



## RECOMMENDED FOR

Secondary students; years 7 to 10

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding; Literacy

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Studying a realistic novel about Australia's past
- Examining the author's evocative use of language and Australian vernacular

## THEMES

- Transitions
- Conflict
- Religion

## PREPARED BY

Judith Ridge

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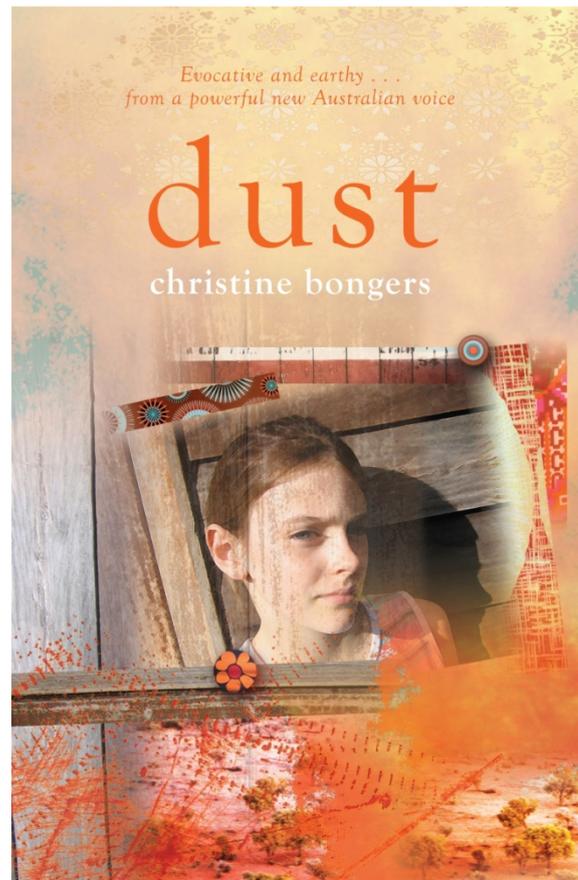
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## Dust

Christine Bongers

## PLOT SUMMARY

Twelve-year-old Cecilia Maria was named after saints and martyrs to give her something to live up to. Over my dead body, she vows.

In the blinding heat of 1970s Queensland, she battles six brothers on her side of the fence, and the despised Kapernicky girls, lurking on the other side of the barbed wire. Secrets are buried deep, only to surface decades later when Cecilia drags her own reluctant teenagers back home to dance on a grave and track down some ghosts.

Warm but tough-minded, *Dust* glitters with a rare and subtle wit, illuminating the shadows that hang over from childhood and finding beauty in unexpected places.

**Children's Book Council of Australia  
Notable Book 2010**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From the author's website:

<http://christinebongers.wordpress.com>

Christine was born and bred in Biloela, Central Queensland, a distinction she shares with international star of stage and screen, the actor and playwright Bille Brown, cricketer Ian Healey and AFI-nominated actress Helen Thomson.

She attended the local high school, and with two friends, proved country kids could out-argue their city cousins, by winning a State-wide school debating competition in their senior year.

She moved to Brisbane to attend university and, apart from a brief stint driving grain trucks into the Goovigen Wheat Board (she only hit it the once), and a slightly longer stint, living and working in Europe, she has lived there ever since. By following sage advice (pace yourself, Mary), she managed to complete a degree in Journalism, and post-graduate degrees in Business Administration and Arts.

Her career low point was picking deformed zucchinis off a conveyor belt in Holland; the highpoint was having her first novel published by Woolshed Press, an imprint of Random House Australia.

Christine has written for a living for most of her adult life. She has worked as a broadcast journalist on the ABC, and in commercial television and radio, in Brisbane and London. She has also written and directed two environmental television documentaries and run her own media consultancy.

Her work was short-listed for the Varuna Manuscript Development Awards in 2006. She completed a Master of Arts (Research) in youth writing in 2008.

Christine shares her life with husband Andrew, children, Connor, Brydie, Clancy and Jake, and their dog, Huggy, the Derek Zoolander of Beagles (really, really, really good looking, but not very bright).

Christine's other books include *Henry Hoey Hobson* and *Intruder*.

## INTRODUCTION

*Dust* is a coming of age novel set against the cultural backdrop of 1970s Australia and the particular social and environmental climate of rural Queensland at that time. Told primarily in the first person by twelve-year-old Cecelia Maria, it covers the events of several months in late 1972 and early 1973 as Cecelia battles the injustices of being the only girl in

a large Catholic family, the difficulties of living and working on the land during an extended period of drought, and the schoolyard politics of the local primary and high schools. When she's not fighting off her brother Punk's regular physical assaults (suffering a broken wrist and eight stitches to a cut shin within the first two chapters), Cecelia finds herself at war with Aileen Kapernicky, the youngest of the despised Kapernicky sisters. Aileen is as wild and unpredictable and angry as her older sister Janeen is withdrawn and silent, and Cecelia can't or won't see just how much she has in common with both Kapernicky girls, even as their lives unfold in dramatically different ways.

*Dust* is a novel of transition: from drought to flood, from childhood to adolescence, from innocence to maturity, and from ignorance to hard-won wisdom. Told in beautifully lyrical yet surprisingly tough language, the novel perfectly evokes an Australia also in transition, socially and politically. It provides with remarkable clarity a glimpse into another era and into the hearts and minds of its beautifully drawn characters. Although set some thirty-five years ago, the novel rings with truths about the human condition that young readers today will easily recognise and value.

## NOTES ON GENRE, STRUCTURE AND STYLE

### Genre

*Dust* is a novel in realistic mode, vividly bringing to life the experiences of children growing up in rural Queensland in the early 1970s.

### Structure

The majority of the novel is written in a fairly chronologically straightforward, linear narrative, in the first person past tense narrative voice of its protagonist, twelve-year-old Cecelia Maria Vanderbomm. However, the events of the novel proper are framed by an opening and closing section set in contemporary times. The subjective third-person narrated prologue, closely aligned with the point of view of teenager Jenna, sees Jenna and her twin brother Jed on a road trip to a funeral with their un-named investigative journalist mother. This mother is revealed at the end of the novel (Chapter 31: Biloela, Central Queensland, Present Day) to be the grown-up Cecelia, returning to her childhood home to, as she says, 'dance on a grave and track down those ghosts'. Chapter 31, while a continuation

of the 'frame' established in the prologue, is written in the omniscient third person.

The novel also includes an epilogue, also written in third person, which brings together the final threads of the novel and provides the reader with a satisfying resolution to character and conflict.

## Style

The author's use of figurative language and Australian vernacular of a past era are of particular interest in *Dust*. Figurative language expresses Cecelia's relationship with her world and the people in it, her 'world view' and brings vividly to life the natural environment, which also functions almost as a character in its own right. The novel is simultaneously told from the limited perspective and understanding of its youthful protagonist/narrator, but also reflects the more mature facility for language of Cecelia as an adult; that is, the metaphors and images employed in the novel are appropriate to Cecelia's world view and experience, but also reveal a maturity of expression that suggests the narration is simultaneously from Cecelia the child and Cecelia the adult's perspective.

See more about the language of *Dust* on p. 14 of these notes.

## PRE-READING: BACKGROUND NOTES

### On writing *Dust*

<http://christinebongers.wordpress.com/motivation-for-writing-dust/>

As he lay dying, my father told me two things that seemed unrelated at the time.

The first was that I was the only one of his seven kids to pay him back for the car that he had helped each of us to buy. It wasn't true, but my reaction, ricocheting between outrage and amusement, delighted the old stirrer.

Then, amidst the grim tangle of tubes and drips, bandages and blood, he gave me a final piece of advice: 'Don't die without doing what you were meant to do, without being what you were meant to be.'

His words still have the power to make my chest ache. I had reached a halfway point in life. A busy career as a broadcast journalist, PR practitioner and lobbyist, had segued into home-based work and children. I had been paid to write professionally for

most of my adult life, yet I rarely wrote creatively: I was afraid to expose the limits of my talent to a more critical audience, which included myself. It seemed far easier and safer, to hide behind the mask of my professional persona.

After my father's death, fear of failure seemed nothing compared to the cowardice implicit in a failure to even try. I began to write creatively, but without any clear intent; with only a vague sense of wanting to recreate a time and a place where my father was young and powerful and, of course, alive. It disturbed me that I found him an elusive character to capture on the page, while a most insistent, bolshy little voice kept writing itself into page after page.

'Listen to your characters,' counsels Veny Armanno. 'The ones that write themselves are trying to tell you something.'

After a couple of false starts I discovered I wasn't writing my Dad's story; I wasn't even writing my own. The bolshy little character, who became Cecilia Maria or Sis for short, had her own story to tell: a story born of ignorance, trailing a lingering regret. Her story was inspired by events surrounding a family who lived briefly in the district in which I grew up and where *Dust* is set. They dwelt in the shadows of my childhood and I knew I had to go into the shadows to find them, to give them fictional life.

The story that became *Dust* found me the moment I typed the words: 'Sis, you've got Aileen Kapernicky's germs!' It brought back with stunning clarity the shadow of a lonely child in the playground, the outcast, the 'other' onto whom in our ruthless innocence we projected our own dark and frightful fears: 'They had fat sandwiches for lunch. Hardly any meat on them at all. Just fat. And Aileen kills flies –'

Recognise it? We all do. I haven't yet met a single individual who couldn't tell me the full name – Christian name and surname – of that archetypal child, lonely and despised, who inhabited the landscape of their youth. They are unforgettable because they personify our fears about everything we don't want to be and because later, too late to make a difference, we can see from the lofty heights of adulthood, how we in our innocence and ignorance betrayed them, sometimes by our actions, more often by simple inaction: sins of omission rather than commission.

It wasn't until I finished writing *Dust* that I finally understood what my father had tried to tell me about myself before he died.

It took me four years to pay him back for the 1985 Daihatsu Charade that he had helped me to buy. It took me just as long to finish my first novel manuscript.

Prodded into exploring my latent talents, I realised what a determined little cuss I have always been: I finish what I start and I always pay my debts. For more than thirty years I have owed something to a memory of two little girls in a dusty playground: one clutching a daisy-covered notebook filled with stories, the other, a shadowy figure, standing alone, at the edge of the play.

With the publication of *Dust*, that long-standing debt will finally be repaid.

### Australia in 1972/1973

Some historical context of the socio-political situation of Australia in the early 1970s may be helpful for your students.

ABC timeline of significant events in Australia in 1970s:

<http://www.abc.net.au/archives/timeline/1970s.htm>

1972 Federal Election:

<http://www.australianpolitics.com/elections/1972/>

It's Time Labor Party campaign video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnLqC3f0nVY>

Women in Queensland during the 1970s (Queensland Government site):

<http://www.women.qld.gov.au/q150/1970/index.html>

Fashion and culture: images from 1970s Dolly Magazine on:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/drewzel/sets/72157604025357809/>

Ad for *Dolly* magazine:

<http://revver.com/video/530696/dolly-a-girl-like-you/>

Go-Set Pop Music Charts:

<http://www.poparchives.com.au/gosetcharts/>

Australian childhood quiz. This quiz dates a little earlier than *Dust*, but is based on the creator's childhood in country Queensland and gives a flavour of Australian childhood before television and the internet:

<http://www.funtrivia.com/playquiz/quiz21709418db7d8.html>

## CHARACTERS

### Cecelia

Cecelia is the novel's protagonist and narrator. She is twelve, turning thirteen, in the course of the events that take place in the novel. Cecelia is what might fairly be called a tomboy, although whether that's by nature, or by dint of the fact she has five (later six) brothers, or a combination of the two, is arguable. As puberty beckons, Cecelia begins to think she should start hanging out with more girls, and she ultimately takes on a highly feminised appearance and behaviours (make-up, short skirts, hanging out with older boys) as she enters high school.

At the start of the novel, Cecelia likes to think of herself as an outsider, but in contrast to the true outsiders – Aileen and Janeen Kapernicky – Cecelia actually is a child with a great deal of love and support behind her, mostly in the form of her large, unruly, but ultimately loving and supportive family.

Cecelia is a shrewd observer of the world around her, although she doesn't always understand what she sees, and she can sometimes let her own prejudices get in the way of recognising the truth (about a person or a situation). She is strongly opinionated and firm in her views, but is also easily swayed by other girls she sees as more popular and confident in the social setting of school than she is. Cecelia is highly intelligent, independent, loves to read. An obvious love of language and its possibilities is a defining feature of her narrative voice.

### Punk

Punk is the brother closest in age to Cecelia of the five original Vanderboom brothers and also the most clearly-defined brother in terms of characterisation. His greatest pleasure appears to be in tormenting his only sister, inflicting serious injury on her twice in the first few chapters of the novel. Despite their apparent antagonism, Punk and Cecelia are also extremely close, although each would die before they admitted it. Part of Cecelia's journey to maturity, which takes place against the 'feud' with the Kapernicky sisters, is a reconciliation of sorts with Punk.

Punk is a very physical character, also clever with words and manipulating situations. He puts on a tough face of not caring about his sister, but it becomes apparent he has been keeping a watchful eye on her as she experiments with her femininity as she enters puberty.

## Janeen and Aileen Kapernicky

Janeen and Aileen Kapernicky are sisters, more or less the same age as Cecelia and Punk, who have recently moved into the district after their mother remarried. Punk and Cecelia have taken an instant dislike to the sisters without really knowing them. (Punk's main objection is that their sandwiches had more fat than meat on them – a clear indicator of the Kapernickys' relative poverty compared to the Vanderbomms.) Aileen is the stronger personality of the two, angry and acting out, aware that Cecelia dislikes her and on the attack – physically and verbally – at every opportunity. Cecelia fails to see past this protective façade and also fails to recognise how similar she and Aileen are in many ways.

Janeen is the quieter and more obviously damaged of the sisters, withdrawn but still prepared to make an overture of friendship to Cecelia. Cecelia does recognise a fellow-feeling with Janeen – both love to read and share an exchange about *Jane Eyre* – but Cecelia is ultimately not capable of seeing past her own prejudices to pursue the friendship. This is something she comes to regret when the truth of the sisters' circumstances are revealed.

## THEMES

*Dust* explores many themes of relevance to contemporary readers.

### Transition

*There's a change coming. I can feel it.* (p. 122)

The over-arching theme of *Dust* is that of transition. On a character level, the theme is to do with the transition from childhood to adolescence and from relative innocence to a hard-won wisdom. Cecelia begins the novel as a careless tomboy, concerned mostly with protecting herself from the violent physicality of her five brothers (especially Punk, closest in her age, and who inflicts both a broken wrist and a gash on her shin requiring eight stitches in the first two chapters). Cecelia is ignorant and careless of the potential hurt caused by her bullying (physical and verbal) of the Kapernicky sisters, Aileen and Janeen. By the end of the novel, Cecelia has moved into her own burgeoning adolescence and has come to some understanding of the dangers posed to vulnerable young girls by some predatory men. She also comes to develop an empathy for her previously despised nemesis, Aileen Kapernicky; she has along the way already developed some fellow-

feeling with the older sister, Janeen, who shares Cecelia's love of reading.

This emotional transition is marked chronologically/temporally by Cecelia's transition from primary school to high school. Metaphorically, it plays out against the backdrop of the intensity of the Australian landscape, and is reflected by the transition from a decade of drought to a new era of potential prosperity after life-saving rains.

Australia itself is also in a period of transition, as inferred by the references to the Labor Party's Federal Election 'It's Time' campaign and subsequent electoral win (pp. 119, 121–122). Although not made explicit in the novel, Cecelia's father's story of post-war immigration to make a new life in Australia foreshadows the coming waves of Asian immigration following the Vietnam War, the genocide in Cambodia and other examples of civil unrest across the region.

### Family

*We had rules despite our unruly appearance: Never praise, never thank and never apologise.* (p. 10)

Family is at the heart of *Dust*. It defines Cecelia's sense of who she is in the world: she is the only girl with five (later six) brothers and by her own admission does not have any particularly close friends at the start of the novel. Cecelia is close to both her parents, but they are too busy running the property and the household to spend much individual time with any of their children.

Although she fights constantly with her brothers – especially Punk, the closest in age to her – and carries a number of actual scars to prove it, it is clear that this is a family for whom loyalties run deep and who will always band together when it comes to the crunch:

I unhooked my feet in the sudden quiet. Shadows had stolen across the gully, swallowing the boys whole. I was alone, a long way from home. The weight of the day's events and the threat of the Kapernickys suddenly seemed to much to bear on my own.

'Wait!' I screamed into the onrushing darkness.

The pale disk of a face flickered back at me. Then another and another. I felt a rush of gratitude as I ran, five faint beacons fixed on



me, the night snatching at the echoes of my cry.

*Wait for me!* (p. 11)

Despite the difficulties the family faces – ten years of drought has made earning a living on the property difficult; the usual challenges that come along with any large family – Cecelia comes to realise that her family is strong and loving and safe. The final scene in the 1970s section of the novel reinforces this, with Cecelia and Punk reconciling their warring ways (fittingly, in church), while managing to stick to the family mantra: *Never praise, never thank and never apologise*. This is reinforced in the final chapter of the novel, Chapter 31, when we see the grown-up Punk and Cecelia, clearly great friends even despite the geographic distance that separates them as adults.

## Religion

*Being Catholic – Baptised, Holy Communionised and Confirmed – we needed loopholes more than most.* (p. 7)

Religion – specifically, Catholicism – plays a large part in the lives of Cecelia and her family. The centrality of the church to the Vanderbomm family is established early on in the novel; with their mother (who converted to Catholicism when she married their father) insisting Cecelia and Punk make confession over the ‘Kapernicky germs’ game the two have been tormenting each other with. However, religious observance is more of a perfunctory matter for Cecelia and her brothers, who look for ways of avoiding revealing too much in Confession (those ‘loopholes’ referred to on p. 7) and who find it difficult to behave in church. (See Chapter 7 as a key example of the role of religion in the lives of the Vanderbomm family.)

Although Cecelia appears not to hold too much store by her religion, she does value the Bible, which she is methodically reading her way through (p. 42). (This is our first glimpse of Cecelia as an avid reader, an important fact about her that comes up again in the course of the novel.)

It is also significant that the final scene of the section of the novel set in 1973 is set back in church, with Cecelia and Punk vowing to be ‘nicer’ to people in future (after the revelation of what has happened to the Kapernicky sisters), which Cecelia says could be their form of ‘contrition’ (p. 217) and coming to some degree of reconciliation themselves. Note the following exchange with particular regard to the

quote from p. 10: ‘*We had rules despite our unruly appearance: Never praise, never thank and never apologise.*’

‘So saying sorry might make you feel better.’

Punk squirmed. I was like a cat with a lizard and just couldn’t let it go.

‘Theoretically,’ I prodded him, it could make you feel better.’

Punk shook his head but he wasn’t disagreeing. ‘Maybe. I wouldn’t know.’

‘OK. Let’s conduct an experiment. Think of something really bad we’ve done to each other and say sorry and see how it feels.’

Punk actually snorted, which got us a warning look from Dad. As soon as he went back to his missive, I dropped my voice even lower.

‘Come on. I’ll start.’ But even with a run-up I was having trouble making the leap. I took a big breath.

‘I’m sorry I pushed you out of the tree. I’m glad I didn’t kill you. I would’ve been really sorry if I had.’

Punk frowned, still sceptical. ‘So ... feel any better?’

I gave it some thought. ‘I think so. Go on, you give it a go.’

Punk thought for a moment, then leaned towards me. ‘I’m really sorry –’ His hot breath in my earhole made me cringe away. He yanked me back.

‘I’m really sorry O’Drabble caned me for scarring you for life.’ (pp. 215–216)

And so on ... the exchange continues over several pages, with Punk apologising only for the things he regretted that had happened to him, but nevertheless, the scene is all about he and Cecelia reaching a *rapprochement* in their relationship, which will no doubt continue to be combative, but has now reached a new level of maturity as the children come to terms with their role in the unhappiness of the Kapernicky sisters. As we see from Chapter 31, set in the present, Punk and Cecelia remain firm friends and allies as adult siblings. Religion and family are firmly intertwined themes in the novel.

## Gender

*The agent looked down at me and smiled. 'Now, that's probably not for you to say, sweetie.'*

*Dad's hand gripped my shoulder. 'She's nobody's sweetie, Edgar.'*

Issues of gender are implicit throughout *Dust*. As the only sister in a mob of boys, Cecelia comes up time and again against the inherent injustices of being a girl in 1970s country Australia:

For some ungodly reason, people expected me to behave better than my five brothers. As if sinning was worse for girls than it was for boys. (p. 7)

This is apparently true: Cecelia is given double the penance by her priest for confessing exactly the same sins as her brothers (see pp. 40–41)

In this family, you don't show weakness or you'll be called a girl. And no-one wants that. Not even me. (p. 11)

Cecelia is more or less forced into being a tomboy: she has to share a Christmas present of a Matchbox car set with her brothers (p. 76) and her dolls have been destroyed in rough play by her and her brothers (p. 19). As she says with some understatement, 'We just weren't set up for girls at our place.' And it's also true that Cecelia rather likes being the only girl; part of her initial antipathy to the Kapernicky sisters is that they have 'broken her duck' of being the only girl around for miles (p. 6).

Despite her overtly tomboyish ways, one of Cecelia's most treasured memories is having been looked after by the 'gypsy' woman Mrs Leddes, who allowed Cecelia to dress up in and play with her jar of exotic – to Cecelia – jewellery. Contrast the language used in this passage with that of any of the scenes of Cecelia playing/fighting with her brothers (especially Punk):

It seemed to take forever for Mrs Leddes to unscrew the lid. Winding, winding, smiling, smiling, until finally, she'd pour out the great glittering waterfall onto the green marbled swirls of laminex ... I'd clip jewels onto my ears, fingering gold hoops and dangling beaded hooks with painful longing, until Mrs Leddes, hearing the car pull up outside, would gently pry them from my fingers, unclip, unhook and unclasp and clink clink clink them back into the jar. (pp. 117–118)

A more domestic, feminine aspect to Cecelia's life is also revealed in Chapter 12, as she talks with her mother about her father's past and the beginnings of their romance, and in Chapter 16 when she discovers her mother is pregnant again, and they discuss their wish for another girl in the family.

Compare to the language and imagery in scenes which show Cecelia in a more 'tomboyish' or masculine role:

- Chapter 9: Punk beating up Cecelia and her decision to 'start playing with the girls ... before he killed me completely.'
- Chapter 13: working alongside her brothers and father on preparing the land for ploughing and the bore-drilling scene.
- pp. 132–133: Cecelia gets a stick stuck in her foot after swimming in a dangerously flooded creek.

Cecelia frequently uses very earthy language and imagery when she is describing life at home on the farm with her brothers; her masculine homelife and the harshness of the natural environment informs the language she uses to form and describe her world. Compare the literal and figurative language Cecelia uses in these different contexts: the feminine and the masculine.

## Adolescence and being female

*I'd cut a fringe into my hair, hitched my uniform just below the level of my orange and black tiger jocks and hidden my own [cigarette] supplies behind the second-highest button of my shirt-waister uniform. (p. 161)*

Cecelia's movement towards adolescence and a greater interest in feminine things is marked by the arrival at school of who would now be called the 'popular girl', Hayley Harris in Chapter 14. Hayley is pretty and 'has the longest legs in the shortest mini ever seen at Jambin State School'. Cecelia is immediately attracted to this new world of adolescent femininity that Hayley represents:

We deserted the jungle gym and monkey bars for her, clustering in the cool under the school. Drinking in her milky white strangeness, hanging on stories that could only come from an exotic creature schooled in the ways of places far removed from the Callide Valley.

Her green eyes danced around us. 'So, who's going to the Jambin dance next Saturday night?' (p. 85)



Also underlying the action of the novel is the danger posed to young girls by sexually predatory men. Cecelia feels uncomfortable from her first meeting with Morrie Kapernicky, the sisters' step-father, although she doesn't fully understand why (pp. 44–47); his threatening/sleazy nature is more fully revealed at the Jambin Dance, when Cecelia feels an actual physical threat from him (pp. 93–94). These scenes foreshadow for the reader the truth about the Kapernicky family – that Morrie Kapernicky and his father have been sexually abusing one, if not both of the Kapernicky sisters.

Cecelia tries on a new 'grown-up' and highly constructed and conventional femininity after she meets the confident, glamorous Glenda Simpson at high school:

Glenda's waist was tiny, even with six inches of uniform skirt bunched under her belt. Her shoulders were back, emphasising an impressive bust for an Eighth Grader. Glossy dark hair framed creamy clear skin; her lips were pink, curving around a wide, wide smile.

Hayley was right. The confidence drew me like a starving eel to crumbs on the waters. Glenda cocked a hip.

'Coming down the stands?'

I smoothed down my pleats and glanced at Hayley. 'Mind my lunchbox?'

She nodded but I was already moving away. Away from her. Away from the tiny stage that was Jambin State School. Away to the bright light that beckoned at the end of Glenda Simpson's Dunhill cigarette. (p. 158)

Cecelia takes up smoking, wearing makeup, hitching 'my uniform just below the level of my orange and black tiger jocks' (p. 161) hanging around with Glenda and older boys at school who drink and smoke during recess breaks at school. A scene on the bus home (p. 173) indicates, however, that Cecelia hasn't quite got this new 'girl' thing right – she is teased by two boys for having hairy legs:

I wouldn't look down, didn't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing me check how hairy my legs really were. For some reason, I couldn't recall my leg hair. Couldn't remember ever noticing it. Didn't know why it should suddenly be an issue. Couldn't understand why it made me feel like crying. (p. 173)

The novel's interest in questions of gender (and power) come together in Chapter 27, when Cecelia hears some of the 'bad boys' down at the football stands talking about what appears to be a case of group sex involving several boys and one girl (p. 189). Cecelia doesn't know who the girl is but is appalled by the way the boys are speaking about her:

'You think that's funny? Chucking off at some poor girl who's so desperate she thinks she can get some sort of affection from the likes of you and your scummy mates? You think that's funny?'

Glenda tried to pull me away.

'Because it's not! It's pathetic! pathetic that anyone would do that to someone. Pathetic that anyone would want to skite about it later and pathetic that a pack of losers *who weren't even there* think it's something to laugh about.' (pp. 190–191)

Cecelia quickly discovers that the girl they are talking about is Janeen Kapernicky, and the sordid secrets of the Kapernicky family are revealed. Janeen is pregnant, by either her step-father or step-grandfather. The Kapernicky men go to jail; the Kapernicky women disappear before Cecelia has the chance to make amends with the sisters she now understands she has both misunderstood and treated shabbily. She abandons her new friends and yearns for the simpler days of State School: 'I yearned for the days of the jungle gym ... The comfort of believing I could make sense of life, that I could work things out just by hanging in there...' (p. 194)

But Cecelia cannot go back to the days of the jungle gym; she has passed irrevocably from the state of childhood innocence and ignorance to a knowledge of the world – that it can be far more dangerous and damaging than any rumble in the dirt with an older brother – from which she can never return.

## Conflict

*I would tough it out. I would get stronger. And in the meantime, I'd stay out of Punk's way, before he killed me completely.* (p. 53)

Conflict takes many forms in the novel:

- Sibling conflict, as demonstrated by Cecelia and Punk's constant physical and verbal encounters
- Conflict between Cecelia and her nemesis, Aileen Kapernicky



- Conflict of living on the land, dependent on the vagaries of climate and environment

The conflict between Punk and Cecelia is ultimately resolved (see section below on Religion), whereas the conflict between Cecelia and Aileen is never resolved. Aileen and Janeen are spirited away by their mother after the sexual abuse by their step-father and step-grandfather, and Janeen's resulting pregnancy, are revealed, and Cecelia never has the opportunity to make amends with either sister. The significance of this is emphasised by the framing sections of the novel, set in the present, which sees an adult Cecelia making a speedy road trip to the funeral of the girls' step-grandfather in the hope that Janeen may be at the service. Cecelia finally makes amends by passing on to the sisters the blue thunder egg first shown to them by their teacher, Mr O'Driscoll, in an attempt to demonstrate that 'Appearances can be deceptive' after Cecelia and Aileen's antipathy towards each other has ended up in a physical fight:

'My friend has always been interested in what others neglect or overlook. He is fascinated by what is formed by different pressures at different times. He says it is the extremes that create the most marvellous hearts. In rocks and in life.

'I'd like you girls to think about that.' He pulled the blue horse from my hands. 'You're intelligent girls. Smart enough to know better than what I've seen and heard from you today.' (p. 63)

Finally, the conflicts inherent in living and working on the land and against the elements run throughout the course of the novel, providing a counterpoint to human conflicts, which can be resolved, with good will. Conflict with the Australian landscape, however, is an ongoing battle, never to be resolved, but to be lived with and managed.

### The outsider

*It was as though I no longer occupied space in Janeen's world. Something had shifted – in the order of things – and I was now the intruder, the one disturbing someone else's sanctuary.* (p. 57)

*Dust* handles questions of popularity, bullying, the Outsider and related themes with great subtlety and through strong characterisation.

Cecelia likes to play the role of the outsider at the start of the novel, at least in terms of being the only girl in her area (p. 6), the only girl in her family, and

not having any particularly close friends at school. However, for Cecelia, this is more a choice she makes, whereas for Janeen Kapernicky in particular, although also in some respects for her sister Aileen, being an outsider is not a matter of choice, but more a question of self-preservation.

Cecelia first makes real contact with Janeen when she discovers her hiding in her own personal sanctuary—the book room at school. For Cecelia, the book room is a place where she can 'be alone with a thousand lives I'd never live' – the second indication of the importance of books to Cecelia – whereas for Janeen it is a place to hide away from the world. The similarities and differences between these two outsiders are demonstrated in their exchange about *Jane Eyre* on p. 56. Cecelia thinks Jane's aunt was cruel to her because she was different – a reflection of her own sense of her place in the world. Janeen's response is equally revealing: 'They were cruel people,' she said. 'And Jane had no-one to protect her. That's why they could get away with it.' (p. 56)

This scene is an opportunity for Cecelia and Janeen to make a connection and recognise their similar interests in reading, and find a friendship, but it is interrupted by an enraged Aileen, who (justifiably, given their history) thinks Cecelia is taunting her more vulnerable sister. The scene descends into a fistfight between Cecelia and Aileen. It is not until Janeen and Cecelia are in high school the following year that Cecelia again gets a glimpse into the heart of the other girl, when Janeen reads her poem 'Indifference' to the class:

My eyes burned at the accusation in the words, at the loneliness, at her ability to voice them at all. I could never do that. Strip myself bare and let people see where they'd wounded me. (p. 172)

Cecelia's own fears prevent her from reaching out to Janeen ('I was afraid ... she'd see through me and know me for what I was.' p. 172). Cecelia is no longer an outsider – she is now, in the more contemporary way of describing it, one of the 'cool kids' at school and to reach out to Janeen would reveal more of Cecelia's inner uncertainties about her new life than she's willing to risk.

## THE LANGUAGE OF *DUST*

*I didn't want to break my duck with an icky Kapernicky.* (p. 6)

*Dust* is a linguistically rich text, from the Australian vernacular of a particular time and place, to the rich

use of figurative language employed by the protagonist-narrator, Cecelia, as she explores and describes her ever-changing world.

Look at the many rich examples of figurative language in the text. Cecelia, who is established as an avid reader, is obviously a great lover of language and the power of words to shape and describe the world as she sees and experiences it. Her metaphors are always apt and appropriate to the time and place and reveal much about Cecelia's character at the same time. Many of her metaphors and similes relate to the natural world that is such a dominant part of her daily life:

Of the five girls in Five/Six/Seven, I was the only Grade Sixer, hanging like a dag out of a sheep's bum. (p. 21)

I pushed down a weird angry thrill – like the ground that Punk and I had been working was about to push up a toxic new plant – and thumbed the gum beside the fuel tank. (p. 27)

(Of their dead pet sheep): Ants skating across the green ice of his spooky sheep eyes. (p. 30)

Cecelia's playful way with language reveals much about her feisty, cheeky, intelligent nature (see the above 'icky Kapernicky' quote) as it reveals information about the social structure of her world:

Each of the young Mrs Kenny's had at least four kids so church was like a Kenny layer cake with families like ours as the icing in between. (p. 37)

Other aspects of Cecelia's personality are also revealed through her language choices:

A curled ball of dead spiny anteater blinked past on the edge of the bitumen.

My gut lurched. I recognised that urge to protect a soft underbelly, to curl up at the hint of threat, to fan out the spikes and tough it out. (p. 48)

The language is never anachronistic, but always true to the time and place in which the novel takes place. Cecelia makes reference, for example, to Punk 'nearly busting his foofer valve' trying not to laugh; an appropriate image for a child of the bush in a period pre- the technology available to children today.

The language also reflects the cultural and social scene of 1970s rural Australia, with references to

'Sharpie cuts', Osti dresses, Bata Scout school shoes, the music of the era (*Slade Alive!* and Alice Cooper), the long-running Bellbird television soap opera. Also notable is the use of an Australian vernacular, largely (and ironically) employed by Cecelia's Dutch immigrant father, which is rarely heard in everyday conversation any more: *flaming idiots*; *silly as a mob of wet hens* (p. 8), etc.

Finally, note also the resonant nicknames of the children of the Vanderbomm family: Big Hairs, Punk, Fatlump, Lick, Wart and later, the new addition Cool Hand. Cecelia is, by contrast, stuck with the less poetic Sis. Although it's not stated, there's a distinct possibility that (apart from Cool Hand) that is was Cecelia, lover of books and language, who coined these coarsely poetic names for her brothers.

## ACTIVITIES

### Questions for discussion

- *Dust* is set in the early 1970s in central Queensland. Why did the author choose to set it in a specific time period? What differences might one expect there to be in the book if it were set in the current period instead of 35 years ago? Consider language, use of technology, social issues and awareness as part of the discussion.
- Gender roles are often highlighted in the novel. (See the section on gender in Themes for examples.) Set up a class discussion: how much of the novel's interest in gender roles is a reflection of the time in which it is set (although not mentioned in the novel, it is set during the height of the second wave of the feminist movement)? Have things changed all that much for young men and women since the early 70s, or do girls and boys face some of the same issues regarding gender as the characters in the novel? (Keep in mind that the boys in the novel are as much affected by gender expectations as the girls.)
- In 'On writing *Dust*', Christine Bongers said: *I haven't yet met a single individual who couldn't tell me the full name – Christian name and surname – of that archetypal child, lonely and despised, who inhabited the landscape of their youth. They are unforgettable because they personify our fears about everything we don't want to be and because later, too late to make a difference, we can see from the lofty heights of adulthood, how we in our innocence and ignorance betrayed them, sometimes by our actions, more often by simple inaction: sins*



of omission rather than commission. Taking care of the sensitivities of students who may fill this 'outsider' role, lead a discussion about the treatment of the 'outsider' in the students' own lives.

- How much responsibility does Cecelia feel she has for the events surrounding the Kapernicky sisters? How much responsibility should she take? Who else should take responsibility for what happened to Janeen and Aileen?
- How much did Cecelia's family shape her values and world views, and the way she interacts with other people? What about her Catholic religion? What other influences were on Cecelia in these months of transition from childhood to adolescence?

### Writing tasks

- Compare this novel to others about Australian childhood and adolescence, especially the female experience of growing up in Australia. Examples might include *Seven Little Australians* by Ethel Turner, *Looking for Alibrandi* by Melina Marchetta, *Killing Aurora* by Helen Barnes, *The Push* by Julia Lawrinson, and *Anonymity Jones* by James Roy. Write a comparative essay about *Dust* and one of these other novels, looking at questions of gender, when and where one lives, class and cultural origin and any other elements that the books explore as influences on growing up (female) in Australia.
- Essay: Why is the novel called *Dust*? What examples of this motif can be found in the novel, and how effective is dust as the defining metaphor for the novel?
- Creative response: Imagine the grown up Cecelia writes the story of the events of this novel, including her adult attempt to make amends to the Kapernicky sisters, as a feature article for the weekend newspaper magazine (eg Fairfax Media's *Good Weekend*). Write that feature article, taking into account the differences between journalistic and narrative writing.
- Write the fight scene between Cecelia and Aileen Kapernicky (Chapter 10) from the point of view of Aileen.
- Write a narrative prose piece in the voice of Punk, about the events in the first few months of high school, particularly focusing on the changes in his sister Cecelia.

### For advanced students

In *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* by Barbara Wall (Macmillan London 1991), Wall states that use of the first person narrative voice has allowed adult writers to 'court readers much younger than themselves', but goes on to argue that *verisimilitude has not been easy to achieve. Children not only lack experience but also the words in which to describe and analyse experience. That a child's inexperience of life and of writing may clash uncomfortably with the designs of the adult story-teller is a problem that underlies this branch of first person narration.* (p. 248)

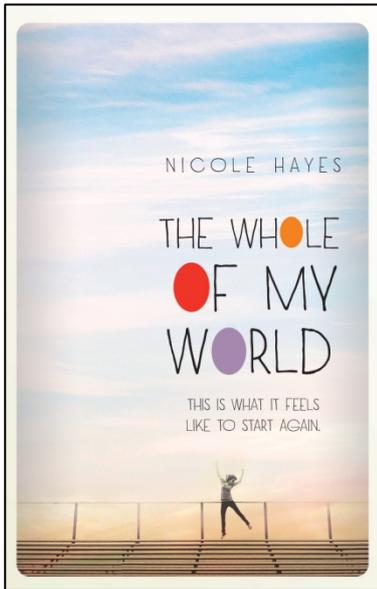
Take this as the starting point for a discussion, or even an essay, on the use of first person narration in *Dust*. Is Cecelia's narrative voice a convincing replication of a smart, well-read child on the cusp of adolescence, or is the narrator really the adult Cecelia (who we meet in the novel's framing chapters) looking back on the events of her childhood? Any discussion and written response should be heavily supported with examples from the text. Students should look for examples of figurative language that reveal Cecelia's character, child v adult perspective/point of view events, Cecelia's maturity and understanding of events.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE RESOURCES

Once an English teacher, Judith Ridge has specialised in children's and young adult literature for the past 20 years, working as an editor, community arts coordinator, writer and critic. She is the development officer for the Western Sydney Young People's Literature Project, a community-based project designed to engage young people with reading and literature. She also teaches creative writing, with a focus on writing for children and young adults. Judith has written about children's and youth literature for journals such as *Viewpoint*, *Magpies*, *The Horn Book* (US) and *The Age* and has written teachers' notes for books by Melina Marchetta, MT Anderson and Morris Gleitzman. She has been invited on a number of occasions to speak at conferences and seminars in Australia and the USA. Judith Ridge is a Churchill Fellow and has an MA in children's literature.



FURTHER READING FROM WOOLSHED PRESS



*The Whole of My World*  
by Nicole Hayes

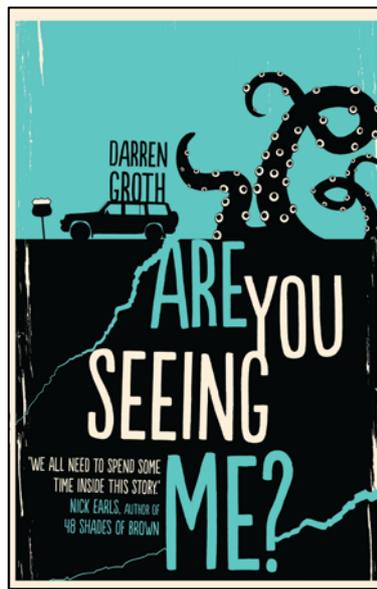
**Why this story?** Another coming-of-age story set in a different time in Australia's past.

Desperate to escape her grieving father and harbouring her own terrible secret, Shelley disappears into the world of Aussie Rules football. Joining a motley crew of footy tragics – and, best of all, making friends with one of the star players – Shelley finds somewhere to belong. Finally she's winning.

So why don't her friends get it? Josh, who she's known all her life, but who she can barely look at anymore because of the memories of that fateful day. Tara, whose cold silences Shelley can't understand.

When the whole of your world is football, sometimes life gets lost between goals.

*Teachers' resources available.*



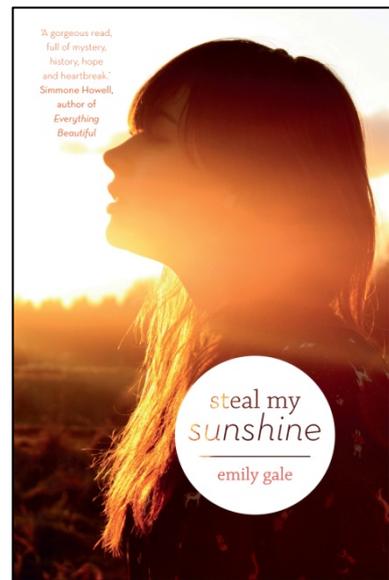
*Are You Seeing Me?*  
by Darren Groth

**Why this story?** 'We all need to spend some time inside this story.' Nick Earls

Twins Justine and Perry are about to embark on the road trip of a lifetime in the Pacific Northwest. It's been a year since they watched their dad lose his battle with cancer. Now Justine is the sole carer for her disabled brother. But with Perry having been accepted into an assisted-living residence, their reliance on each other is set to shift. Before they go their separate ways, they're seeking to create the perfect memory.

But the instability that has shaped their lives will not subside, and the seismic event that Perry forewarned threatens to reduce their worlds to rubble.

*Teachers' resources available.*



*Steal My Sunshine*  
by Emily Gale

**Why this story?** A bittersweet story about a family in turmoil.

During a Melbourne heatwave, Hannah's family life begins to distort beyond her deepest fears. It's going to take more than a cool change to fix it, but how can a girl who lives in the shadows take on the task alone?

Feeling powerless and invisible, Hannah seeks refuge in the two anarchists of her life: her wild best friend, Chloe, and her eccentric grandmother, Essie, who look like they know how life really works.

But Hannah's loyalty to both is tested, first by her attraction to Chloe's older brother, and then by Essie's devastating secret that sheds new light on how the family has lost its way.

*Teachers' resources available.*

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The Whole of My World	Nicole Hayes	9781742758602	9-10	\$18.99		
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