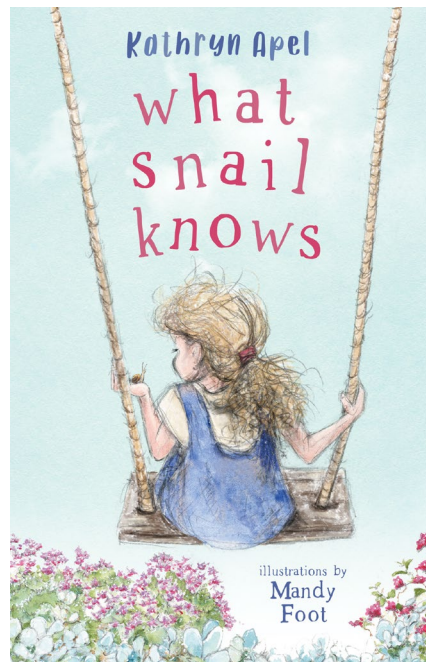


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# WHAT SNAIL KNOWS

## Kathryn Apel



### Teachers' Notes

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

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**SYNOPSIS**

Lucy is lonely. It's hard to make friends when you move towns so often. And it's hard to fit in when you are shy and unsure. There is something different about this town, though. Her new teacher is kind and patient, Tahnee *wants* to be Lucy's friend, and Mei-hui's caravan park is beginning to feel like home.

*What Snail Knows* is a gentle verse novel about belonging, acceptance and gaining the quiet confidence to be yourself.

**THEMES**

- Belonging
- Acceptance
- Friendship
- Loneliness
- Community
- Introduced Species
- Action
- Verse

**WRITING STYLE**

*What Snail Knows* is a beautifully crafted verse novel that is told with restraint while being rich in structure, symbolism and themes. Through the use of evocative characterisation and clever formatting, the verses flow effortlessly to share the story of Lucy, a girl whose mother has died and whose father is reluctant to accept help for fear of seeming vulnerable. When Lucy finds Snail, however, she also finds friendship and a slowly burgeoning confidence. Told in first person, present tense, Kathryn Apel engages readers through her perfectly nuanced story of Lucy's homelife in the caravan and the daily bustle of her Year Two classroom. Although perfect for a read-aloud to early childhood classes, the literary quality and sophisticated writing also extends its range to middle readers.

**STUDY NOTES**

- In the first poem starting on p. 2, we discover that Lucy and her dad live on their own and move a lot. Discuss how the stanzas not only establish a timeline for readers, but also share that Lucy doesn't have a mum, grandparents or other family. How does this verse help readers to immediately empathise with her?
- On p. 6, Lucy says she was 'hoping to find treasure' when she found Snail. Why does Lucy consider Snail to be such a treasure?
- Discuss the formatting of the poems, particularly the choice of line breaks and position of words on the page. How do these choices add meaning to

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the poems? Examples to discuss can be found on the following pages: 6, 18, 21, 24, 45, 64, 119, 137, 141, 178, 179, 218, 222.

- Imagine that you are Snail leaving an invisible message for Lucy. What message would you leave her (p. 7)?
- How does Kathryn Apel use ‘show not tell’ to describe the fact that Lucy and her dad don’t have much money? Explore this idea further through Lucy’s school lunches and those of her peers, including the scraps Lucy brings home for Snail.
- After reading ‘Moving House’ on pp. 11–12, use the description to sketch Snail’s new home.
- In what ways is Snail a metaphor for the lifestyle that Lucy and her dad lead?
- Why, ‘on quiet afternoons’ (p. 16), does Lucy like to pretend that the parklands are her backyard?
- Look carefully at the drawing of Lucy on the front cover, and again on p. 17. Although we can’t see her face, we can tell she is smiling. What is making her feel so happy in these two drawings? Compare these with the drawing on p. 25. How is body language used to convey meaning?
- Explore the various poetic devices used throughout the text, discussing how they contribute to the narrative. Examples include:
  - Shape poetry
    - The numeral 2 – p. 3
    - Car – p. 28
    - Snail – p. 49
    - Pieces of pie – p. 76
    - Jellyfish – p. 93
    - Key – p. 99
    - Snail – p. 210
    - Flower – p. 218
    - Heart – p. 222
  - Repetition
    - ‘What If?’ p. 4
  - Imagery
    - it was snail-heavy p. 6
    - Slowly, slowly, a sticky grey body / slid out p. 6
    - Our washing / snail-shell swirls p. 79
    - I feel my lips tease into a smile p. 97
    - Snail’s eye-stalks / arc and sway p. 98
    - a smile slides / across my face p. 108
    - Don’t want worry / to squeeze out my eyes / and slide down my cheeks p. 138
    - ‘It’s just Dad and me,’ I say / jiggling on the spot / with the worry / in my feet p. 146

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- I whisper, / feeling like a stodgy glob / of squidgy putty – with all my / happiness squished out p. 207
- Similes and metaphors
  - like a great big / shady / tree p. 18
  - My dad is like a shadow. / A whisper. / A hug p. 21
  - Our washing sloshes and / swirls like a snail shell p.53
  - Snails are little vacuum cleaners p. 121
  - Her eyes are / as soft / as the touch of / her hands p. 150
  - Then I hear him swallow, / like there's a big lump / blocking his throat p. 178
  - it's like he's sifting through words p. 184
  - Stretching / out like a small tree p. 222
- Alliteration
  - picking, / planting, / potting and / pruning p. 79
  - grows into a grin p. 97
  - smile slides p. 108
- Rhyme
  - What is stopping / your toad hopping p. 190
  - We group. / We troop. / We swoop. / We scoop. / We *whoop!* p. 198
- Wordplay
  - 'Shell-ter' p. 47
  - 'Partners in Slime' p. 50
  - 'PIEces of Rubbish' p. 88
  - 'Bee Mine' p. 101
  - 'We'll jump right in with these / fun facts' p. 116
  - 'A Coil of Concern' p. 149
- Discuss the use of specific devices on the following pages, and how these add to meaning:
  - Parenthesis – '(again)' p. 3; '(It's a bit like mine ... a bit knotty)' p. 21
  - Italics – '*just*' p. 5; '*real*' p. 14; 'from a *whole apple*' p. 47; '*Real steak*' p. 156; '*Gasp*' p. 179
  - Dash – 'to our other caravan – / before we moved to / this one' p. 6
- Why does Lucy liken Mei-hui to a bee (p. 14)? How would you describe her? What role does she play in *What Snail Knows*?
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, create a story map that summarises the storyline of each section.
- How do others help Lucy and her dad in *What Snail Knows*? Why is Dad so reluctant to accept help? What finally changes his attitude?
- Look at images online of the inside of caravans like the one Lucy and Dad live in at Mei-Hui's park. Use the drawings on pp. 14–15 to help. Compare these images with the depiction of their home in *What Snail Knows*.

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- Discuss the metaphor of the family tree on p. 19. Why does Lucy see her family as 'just a seed'? How do we know that Lucy desperately craves family?
- What characteristics do Lucy and her dad have in common? How do they differ? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Discuss the symbolism of Lucy's hair. How does it reflect what is happening at various stages of the narrative?
- After reading 'I Smell Trouble' on p. 27, write a reflection in the role of Lucy. How does this verse make you re-think the way you treat people?
- How does Tahnee '[squeeze] / inside' Lucy's shell (see p. 29)? What does this mean?
- Why does Lucy 'sit / and watch' the other children during lunchtime rather than play with them (p. 32)?
- How do the various inquiries completed by Miss Darling's class help Lucy to come out of her shell?
- Create your own class 'How Can I Help?' program. Like Lucy's class, collect data to create a graph of the class's activities.
- How does helping others improve wellbeing for both the givers and receivers of such acts? Why do characters like Roxie and Kody struggle with this concept initially? Why isn't Ashton making his bed considered helping someone?
- How does Lucy realise that helping people does not need to include money? What do people in her class do that is free?
- Lucy's class devise rules for their school. What rules could be added to a list for your school? With a partner, create a poster to promote one of these rules. Think of a catchy phrase for your poster.
- What does Miss Darling mean when she says 'play with your words' (p. 38)? Why does she say 'your first attempt / might not be your / *best* effort'? Reflect on times when this was true for you. Share with a friend.
- Why doesn't Lucy like group work? Why is group work important? What advice would you give Lucy to help her overcome this?
- What are Tahnee's qualities? Why is she such a good friend? What can you learn about friendship from her?
- Why is Lucy surprised that 'Tahnee's happy / with *her* partner' (p. 40)?
- Discuss the shape poem about snails on p. 49. Try creating your own shape poem based on the attributes of a different animal.
- Kody often shares what his father thinks about things. How would you describe his father? How are Kody's mother and father different (see p. 84)? How is Kody's dad different from Lucy's dad?
- Like Miss Darling, cut up a simple recipe that students could make at home and have them unscramble it. Demonstrate making this meal so that students can do so at home.

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- Why, when going to buy puff pastry to make the sausage pie, does Lucy ‘swing Dad’s hand’ (p. 67)? How do we know that her dad is also happy (see p. 69)?
- Why, in ‘Ticking Boxes’ (p. 69), does Lucy feel a sense of achievement when she can tick some boxes? What can we learn from this to help our own self-management habits?
- Why does Lucy call Miss Darling ‘Teacher’ rather than use her name (see p. 72)? What is the significance to the storyline of Lucy starting to call her Miss Darling?
- Like Lucy’s class, take a survey of the rubbish collected around your school. Create a pie graph using the rubbish (see p. 88). What can be done with the food waste from your school (see p. 90)?
- On p. 97, why does Lucy say, ‘This school is / the best school / I’ve ever been to’? What are you grateful for in your school?
- Using the recipe on pp. 102–103, create your own beeswax wraps.
- Conduct an inquiry into introduced species (other than cane toads) that have had a negative impact on native flora and fauna. Create a poem to share vital information about this species (see pp. 117–118).
- Like Miss Darling’s class, learn how to write an email to an organisation (see p. 124).
- Design and create your own toad scoop (see p. 132).
- When Lucy’s dad doesn’t pick her up from school, she whispers, ‘It’s just Dad and me ...’ (p. 139). Why is this quiet line so powerful?
- Using the verse ‘Worried Sick’ on pp. 141–142, create a dramatisation of this scene.
- How are Snail and Banjo like one another (see pp. 157–158)? How does the drawing on p. 158 show this?
- What does Lucy say that finally makes Dad realise how important staying is to her?
- How has Lucy found her voice? Why is this so important?
- Discuss the verse ‘Tangled Web’ on p. 177. How does it capture so much of the storyline of *What Snail Knows* in so few lines?
- Discuss what the following excerpt tells us about the relationship between Lucy and her dad: ‘When Dad starts snoring softly, / I crawl up onto the bed / and into his cuddle’ (p. 182).
- In the role of Lucy, write a journal entry about the day Dad says, ‘Maybe it’s time / to stay’ (p. 211).
- How does finding out about her family tree make Lucy feel more whole?
- Why does brushing her hair and looking in the mirror help Lucy to think about her mum?

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- Describe Miss Darling. What impact does she have on Lucy? Which teachers in your life have had a positive impact on you? Share with a friend.
- In what ways is Lucy like Snail? How would this story be different without Snail? What would be the same? How important is Snail to the text?
- Discuss the significance of the book's title. What exactly *does* Snail know? Share in a reflection.
- As a companion novel to *What Snail Knows*, read Kathryn Apel's *Too Many Friends*. (Teachers' Notes are available on the UQP website.)
- Lucy writes an acrostic poem about Snail (p. 43). Choose another species about which to write an acrostic poem, sharing facts with your audience.
- Consult with your principal to organise a compost heap and/or worm farm for your school.
- Advertise and hold a 'Nude Food Day' at your school (see p. 92).
- Research the life cycle of snails. Present your information using an app such as *Explain Everything*. Consider creating a snail habitat in your classroom and keeping snails for the duration of your inquiry.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*What Snail Knows* came about from a conversation in my first post-lockdown get-together with a kidlit friend. We'd been chatting mum-stuff, and kids helping at home, which led me to share about a unit I'd taught inspired by the question 'How can I help?'

'You should write that book,' my friend said.

At the time I was immersed in picture books and I couldn't see the story ... but six weeks later I was pondering verse novels, and though I had two mid-process, my friend's words popped into my head and I could see it – as a verse novel.

I started to gather a class of characters, then realised I already had them in *Too Many Friends*. Tahnee was a natural helper, so it wasn't her story. But one character was inspired by a girl I taught in my first class – a little girl who has played on my heart all these years. The quiet one who was always there, but always ... alone.

She was in my class for the shortest time. Then gone. Her tidy tray of scant belongings left behind.

I've never forgotten her.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kathryn Apel is a born-and-bred farm girl who's scared of cows. She lives among the gum trees, cattle and kangaroos on a Queensland grazing property, where she writes poetry, picture books and verse novels. Her previous books include *Bully on the Bus*, which won the Australian Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature: Younger Readers, *Too Many Friends*, a CBCA Notable book, and most recently, *The Bird in the Herd*. Kat loves pumping poetry because she can flex her muscles across other genres, to bend (and break) writing rules. A trained teacher, Kathryn shares her passion for words at schools and festivals around the globe.

[www.katswhiskers.wordpress.com](http://www.katswhiskers.wordpress.com)