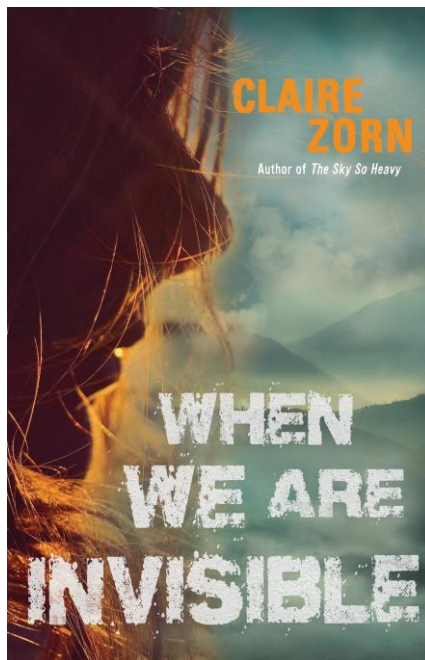


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# WHEN WE ARE INVISIBLE

## Claire Zorn



### Teachers' Notes

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

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**SYNOPSIS**

Traumatised by the devastation of a nuclear winter, Lucy, Fin and Max flee the chaos of Sydney to the safety of Wattlewood, a compound in the bush where survivors must earn their keep. Confronted by strict rules, dogmatic leaders and the roles assigned to her, Lucy's inner compass raises doubts. Is she safe or unsafe here? Should she stay or run?

The sequel to *The Sky So Heavy, When We Are Invisible* juxtaposes power, control and security with courage, love and compassion.

**THEMES**

- Courage
- Compassion
- Love
- Community
- Violence
- Gender Inequality
- Nuclear Winter
- Spirituality
- Eating Disorders
- Power

**WRITING STYLE**

*When We Are Invisible* is written in first person and uses a combination of present and past tense as the story shifts between Lucy's current situation and the recount of her life before the nuclear winter. Lucy's confusion, anger and doubt is shared with readers through the recurring imagery of the white room in her head that is filled with boxes of memories and regrets. She also discloses her sister's rape and subsequent battle with anorexia, which underscores the theme of violence towards women against which Lucy revolts. Due to its subject matter and occasional explicit language, it is best suited to older readers.

**STUDY NOTES**

- The opening chapter of *When We Are Invisible* gives an immediate sense of setting and voice. Discuss the language features and structural style that instantly draw readers into the text.
- How has the author used Lucy's memories in the first chapter to offer such a vivid portrait of her experiences? How does this position readers?

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Why is it important that we care about the protagonist? How has the author achieved this?

- On p. 2, we are told about a world with ‘No power. No communication. No information. No fuel. And, finally, no food.’ In the role of a survivor of the nuclear winter, write a journal entry about this ‘new normal’.
- Violence is an important issue raised in *When We Are Invisible*. As you read, take note of this theme and its impact on Lucy. What does she mean when she says, ‘An act of violence is like a moment of punctuation between one self and another’ (p. 3)?
- Discuss Lucy’s description of her anger following the death of Noll and Matt:

What I feel is not sadness. Sadness is a quiet thing – a thing that sleeps in your bones, makes them heavy. I don’t feel heavy. My heart is hissing and quaking, and the anger unfurls as though through my skin. I seethe and I want to lash out. I don’t want to run away from the hurt; I want to run at it and pummel it with my fists – I want to kick its face in. Is that normal? (p. 5)

How has Claire Zorn conveyed Lucy’s state of mind so powerfully? Discuss the use of ‘show don’t tell’ in this passage.

- Why does Lucy cry when she sees the dead soldier by the roadside (p. 7)? What does this reveal about her character?
- Before they reach their destination, make predictions about Wattlewood Recreation Centre. What types of characters might we encounter there? What might some of the rules and regulations be?
- Reread the description of the dogs that Lucy, Fin and Max face when they are stopped at the border of Wattlewood (p. 12). How has imagery been used to depict this scene so effectively?
- Create a character profile of Lucy that shows your understanding of her personality and traits. Use a combination of colours, images and words to share your thinking.
- What is it about Jaxon that makes Lucy uncertain? How does his behaviour reflect the theme of power?
- In what ways does Jaxon manipulate Esther? Why can’t she see this for herself?
- Lucy says that ‘instinct has kept us alive so far. It’s like a compass and I tune in to the needle often: trust/don’t trust, run/stay’ (p. 27). How is the motif of this compass needle used throughout *When We Are Invisible*?

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- Throughout the text, Lucy describes her thoughts as a ‘white room full of evenly proportioned white boxes that I keep things in [which] has a single cold fluorescent light on the ceiling, the kind that is so bright you can’t block it out’ (pp. 31–32). What does the white light represent? Track the use of this literary device as you read. How does this help readers to better understand Lucy?
- Lucy says that she has to be ‘careful with my memories of my sister. They don’t give me strength. They scratch and tear at me if I bring them to the surface. I have to seal them up in the boxes and store them away’ (p. 38). Why does Lucy have to be careful with these memories, and how does Lucy change once she shares these memories later in the text?
- What role does Raahel play in *When We Are Invisible*? How does she reveal a courageous yet cautious nature?
- What is the connection between Bit, Declan, Mr Starvos and Lucy’s violence? Why does she keep hearing the cricket bat hitting Mr Starvos’s head?
- On p. 62, Lucy speaks about being the sister of someone with a chronic illness:

You smooth out wrinkles in a day so your parents don’t have to.  
 You become self-sufficient. You’re never the kid who talks back,  
 who makes trouble, who sees the line and crosses straight over it.  
 You’re careful. All. The. Time.

In response to this quote, write a journal entry, either in the role of Lucy or as yourself if you can identify with similar behaviour. How is this approach to life at times counterproductive?

- Sketch the landscape as described in the first paragraph on p. 67. Discuss the use of figurative language to depict this scene.
- Why does Lucy ‘hate Jaxon’s words and what they do to my head, how they reduce me to someone weak who needs protection’ (p. 70)? What comment is the author making about the disempowerment of women?
- Lucy often considers how Noll would have approached situations. How does Noll’s Christianity help Lucy to process her experiences? How is Lucy strengthened by Noll’s comment about the fearless women in the Bible? Why does Fin say Lucy is ‘the bravest person I know’ (p. 78)?
- Reread pp. 89–90 in which Lucy speaks about the disadvantages and inequalities that girls face. Why is this exposition such an important inclusion in *When We Are Invisible*?

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- What is it about Lucy that impresses Tom? Why doesn't he share this with her until much later in the novel?
- Why does Lucy see similarities between Declan and Jaxon? Why does she feel that 'Fin beams at him the way my mother would at Declan Flemming' (p. 104)?
- Why, when Jaxon teaches Fin and Lucy how to skin an animal, is she determined not to faint (p. 120)?
- Why can't Lucy bring herself to play the piano at Wattlewood?
- What examples are there throughout *When We Are Invisible* of women being disempowered? How do Lucy, Esther and Raahel empower themselves?
- Given the themes of gender inequality throughout the text, how important are gentle male characters such as Fin to the novel?
- Using Chapter 22 as stimulus, write a newspaper article targeting traditional gender roles and the need to challenge gender-based inequalities.
- How has hitting Mr Starvos with the cricket bat affected Lucy? Use quotes from the text to support your ideas.
- Why, when talking about how Lucy couldn't smash a kangaroo's head with a rock, does Esther say 'there's a big difference between wouldn't and couldn't' (p. 142)? How does this help Esther to respect Lucy more?
- What does the re-emergence of the sun symbolise in *When We Are Invisible*?
- Why, when Raahel asks whether Lucy loves Fin, does Lucy reply, 'I try not to' (p. 149)? What is holding her back?
- Discuss the significance of the following quote from the text: 'I remember Mr Effrez yelling Lady Macbeth's lines. *Out, damned spot. Out.* But it can't be done. I have Starvos's blood on me and it will be there forever' (p. 151).
- Lucy describes her feelings of uncertainty, saying 'each day rolls over me like a dark wave; I don't float on the top – I have to hold my breath, put my head down and wait for it to pass over me' (p. 160). Why does it take her so long to confide in Fin, and trust their love for one another? How does doing so help her move forward?
- How does the episode with Sarah and Polly reveal inner characteristics of both Jaxon and Tom?

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- Why does Lucy's anger with Jaxon make her 'frozen' (p. 204)? How can a man's body language make a woman 'feel ... less' (p204)?
- Discuss Tom's character. How does he develop from the start of the text to the end? Why does he say to Lucy 'if I was your dad I'd be bloody proud of you' (p. 212)? How does saying so give Lucy the courage to do what she does next?
- How does Jaxon make Lucy feel 'like a piece of paper – he's crumpled me up into nothing and I can feel every crease' (p. 227)?
- What statement about control and power is being made in *When We Are Invisible*?
- In the role of Lucy, write a journal entry expressing how you feel when the texts from Bit come through on your phone. What does this mean for the future? How is this both a happy and sad moment?
- Why doesn't Lucy carry through with her initial plan to ride home to her mother?
- Discuss Lucy's assessment of heroes:
  - Jaxon has invented reasons to make terrible decisions, like it's a glorious thing to do. He wanted to be the hero without knowing that the hero is the last person anyone should want to be – because they have the hardest job and they have to live with it forever. (p. 294)
- Which character from *When We Are Invisible* do you most relate to? Why?

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

Like many readers of *The Sky So Heavy*, I've often wondered what Fin, Lucy and Max found when they left Sydney in search of safety after the catastrophic nuclear disaster which forced them to flee their homes. I had a vague notion that they found some sort of safe haven to wait the chaos out until the world settled and they could return home. However, I was happy to leave it unexplored and I never intended to write a sequel until Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States and I began to wonder what would motivate people to vote for such a leader. No doubt there was something about him which charmed them, people also perhaps had a lot of fear and distrust of the established systems of power and government. Trump presented an alternative and a (false) promise of prosperity and protection. The world I've envisioned in *When We Are Invisible* is a place full of fear and uncertainty – everything its inhabitants have known has been taken away. I started to imagine what sort of leader might be appealing to people in their situation.

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In addition to this, as I began to write I realised that Lucy's experience as a young woman in such a world would be very different to that of Fin (the protagonist of *The Sky So Heavy*). Conversely it might be similar to what women and girls in many parts of the real world experience today. And what of the women and girls who live through relationships here in Australia where they are manipulated, controlled and silenced? How do women end up in relationships which are the exact opposite of what they sought? I wanted to use Lucy's observant eyes to peer into this kind of experience – one which too often is invisible to even close friends and family. I wanted to find a way to make visible the lives of women and girls who are abused emotionally, psychologically and physically. I wanted them to be seen.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Claire Zorn lives on the south coast of New South Wales with her husband and two sons. Her first young adult novel, *The Sky So Heavy*, was a 2014 Children's Book Council of Australia Honour Book for Older Readers, shortlisted in the 2013 Aurealis Awards – Best Young Adult Novel and shortlisted in the 2014 Inky Awards. Her second young adult novel, *The Protected*, was the winner of four awards: the 2015 Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Young Adult Fiction; the 2015 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards – Young Adult Fiction Prize; the 2015 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year for Older Readers; and the 2016 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards – Young Adult. It was also shortlisted in the 2015 Inky Awards. *One Would Think the Deep* is her third book for young adults and was awarded the 2017 CBCA Book of the Year for Older Readers.

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