Discuss.
- Re-read p30, in which Clem revisits the house and shares what the fire did and did not destroy. Clem describes the smell of fire that ‘no amount of washing can get out’. How does this scene help you to empathise with Clem? Discuss the symbolism present in this comment.
- Discuss Clem’s observation that of the things people donated to them, ‘so much of it was rubbish’ (p31). If you were Clem, what five things would you most hope to have donated to you? Why those items? As a class, consider taking action to collect donations for a charity, taking Clem’s comment into consideration.
- Clem finds that music ‘always fills an empty space’ (p33). In what ways can you relate to her sentiment? What role does music play in your life?
- Discuss the importance of running to Clem’s life. Why is she urged to run when feeling unsettled?
- Why does Ellie think that Clem is ‘so lucky’ (p53)? Does Clem consider herself lucky? Discuss.
- Why does Clem feel that her ‘tears just won’t come’ (p68)? What is preventing her from being able to show her feelings?
- When Clem finds the photo of her and her mother, she says, ‘the little girl doesn’t look like me. She looks like someone I don’t know, full of hope and wonder, leaning into her mum’s arms like they’re the safest place in the world’ (p94). Discuss the way in which this photo reveals a vulnerable side to Clem that she seems so reluctant to accept.
- What role does Maggie play in *The Secrets We Keep*? How does she help Clem?

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- Why won't Clem read the letter from her mother? What do you think the letter will say?
- What does Clem mean when she says, 'by the time our house burnt down, Mum was already swallowed up inside her own black' (p175).
- When Ellie discovers the truth about Clem's mum, Clem says, 'her eyes are so sad. I have to look away. I can cope with Tam's anger, but Ellie's sadness is harder because it's partly my fault' (p196). Why does Clem find Ellie's sadness more difficult to deal with than if Ellie had been angry?
- What does Maggie mean when she says 'language gets in the way of understanding' (p200)? Do you agree? Why?
- How do you feel as a reader when Clem finally allows her grief and emotions to surface? Why? Have you ever felt unable to express your feelings? Share in a reflection.
- It takes a game of Scrabble to make Clem realise how much her mother means to her. What special activity or place would trigger such emotions in you about your mother? Share with a friend.
- The novel builds to its climax with the school athletics carnival. Discuss how the events of this day help Clem to accept her new neighbourhood, school and friends.
- Map the main plot points of *The Secrets We Keep* on a story graph, showing how the author has created tension throughout the text.
- Create a poster that shows the contrast between Clem's life 'BTF' (before the fire) and after.
- Write another chapter for *The Secrets We Keep* to follow the final chapter.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I didn't set out to write this book. It sort of wrote itself. Born of a need to explore something sad and sensitive, it bubbled up and poured out. And it was written for my daughter Evie, as a project for us to work on together. Without her eagerness for the next chapter, it would have stalled long ago.

I wrote *The Secrets We Keep* because a family member had a breakdown. They didn't try and burn the house down and they didn't end up needing to go to hospital, but they were clinically depressed for six months. I wanted to write a book that explored how a child feels when someone they love becomes emotionally unavailable. How frightening it can be and how at times they wish the person was physically sick instead because at least then it's easier to talk about. I'm very interested in how children perceive that person's illness, and I've tried to parallel the ease at which Ellie can talk about her mum's cancer, with the difficulty that Clem experiences talking about the mental health of her mum.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nova Weetman has been writing for 18 years. As a screenwriter, she has written short films for Film Victoria *Ripples* and *Mr Wasinski's Song* (AWGIE nomination and winner Best Australian Short at MIFF) and has written for *Neighbours*, *Pixel Pinkie*, *H2O*, *Buzz Bumble*, *Wild But True* and *Fanshaw and Crudnut*. As a writer, she has had short fiction published in *Overland*, *Mslexia*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Wet Ink* and *Island* and non-fiction published in *Overland* and Fairfax Media. Nova is the author of two middle-grade books in the Choose Your Own Ever After series and two young adult novels, *The Haunting of Lily Frost* (2014) and *Frankie and Joely* (2015). *The Secrets We Keep* is Nova's fifth book.

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