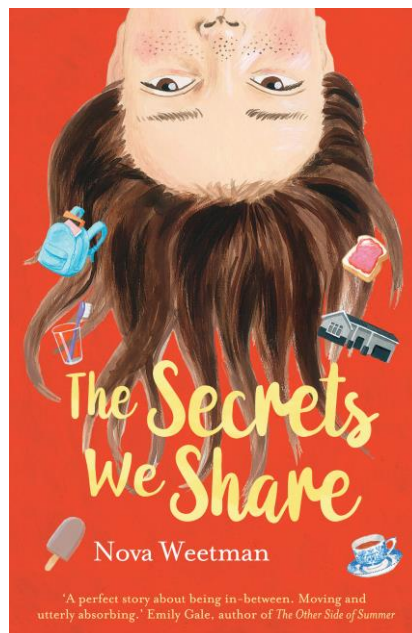


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THE SECRETS WE SHARE

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	6
About the Author	6

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SYNOPSIS

As Clem struggles to piece together her life 'after the fire', the unexpected return of her mother threatens the precarious stability she has worked so hard to achieve. Her feelings of self-doubt are magnified as she starts high school, feeling excluded when her two best friends, Bridge and Ellie, become close. Clem alienates herself from all that has kept her together.

Then she meets fourteen-year-old Matt, who is dealing with his own sense of isolation. He is rebellious and a risk-taker, yet Clem feels she can tell him things she can't to those closest to her. In this companion novel to *The Secrets We Keep*, Clem eventually learns to confront her fears rather than run from them.

THEMES

- Relationships
- Trust
- Friendship
- Belonging
- Doubt
- Change
- Acceptance
- Resilience

WRITING STYLE

The Secrets We Share is told in first person, present tense. Clem's doubts, fears and insecurities are realistically and sensitively realised through her voice, making this novel relatable to middle readers. Nova Weetman's use of character, mood and pace creates a very thought-provoking and tangible text. The symbolism of the 'Separation Tree' running through the novel allows for the exploration of motifs as a powerful literary device.

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STUDY NOTES

- Compare the front covers of *The Secrets We Keep* and *The Secrets We Share*. Make predictions about the latter based on the cover.



- Chapter 1 introduces the motif of the Separation Tree that flows throughout the novel. As you read the text, track the way in which Nova Weetman uses this motif to symbolise Clem's state of mind and the events and emotions that are making her feel so unsettled. Why does Clem feel so drawn to this tree?
- After reading the first chapter, discuss the complications that are revealed through Clem's visit to the Separation Tree. Why are these introduced so early in the narrative? What is the 'enormous sadness' in their lives that Clem's dad hopes can be overcome (p2)?
- What is meant by the term 'brokenness' on p3? How is this novel a story about brokenness, not just of Clem's mother, but of other characters as well?
- Why does Clem's dad like 'imperfections' (p3)? How is this shown in *The Secrets We Share*?
- Why does Clem like running? How does running both help and hinder her?
- Why is Clem so unsettled about her mum moving back in? How does the author show Clem's disapproval?
- How is Clem's relationship with her father altered by the return of her mother? Why has this happened?
- Why is Clem nervous about starting high school? What are your reservations about high school? Share with a friend.
- Clem is trying to cope with a lot of change in her life, which is causing her stress and self-doubt. What effect does change have on you? Write a reflection sharing your thoughts.
- In *The Secrets We Keep*, Clem's neighbour Maggie plays a significant role in helping Clem overcome many obstacles. Discuss the way in which we don't see much of Maggie in *The Secrets We Share*, yet her wisdom

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and mentorship still play a strong role in Clem's life. Why has the author chosen to include Maggie in this less direct way?

- Why does Clem describe Maggie as a 'human version of a goldfish: busy, inquisitive and surprising' (p17).
- How does Maggie help Matt? Why does it take Matt some time to value Maggie's guidance?
- Why does Maggie say that 'since [Matt's] been here, we've moved around each other like fish occupying different ends of the tank' (p21)? What allows this to change?
- Discuss Nova Weetman's use of Maggie's fish tank to help Clem make sense of her life.
- What role does Bridge's sister, Nat, play in *The Secrets We Share*? How does her character personify Clem's doubts?
- What aspects of growing up and transitioning to high school seem to be most confronting to Clem?
- Why is Clem so against her friends wearing lip gloss? What does this tell us about the different rates at which people grow up, and the effects on friendships of people growing up too fast?
- Bridge and Clem are similar, yet very different. How do their differences complement one another? Why is it important that friendships promote individuality rather than conformity?
- Why does Clem get teary thinking about having Bridge in her corner? Give examples of what actions show Bridge doing this?
- In what ways is the theme of belonging explored in *The Secrets We Share*?
- Create a character profile of Bridge that shows her character strengths. Give explicit examples from the text to demonstrate your understanding. For example, letting Ellie have the last folder when they go stationery shopping; encouraging Clem to join the netball team.
- Why does Clem keep her mother's return to herself? How does keeping this secret affect Clem? Why is Matt the only one she shares it with?
- Bridge describes the last few days before high school like being 'in mourning' (p51). What does she mean by this?
- Why do you think Clem feels so left out in her friendship with Bridge and Ellie? Are her feelings justified? Discuss.
- Discuss Clem's comment that she is 'feeling just like that zip: I can't quite open and can't quite close' (p58)? How is this explored throughout the text?
- Instead of letting her feelings be known, Clem chooses to 'shove it all back into the bag, so the grenade just detonates somewhere deep inside me instead' (p58/59). What is the danger in Clem doing this?

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- Why does Clem think that the shuddering air conditioner is a 'sign of cracks in the patch job Dad's done to mend this family' (p59)? Is Clem being fair to her father with such comments? Discuss.
- What do Clem and Matt have in common? How do they help one another through their hardships?
- Why does Matt like rooftopping? Why does Clem try it? Does it help her? Discuss.
- Why does Clem dislike her new house so much? To what do you think she is really objecting?
- Bridge tells Clem that she is a risk-taker, however Clem is not so sure. Discuss whether or not you think Clem is a risk-taker. Give evidence from the text to support your views.
- It takes Clem time to let her mum back into her life. What small signs are there that Clem is slowly beginning to accept her back into her life, despite not really wanting to? Why has the author made this such a gradual acceptance?
- What reminders of her mum's depression are there in *The Secrets We Share*? Why do these hinder Clem's acceptance of her mother?
- Why does Clem feel she can't trust her mother?
- Clem's first day of high school does not quite go according to plan. Write a recount of a first day at a new school, either in the role of Clem or by sharing your first day at a new school.
- Why does Clem feel 'exposed' when her mother questions her about school (p160)? How does this derail their relationship? How does her mum persevere during this difficult patch?
- Why does Clem get to a point where she is 'not even sure what [she's] angry about' (p169)? What does this suggest about the way in which she has dealt with her issues? Have you ever felt like Clem? Discuss.
- Discuss the comment that Matt makes about Maggie and Clem – that they both ask questions rather than making judgements about him.
- If you were Bridge, what would you find frustrating about Clem's behaviour? Why then does she go to such lengths to help her friend?
- How does Clem's broken leg actually help her to heal?
- When the Separation Tree dies, some of its saplings are planted. How does this symbolise the journey that Clem and her family have endured?
- In the role of Clem, write a letter to Maggie from your new house, sharing what life is like now that you are back with your family.
- What advice would you give to Clem about adjusting to change, in particular, her new friendship group?
- What does Maggie mean when she tells Clem that her love for her mother is like daffodil bulbs that will be back one day? Track this motif as you read. How is Maggie's advice realised at the end of the novel?

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- Reread the first few pages of the text to refresh Clem's initial observations of the Separation Tree. Write a reflection of a time that you felt like the Separation Tree – 'nobody knows how bad it is because its tough outer layer stops us from seeing in' (p1).

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When *The Secrets We Keep* was published in 2016, I didn't even consider writing another book about Clem and her family. So when my publisher first suggested it, I was a bit wary. But Clem's a character I've come to care for very much and she was my way back into the world of the book. She opened the door and sucked me straight in. And as soon as I was back in that world, it felt like the most natural place to be. Once I started thinking about Clem again, and where she was at, the story for the sequel began to develop. Now I'm almost ready to start jotting down a few ideas about Clem and what she could get up to when she turns thirteen!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nova Weetman lives in Melbourne with her partner and two children. She has written for film and TV, including *Neighbours* and the children's series *H2O* and *Pixel Pinkie*. Nova has written two middle-grade books in the Choose Your Own Ever After series, and three young adult novels, including *Everything Is Changed*, a 2017 CBCA Notable Book. Her middle-grade novel *The Secrets We Keep* was shortlisted for the Readings Children's Book Prize, the Speech Pathology of Australia Book of the Year Awards and the ABIA Awards, and was a 2017 CBCA Notable Book.

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