



TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Belinda Bolliger

WALKER BOOKS



WORSE THINGS

CREATOR: SALLY MURPHY (AUTHOR)
& SARAH DAVIS (ILLUSTRATOR)
ISBN 9781760651657 PAPERBACK
MAY 2020

ABOUT THE BOOK

Worse Things is a story about connections, the ways they are made and what happens when they are lost or illusive.

Worse Things follows the lives of three main characters: Blake, an Aussie Rules football player who suffers a devastating injury; Jolene, a hockey player who hates the game and is grieving the recent death of her father; and Amed, a soccer-loving, non-English speaking orphan who feels like an outsider since arriving in Australia after being raised in a refugee camp.

A touching and inspirational story about connections and the things that bind us all.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Murphy is the author of more than 28 children's books. Her first illustrated verse novel with Walker Books Australia, *Pearl Verses the World* (illustrated by Heather Potter) won the children's book category for the Indie Book of the Year awards, 2009; was awarded Honour Book in the Younger Readers category, Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards, 2010; and won the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards, 2010, Best Book for Language Development, Upper Primary (8-12 years). *Toppling* (illustrated by Rhian Nest James) won the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, Children's Book - Mary Ryan's Award, 2010 and the Children's Book for the 2010 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. It has also been short-listed for the 2010 Speech Pathology Australia, Book of the Year Awards, Upper Primary category and the 2011 Children's Book Council of Australia Awards, Younger Readers Notable Books.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Sarah Davis is a multiple award-winning illustrator, and associate art director for Walker Books Australia. She won the CBCA Crichton Illustration Award for her first picture book, *Mending Lucille*, in 2009, and since then has gone on to illustrate more than 40 titles, in a range of styles and genres. She has an Honours degree in literature, and her love of language and narrative underpins her illustration work. With each project she experiments with new ways to construct visual narratives, working across a range of media. Sarah has collaborated with many major publishing houses and commercial clients across Australia, New Zealand, the USA and the UK. An experienced presenter with a teaching background, she regularly speaks at schools, festivals and universities throughout Australia and internationally. Sarah is also proud to be an ambassador for Room to Read. She is represented by the Gallt Zacker Agency in the USA.



ABOUT THE TEACHER NOTES AUTHOR

Belinda Bolliger worked as an editor and publisher of children's books for over twenty-five years. She was the Children's Publisher at Hodder Headline (now Hachette Australia) and Children's Commissioning Editor and Publisher for ABC Books/HarperCollins. She has worked with many award-winning authors and illustrators, including Libby Hathorn, Garry Disher, Frances Watts, Judith Rossell and Matt Ottley. Belinda was editorial manager for Australian Standing Orders (Scholastic) for over 11 years, reviewing and selecting the most suitable new releases from Australian publishers to send to schools around the country. Belinda now works as an associate agent at Key People Literary Management and as a freelance children's editor and project manager.

CURRICULUM LINKS

English (Language; Literature and Literacy) • Humanities and Social Sciences (Knowledge and Understanding; Civics and Citizenship)
The Arts (Media Arts; Drama; Visual Arts) • Health and Physical Education (Personal; Social and Community Health)

THEMES

Sport • Friendship/Connection • Families • Loneliness/Disconnection

For ages 9-12 years

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Death • The refugee experience



TEACHER NOTES

Verse Form and Language

Worse Things is written as a verse novel, which is when a story is told through poetry rather than prose.

- Why do you think the author chose to write *Worse Things* as a verse novel?
- How does a novel written in verse affect the way you read and understand the story?
- Do you find this form of storytelling effective and enjoyable? Why or why not?
- What are some of the poetic techniques that the author has used in the novel? For example, while the poetry in the novel doesn't rhyme, there is a beautiful rhythm to many of the lines. Find examples of these.
- What are some other techniques the author has used? How do these techniques help to tell the story and convey the characters' thoughts and emotions? Think about the use of the 'dictionary' definitions, punctuation and so on.
- The author tells the story using multiple voices. How does this add to your understanding of the characters' journeys? Write one of the chapters as a third-person narrative. Discuss how this compares to the verse novel form in multiple voices. Which one do you find more impactful? Why do you think this is?
- **Quote:** '*... to find yourself kept separate again/by the invisible fence of language.*' (p 69)
Find examples of other similes and metaphors in the verses. What do you think they add to the story? Think of some other poetic and impactful ways of describing 'the invisible fence of language'. Create an artwork that shows how 'the invisible fence of language' might feel to Amed.
- As a class, discuss how the structure of a verse novel influences your emotional connection to the characters and the events.
- Are there particular verses or chapters that stood out to you? Why?

Theme: Sport

The author uses sport as a way of telling each character's story.

- Discuss how each character's relationship with their sport reflects their personal identity and struggles. For example, how does Blake's injury affect his sense of self? What does this tell us about his identity?
- Why do you think the author chose sports as a way to explore these characters' lives? How do their sports help us understand who they are beyond just athletes?
- How does the author use the challenges in sports (such as injury, loss and feeling out of place) to mirror the challenges the characters face in their personal lives?
- What parallels can you draw between the characters' experiences in sports and their journeys off the field? How does this make the storytelling more impactful?
- Discuss how sports serve as a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, especially in Amed's case as a refugee who connects through soccer.
- How does the author use sport to show that, despite their differences, the characters share common experiences and emotions? What does this say about the power of sport to bring people together?

Theme: Loneliness and Disconnection, Friendship and Connection

- Each of the characters struggles with friendship and a sense of connection. How do Blake, Jolene and Amed feel disconnected from the people around them?
- What are the ways they try to reconnect with others? Are they successful?

- Blake and Jolene appear to be successful and happy, however they both struggle with a sense of loneliness and disconnection. How does the novel show that we never really know what is going on with a person just from outward appearances?
- Discuss how the challenges Blake, Jolene and Amed face lead to new friendships and connections.
- Discuss how connections can be lost and what it takes to rebuild them.
- Re-read the text on pp 182-184. What does Jolene discover about Rachel? Do you think they will build a new connection? What do you think Rachel discovers about herself in her exchanges with Jolene? Why do you think she was mean about Jolene when the other hockey team members were discussing her? Write a chapter in verse form from the point of view of Rachel.
- One of the themes of the book is loneliness. Find examples in the text for each of the characters that show when they are feeling lonely.
- Re-read the poem/definition 'Alone' on p 73. Write your own poem for the word 'alone'.
- Create a visual web that shows how Blake, Jolene and Amed are connected to each other and the people in their lives. Include how these connections change throughout the story.
- Write a short story about a time when you felt disconnected from others. What did you do to rebuild those connections? If you feel comfortable, share your story with the rest of the class.
- Express the themes of connection, loss and resilience through art, music or poetry. You can create a piece that represents how the characters feel or how you feel in relation to the story's themes.

Theme: Families

The families in *Worse Things* play an important role in the development of each character.

Blake

- Discuss how Blake's parents sign him up to be an umpire and how this gives Blake new enthusiasm. How does Blake's attitude towards his younger brother change? What role do you think his younger brother plays in Blake's renewed optimism?

Jolene

- Jolene has a troubled relationship with her mother. Why do you think her mother puts so much pressure on her daughter?
- **Quote:**
'She tells me over and over again about her own dreams of hockey stardom and how she missed out because of bad luck and the timing of her knee injury.' (p 118)
What do these lines tell you about Jolene's mum and her hopes for Jolene?
- Re-read p 124. What is the author saying about parents and the pressure they put on children?
- How does the death of Jolene's dad change the dynamic between Jolene and her mother?

Amed

- Amed can barely remember his mother, father and brother. Who is Amed's family now?
- Several times, Amed mentions that his aunt worked hard to find him. Why is this so important to him? What is the significance of the gift that Amed gives to his aunt at the end of the book?

Characters

Blake

- Write down what you learn about Blake from his first poem in the book on pp 9-11.
- What do you know of Blake by the end of the novel?

- In the poem 'Broken' on p 13, the word 'broken' is defined as 'no longer whole or functioning'. Why do you think the author chose these words? Do you think they describe Blake? Do you think they also describe Jolene and Amed? Who else in the story might these words describe?
- **Quote:**
*'But it's hard to feel
part of it
when they're on the oval
and I'm on the sideline
standing awkwardly.'* (p 36)
Blake's identity is tied up in his status as a footy star. How do his feelings change by the end of the book? Could it be said that it was a good thing that he broke his arm?
- Is Blake more than his skills as a football player? Who else is he? How does he – and how does the reader – discover this?
- How does breaking his arm show Blake the meaning of true friendship?

Jolene

- Write down what you learn about Jolene from her first poem in the book on pp 14-15.
- What do you know about Jolene by the end of the novel?
- Why doesn't Jolene tell her mother how she feels about hockey?
- Do you think Jolene's mother cares about how Jolene feels about hockey?
- **Quote:**
*'All she wants to talk is hockey:
training
games
fitness
regimes
squads
selections
performances.
Hockey hockey hockey.
Hockey hockey.
Hockey.'* (p 30)
What does the repetition of the word 'hockey' in the verse suggest?

How might her focus on hockey affect Jolene's relationships with others?

- Can you think of situations where being very focused on something might help someone and situations where it might hurt them?

Amed

- Write down what you learn about Amed from his first poem in the book on pp 16-17.
- What do you know about Amed by the end of the novel?
- On p 36, Blake describes Amed as '*A lonely boat kid/watching the footy/pretending he understands.*' How does this describe Amed and yet not describe him at all?
- How do Blake and Jolene each view Amed at the start of the novel? How has this changed by the end of the story?
- We don't know very much about what happened to Amed before he arrived in Australia. Create a backstory for Amed based on the clues we are given in the story. You might like to do this in verse novel form, or as a short story, an artwork or a graphic novel.
- Amed doesn't understand the rules of the games that Blake and Jolene play, but he knows all about soccer. Discuss how the author uses this as a metaphor for the differences between the three characters.
- **Quote:**
*'Me, I am silent in class
watching waiting to be heard.
And in sport, too
I watch and wait.'* (p 34)
This verse sums up Amed and his experiences in Australia. Discuss.
- Amed is brave in many ways. Discuss how he shows bravery.

Further Activities and Discussion Points

- Re-read the poem 'Worry' on p 51. Choose a word that describes a feeling you have sometimes – good or bad – and turn it into a poem.

- Find examples of the way the author gives the reader so much information in just a sentence or two.
- What do the illustrations and graphics add to the text? Use the illustrations on pp 162-163 as a springboard for your answer.
- Re-read the poem on p 52 where Amed describes himself as a 'watcher'. In the same style as this poem, write about how you see yourself.
- Write a rhyming poem with the same theme as the one on p 58, 'Things I Would Rather Do Than Play Hockey'.
- What are the rules for soccer, footy and hockey? Write the rules in verse form.
- Read the poem on p 127, 'Worse Things in Life'. How does this poem reflect Amed's experience? Do you think Blake and Jolene are justified to feel unfortunate? Why or why not?
- Why does Jolene feel she has to be nicer (p 148)? Discuss the saying: '*Don't be nice, be real.*'
- How do the characters show empathy towards each other? Discuss the importance of understanding others' experiences, even when they are different from our own. How does learning about each other's struggles help the characters connect?
- Role-play different scenarios from the book where the characters struggle with their feelings. As a class, think about how you would feel in those situations and what you can do to support each other.
- Being sensitive to the experience of class members, have a discussion about Amed's experience as a refugee. Explore the challenges of adapting to a new culture and the importance of welcoming others.
- Read the poem 'Friend' on p 199. Write a poem/dictionary definition like this one that shows what the word 'friend' means to you. Create an artwork to accompany your definition and gift your poem and artwork to someone who is a friend to you.





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