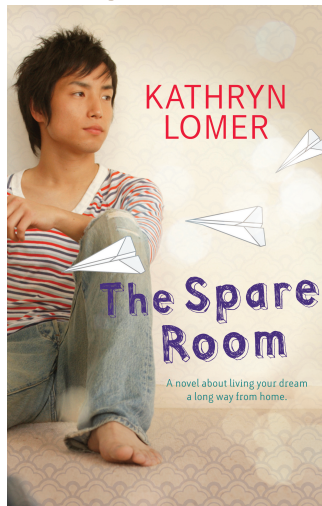


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The Spare Room

Kathryn Lomer



Teachers' Notes

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Summary:

Akira, a disappointment to his father, is sent to a language school in Australia in the expectation that although he failed to gain entrance to a university in Tokyo, he could learn a skill of use to the family business. It becomes a pivotal time in the young Japanese student's life. The relaxed Tasmanian lifestyle opens new vistas; the exciting teaching methods of his new teacher inspires a latent love of, and ability in, language; the structure of his new 'Australian family' and that of his new Australian-Greek friend Stolly, provides a sense of possibilities for his own life. There are, however, undercurrents tugging his homestay family apart and Akira is an unwitting catalyst for near disaster.

It is a beautifully understated coming-of-age novel that explores the process of grieving, cross-cultural understanding and friendship.

Structure:

The story of his time in Hobart is told by Akira, back home from Australia, in a letter to his friend, Satoshi. By using this device the author sets up and maintains one point of view (his own) and a past tense perspective that allows some backtracking and explanation of motives and perceptions. It is a device that works well as readers are given space in the text to fill in their understanding of each of the situations Akira filters through his own perceptions. At the same time it supplies, by implication, one of the results of Akira's experience even though that will not be recognized as such until the story is told. Readers can then enjoy a sense of completion as the ending becomes apparent from remembering the introductory chapter.

Characters:

Akira develops as a character throughout the story as he gradually reveals himself to the reader through a combination of action and both internal and external dialogue. The external dialogue is controlled by his, at first, inadequate English language skills before becoming more confident:

You often want to say something entirely different but you are limited to the vocabulary you know and you have to try to construct something from the little that you have. A bit like trying to make a salad when you only have braising vegetables, or trying to build a boat using only nails. You get kind of warped into the shape of the words you know. There is a big gap between what you think and what you say... For a while that person was trapped inside a new language. p.43

Events outside his control shape Akira's personal learning curve.

The Moffat family are themselves in a state of flux: a personal tragedy has changed their lives; each member of the family reacting differently to it. Collectively they individually hold their grief to themselves. As events force them to face life again in a changed situation, Akira can see them in a new light, more open and embracing. Daisy is the welcoming, open innocent; Alex a man

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caught in a trap by external events; Jess, his wife turns her back on reality and Angie rages against one and all.

Akira's friend Stolly, and his family, are counterpoints to the dysfunctional Moffats. Openly loving, cohesive and supportive they represent what life can be like in a family.

Satoshi, the person to whom Akira is writing of his experiences exists only as the recipient of the letter and as a referral point for Akira trying to bridge the alternative cultures he is experiencing.

Discussion:

There is much in *The Spare Room* to encourage discussion on aspects of modern life in the larger world scenario:

1. Cross cultural understanding:

Discuss the different traditional behavioural expectations of Akira's Japanese family; Stolly's Greek family; and, the Moffat's Australian family. Use the three fathers: Akira's, Stolly's and Alex Moffat as case studies.

Discuss racially motivated misbehaviour. For example, Akira's run-in with the youths in Salamanca Place (p.137); the girls taunting him on the bus. (pp.77-78)

2. Language:

Discuss:

a) The problems of trying to communicate in a second language. For example, see above and Akira's first experience of trying to communicate in an unfamiliar language:

The man flicked through the empty passport impatiently, and barked another question. He could have been speaking Swahili or Martian for all I knew. So much for high school English. This is a pen, I could have said. Or, My hobby is driving. ... I stood there dumbly, the man ticked a box and I was through. Only then did I realise how nervous I was. The experience had totally blown any confidence I'd had. (pp.28-29)

b) Misunderstandings of word use:

For example, ordering the food for his dinner party at the deli he liked —

The People here are always very friendly, always smiling and laughing Akira says as he orders (as he has obviously done before) *six of those chicken tits please*. Akira is lucky that Stolly and the shop assistants see the humour in this, but the shop assistants have allowed him to continue the practice whereas Stolly corrects him. (p.131)

c) Difficulties with colloquialisms and expressions. For example 'Black lambs' (p.136); the use of 'love' in an impersonal manner (pp.66-67 and p.69)

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- d) Difficulties with pronunciation. For example, misunderstanding of Akira's pronunciation of 'beer'. (p.58)
3. Grief: With the school counsellor, identify and discuss the forms grieving can take.

Drama:

The novel, *The Spare Room*, is based on a screenplay. Groups of students could discuss how individual chapters could be adapted for performance before discussing as a group how to coalesce each 'scene' into a seamless play including stage settings and directions. A readers' theatre performance would be equally rewarding, either performance acting as a summation of the reading experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR :

Kathryn Lomer was born in north-west Tasmania and lives in Hobart. Her novel for young adults, *The Spare Room*, became a Children's Book Council Notable Book for Older Readers 2005 and was also shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, the Courier-Mail Book of the Year Awards and the Children's Peace Literature Awards. Her first collection of poetry, *Extraction of Arrows*, won the Anne Elder Award and was shortlisted in the John Bray Award for Poetry and the Age Book of the Year Awards. Her most recent collection of poems, *Two Kinds of Silence*, won the 2008 NSW Premier's Literary Awards - The Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize. Her latest work is a collection of short fiction *Camera Obscura* published in 2008.