

Sprite Downberry

by Nette Hilton



ISBN: 9780732285487 Publication Date: September 2008 RRP: \$14.99

Teaching notes written by Chris Sarandis

Synopsis

Right now, Sprite Downberry's life is pretty tough. Her dad's busy and away a lot, and her mum, Sunny, is very moody and unpredictable, so Sprite feels she can't tell her about the nasty girls at school. And Sprite is also worried about her little brother, Mozz. He can't talk properly and he's supposed to be starting school soon.

Now Dad's taken off, and Sunny's so unhappy she won't even get out of bed.

Determined to fix things, Sprite grabs Mozz and sets out to find their father.

In a night that never seems to end, Sprite faces decision after decision. Can she trust Luther, the runaway boy who rescues her and Mozz? And what should she tell the friendly policeman who knows so much about her?

By the time Sprite is reunited with her dad, things look like they're getting out of control. Will she figure out how to get her family back together – and handle the friendship problems at school?

Age 12+

About the Author

Nette Hilton spent her early childhood in a small country town in Victoria, moving to Sydney when she was eleven. She didn't adjust well to life in a city high school and her memories of this time remain with her and are reflected in her writing. After school, she 'floundered around for several years trying to work in office situations', but eventually gave up and went bush. For a year she worked on a sheep station, had another go at

office work, and then decided to train as a teacher.

The first story she ever wrote was for her daughter, who didn't like going to school. When Nette looked for a book about a child in a similar situation, she couldn't find any so she decided to write her own. 'It was my way,' says Nette, 'of saying things that I found easier to put into written words. I still use writing in this way – if I have something that needs to be said, then I try to write a story about it.'

Nette has to plan carefully to fit her writing into her busy life, even going so far as to allot time in her diary for thinking about the next book. 'It's important to me,' she says, 'that I spend time thinking about the way the book will go, what the characters will be like, how it will begin, how it will end. All these things go chugging around in my head for quite a while before I sit down and start with words on paper or a keyboard.'

Nette went through the same process in preparation for her earlier novel for teenagers, *Hothouse Flowers*, a book which she describes as being about suicide and mental illness, youth and age, living and existing, and the value of life.

Other works by Nette published by HarperCollins include: *Living Next to Lulah; A Proper Little Lady* – shortlisted for the 1990 Children's Book Council of Australia Award (Picture Book); *Square Pegs; The Friday Card; The Web* – awarded Honour Book status in 1993 by the Children's Book Council of Australia (Younger Readers); *Hiccups; The New Kid; A Frilling Time; Seeing Things; Four Eyes* – Notable Book 1996 Children's Book Council of Australia Award (Younger Readers); a number of books in the *Surfside High* series; *The Foundling*; and *Clouded Edges*.

Other than writing and teaching, Nette's work also includes the Nestle Write–Around–Australia Competition where her role as author is highlighted in visits to schools around Australia and as a mentor for students who become finalists in the competition.

Says Nette: 'My life is about making up stories and writing them and then hoping somebody will like them enough to read them. So far I've been lucky and many people do seem to like my books – some like them enough to award prizes to them and others like them enough to write to me and tell me so.

'Writing stories can be a very lonely occupation. For the length of a story my companions each day are the characters that I have made up – and my dogs who never seem to get bored snoozing at my feet while I tap away on the keyboard. I don't talk about my characters until I have finished writing about them and by then, quite often, I'm already searching around for my new story and my new characters so it is a wonderful reward when I hear other people talking about characters that I have invented as if they were

old friends.

'I write each day – some days more than others because I teach at a primary school two days each week. I have my own writing space now – a delightful little house with leadlight doors and books, books, books everywhere! I have written my stories in many places – the kitchen table, the lounge room, the bedroom and, for a short time, in the laundry with two guinea pigs and a mushroom farm. One of the nice things about being a writer is that you only need paper, pencils and a corner of a table to get it going.'

Characters

- Describe one of the main characters from the novel and explain how their personality, actions and behaviour affect the action and outcomes of the novel as well as other people around them.
- Discuss the names Sprite, Sunny and Mozz and consider why the author may have chosen those particular names for her main characters. Do you consider them good choices? Explain your answer.

Setting

- Describe one or two of the settings or locations in the novel. How does the author create different moods for each setting such as the abandoned house and the streets at night?
- Write about a location of your own choice and try to create a mood or tone through your descriptions.

Tone

- As a class, brainstorm words to describe your feelings as you read the novel. Discuss why you chose those words and why you might have felt the way you did.
- Also consider the use of dramatic tension and how this is achieved as well as how it impacts on the reader.

Themes

Take this opportunity to ask the children to identify themes in the novel and to give examples of how these themes are realized. They might include, but are not restricted to:

- family breakdown
- bullying
- friendship challenges
- drug use

- mental illness/bipolar disorder
- children as carers
- sense of responsibility to family
- homelessness
- bravery, resilience and determination
- loyalty

Writing and Discussion Topics

(Refer to Web links at the end of these notes for further information.)

- Choose one of the quotes from the novel (you could use one of the ones below or find your own) and use it as a stimulus for a piece of writing. Your writing does not have to relate to the novel in any way but the quote should appear within your piece.
- Sprite felt a strong sense of responsibility towards her family and took charge of Mozz and finding her dad at a time when Sunny was unwell and unable to cope. Despite the fact that she was confused by Sunny's behaviour, as well as worried and often scared, Sprite sought to reunite her family, no matter what. As such, she was unable to do normal things like go to school. Find out more about children who care for a parent or other family member and describe the impact this might have on their everyday life.
- Reread the conversation between Dad and Sprite on page pp. 253-55, in which they discuss Sunny's illness: "*She's a druggie, isn't she? ... All that had to happen to make it begin was Mozz.*" Find out about bipolar disorder and describe its causes, symptoms and possible treatments. Also describe the impact of Sunny's illness on Sprite.
- In light of what you have learnt about bipolar disorder, reread the passage with the snake in Chapter 1 and discuss how this incident might have been symptomatic or exacerbated by Sunny's illness. Then find another example from the book that demonstrates a possible outcome of her health issues. (E.g. Sunny's doona cave; the dramatic change to her hair, the excessive amount of cakes she made when baking, and etc.)
- Choose a couple of the quotes below and explain who said them, when each was said and why. Analyse what it reveals about the speaker and their situation.
- Also choose a quote from the section below that you can identify with and write about a time you felt the same way.
- Pg 7: *They liked it so much they'd be paying her back for it all day.*

- Pg 8: *Sprite was angry. It had rippled around under her outside layer of skin threatening to burst out all day. She'd held it in. If she let it go, she'd splatter everywhere like the eggs she'd tried to cook in the microwave.*
- Pg 9: *She wanted to smack out so badly her breath was making snorting noises, but who was she going to hit? Boy she could see it - her arms whacking around and them all ducking and pointing and laughing.*
- Pg 10: *Around her she could hear a new silence filling the room. A smug silence. They'd got her and they knew it. Every little air space throbbed with it. It pulsed and pumped at her ears.*
- Pg 14: *When are you going to teach him to talk properly? Sprite demanded, wanting each word to stab at her mother like bindis into bare feet, wanting to make her pay for the terrible, terrible day.*
- Pg 82: *If Dad didn't come home ever again, where would the memories go?*
- Pg 82: *There was no point doing anything, it would just make another memory and it'd be one that she wouldn't want to keep.*
- Pg 85: *Her happy face and big clawed hands didn't match the heavy feeling in her heart. It was like she was being dragged down by sadness.*
- Pg 92: *Perhaps though, now she thought about it, if Madeleine had asked her to gang up on someone, maybe she would have. It'd be easier than having Madeleine hate you. Maybe that's what had happened to Katie.*
- Pg 95: *It seems to me, Sprite, that if you want people to like you, you need to start doing a few things right.*
- Pg 98: *Sunny always reckoned you shouldn't tell good news until it happened. She reckoned saying it out loud scared it away... The thought that Dad mightn't come home because she'd said it out loud, thudded under her heart so hard she had to hold one hand against her ribs to make sure it kept beating.*
- Pg 100: *What if she'd really spoiled it, and Dad wasn't home.*
- pg 105: *An awful little blackness inside her head whispered that Mozz would never have gone down the hill if Dad had been there, but she ignored it.*
- Pg 113: *As she said it, she remembered Dad explaining how Sunny couldn't try, not by herself. Not when she got like this, like she had been that other time. "It's like trying to pick yourself up with your own shoelaces," he'd said.*
- Pg 140: *If the man leaned over to grab the dog, if he leaned over to see what the dog was doing, they'd be found. And the whole plan of getting Dad to go back to Sunny would be lost forever.*
- Pg 215: *School was almost like something that had happened in her imagination. Had she really cared about a drawing of a frog? And those girls – Katie and Madeleine and Diva? Sprite's stomach knotted up a little as she thought about how awful they'd been. Here she was, in the middle of the night, running along a*

dark street with her little brother asleep in an abandoned house with a homeless kid called Luther, and those girls could still make her stomach clench.

- Pg 228: *Sprite thought about Sunny and the sad way she'd huddled herself into the doona cave on the bed. She thought about the way she kept that cave door closed up tight so no light could get in. How awful and dark it must be down there for her.*
- Pg 241: *But a nasty little worm twisted itself in Sprite's gut as she remembered Bazza leaning up close to her and she shuddered. It didn't feel right, not even when she thought about it now.*
- Pg 247-48: *Sprite didn't want to [leave the police station]. It was like they were letting go of a thread that held Mozz to them, leaving it to wave around all by itself.*
- Pg 270: *If Sunny was an eagle then who were the turkeys? Not her and Mozz. They'd be eagles too. Or eaglets. And not Dad. She'd never call him a turkey. Maybe it was the girls at school like Madeleine and Katie and Diva. Maybe they were the ones who wanted to fly, but because they couldn't fly themselves, they stopped anyone else from taking off. That'd be right.*

Studying the Novel

Chapter 2

- After the incident with the snake, describe Sprite's feelings when she was judged and teased by her classmates.

Chapter 3

- Why did Sprite tell Sunny that Katie's mother had sent a note requesting that Katie not sit near her in class? What was the outcome of this revelation?

Chapter 4

- How did Sprite deal with the bullying after she was accused of having head lice?
- How and why did Sprite try to lift Sunny's darkening mood?

Chapter 5

- When Dad failed to come home, describe what happened when Mozz and Sprite tried to cheer Sunny up by making a cake.

Chapter 6

- Why did Sprite suspect that her father would not come home?

Chapter 7

- Why do you think Sunny thought she was a bad mother? Discuss.
- When Dave spoke to Sprite on the phone, what did he say he was planning to do and how did Sprite deal with this information?
- Did Sprite feel responsible for ensuring that her dad came home? Discuss.

Chapter 8

- Why did Sunny change her hair and what did she hope to achieve by it?

Chapter 9

- Why did Sprite lash out at Katie after the incident in the library?

Chapter 10

- What happened to Mozz that caused Sprite to feel that she had to take care of him? (See Pp 103-05)
- Explain why Sprite decided to set out with Mozz in search of Dad.

Chapter 11

- Why was Sprite so keen for Jephath to drop her and Mozz at the pie shop as well as convince him that Dad was in her sights once they were there?

Chapter 12

- How and why did Sprite convince Mozz that it was important to be quiet while they searched for Dad?
- What sort of risks did Sprite take in order to make their journey a little easier?

Chapter 13

- Why did Sprite's 'heart sink' at the beginning of this chapter?
- In Sprite's mind, how important was finding Dave to their family's future?
- How did Sprite feel about stealing food from someone's house?

Chapter 14

- Talk about the tone of chapters 14 and 15 and the elements that may cause the reader to feel uncomfortable.

Chapter 15

- How did Mozz and Sprite escape from the old man's house?

Chapter 16

- Why did Sprite continually try and humour Mozz during the journey?
- Re-read page 191 and discuss Luther's mood and feelings as well as Sprite's sensitivity towards him?

Chapter 17

- Why do you think Sprite felt compelled to tell Luther about her parents and the girls at school?
- What initially prevented Sprite from leaving the abandoned house with Mozz?
- Describe her apparent resolve to go and find her Dad?

Chapter 18

- While they ate their pizza, what did Sprite learn about Luther's past and his plans for the future? How do you think this information might have influenced her?
- How was Sprite suddenly able to make a whole new plan at the end of this chapter?

Chapter 19

- Read the quote from page 215 (see above) and describe what Sprite meant when she made the comparison between her current situation and the one with the girls back at school.
- How did Sprite finally end up at the police station and what were her feelings at this stage of her journey?

Chapter 20

- What prevented Sprite from revealing Mozz's whereabouts to the policeman?
- Despite her joy at finally being reunited with Dad, what greatly dampened Sprite's mood when they went in search of Mozz?

Chapter 21

- What did Sprite and Dad discuss while they searched for Mozz?
- Describe how all Sprite's thoughts crowded in on each other during the search for Mozz. Have you ever felt like this? If so, what caused these feelings and what helped them to go away?
- Why did Sprite fret that Luther hadn't seen her note?

Chapter 22

- What did Sprite learn about Luther from the policeman and how do you think it impacted on her impression of him?
- How did Dad explain Sunny's problems to Sprite? Was it a good explanation and do you believe she understood it? Why or why not?

Chapter 23

- Describe the reunion between Sprite, Dad and Mozz.
- How did Dad convince Luther to spend a few days with them?

Chapter 24

- At the end of the novel, how did Sprite feel about the prospect of life without Sunny (for a little while), a new school and her family's future?

Chapter 25

- What made Sprite confident that Luther would find her after they moved?

Text Response

The book is about one girl's determination to reunite her family. In approximately 300 words, discuss how Sprite sets out to achieve this goal, how her journey unfolds, and the degree of success she experienced in understanding her mother and the reasons behind their family breakdown. You could include quotes to support your essay.

Research Topics

Children could prepare a brief report on a chosen theme from the novel after their initial brainstorm. See below for suggested Internet links to some of the themes from the novel.

FURTHER READING

<http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/>

<http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/Housing+&+Accommodation/Homelessness/>

<http://www.reachout.com.au/default.asp?ti=255>

<http://www.medicalonline.com.au/medical/drugs/marij1.htm>

www.beyondblue.org.au

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

www.reachout.com.au

www.sane.org

<http://www.youngcarers.net.au/parents-needs.html>