



Jane Godwin

WHEN
RAIN
TURNS
TO
SNOW

TEACHERS RESOURCES

WHEN RAIN TURNS TO SNOW

by Jane Godwin

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Introduction	3
Before & After Reading the Novel	4
Themes & Curriculum Topics	5
Study of History, Society and Environment	
Science	
English Language & Literacy	
Further Quotes for Discussion	12
Further Activities	13
Conclusion	13
About the Author	13
Bibliography	14
About the Author of the Notes	14

INTRODUCTION

'Have you ever seen it when rain turns to snow?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Sometimes it happens in Ballarat. It's like everything slows down,' he pauses, looks over at little sleeping Mercy, 'becomes soft. Quiet.' (p 79)

Lissa Freeman is alone at home when a young stranger turns up on the doorstep, carrying a baby. After refusing him entry she gradually becomes drawn into the mysterious mission on which Reed Lister has embarked. For Reed is on the run. He's been given the responsibility of looking after Mercy, the baby, by his addicted brother Eliot. And he has just discovered that he was adopted. Reed is searching for his birth mother, despite loving his adoptive parents, and somehow he has identified Lissa's mother as a possible candidate. Eliot has the same parents who love him but whom he has rejected. His baby Mercy has not been well treated and when he asks Reed to take her, Reed decides to find his lost mother and to take Mercy to her. To make matters more traumatic, Mercy isn't well, and neither teenager knows much about caring for a baby, but together they attempt to keep her safe.

Meanwhile, Lissa is also grappling with problems of her own. Their mum has a new friend in Troy, their dad is now living in China and is about to be a father again with his new wife Wendy. Lissa's best friend Hana has moved to WA and the mean girls at school are making Lissa's life a misery. Meanwhile, her brother Harry is dealing with a devastating secret of his own. And why does her mum lie about not knowing Reed? When Lissa discovers the real truth about her own birth, things begin to unravel. But happily Lissa and Reed form a bond which helps them both to resolve their personal crises. For in the course of this drama, Reed's appearance has stirred up untold histories in Lissa's family, and suddenly she is having to make sense of her past in a way she would never have imagined.

This is 'a beautiful and timely coming-of-age story about finding out who you are in the face of crisis and change'. It is also a love letter to the power of words, for the narrator, Lissa Freeman, absolutely loves language.

'I can't help thinking that Reed was sent from some kind of force in the world. That when we both needed each other, we were there. Neither of us knowing who we were, his discovery leading to mine . . . It makes no sense at all, it's like Bruce Springsteen coming on Troy's car radio just after we'd been talking about him. There's a word for that. Synchronicity. I like that word. I might put it on my list.' (p 268)

BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- Examine the lovely cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the novel, read about it in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society and Environment, Science and English Language and Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT (SOSE)

FAMILIES, PARENTING & HERITAGE

KEY QUOTE: 'I don't believe a family is only about genetics. I found a new word in the dictionary. Family. It's a portmanteau word, like blog, and brunch, and labradoodle. A blend of friend and family. I've got the definition in my phone. "A group of people who are not related by blood but who constitute an intimate network and a sense of belonging." ' (p 266)

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel is about the many ways in which a family can be made. What constitutes a family?

DISCUSSION POINT: It is also about the secrets often kept about family origins. 'As the lift goes up, I wonder how well any kid ever knows their parents. All the things your parents don't tell you. All their lives before you, the mistakes they've made, the regrets they have. Stupid things they did when they were young, before everything could be recorded forever on the internet. Their fears for you, for them. What they really, truly believe about you.' (p 205) Does everyone have a family secret? Do parents routinely keep secrets from their children?

DISCUSSION POINT: Should adopted children be told by their parents at an early age? And what of children born via sperm donors or surrogate mothers?

DISCUSSION POINT: Parenting is a huge responsibility. Eliot has been an unfit parent to Mercy, as has Sienna. 'Reed slows down, turns to me as we walk. "You need to understand that, his place, it's not a good place for a baby. Each time I went since Mercy was born, I got more and more worried." ' (p 67) Reed rescues Mercy but many babies are not so fortunate. Did Reed act correctly in taking responsibility for the baby as he did?

DISCUSSION POINT: Parenting can also be an enormous challenge which leads to controlling behaviour: 'It's like they have some kind of rope that they're gripping, and they're praying that it'll hold, that they won't have to let go.' (p 135) Is parenting sometimes an act of desperate fear, as much as it is fuelled by love?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'De facto means in fact. Troy might not be married to Mum or anything, but in fact he's becoming her partner. De facto. Like no matter what someone says about something, you need to pay attention to the in fact part.' (p 111) The term 'de facto' marriage implies a relationship which is less traditional than marriage by ceremony, and yet this definition implies that it is just as legitimate. Is it?

DISCUSSION POINT: Nature or nurture? The novel suggests that our heritage is often a determinant in our development as much as our home environment. Although Reed proves to be the sensible, diligent student his adoptive parents had hoped their son Eliot would become, he is also obsessed with environmental issues, an interest which later proves to have been inherited from his mother, Melanie, who was an environmental activist. From your observation, which is strongest – nature or nurture?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lissa's childhood memories of Bruce Springsteen are discussed (pp 156–7). The final page also refers to him. 'You like him too? Which song's your favourite?' "'Born to Run". Which one's yours?' "'Growin' Up".' (p 273) What significance does Bruce Springsteen have in this novel? What does this final page suggest?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lissa hears from Sadie about the recognised step-parenting conventions, for example: 'First meeting – incidental drop-in, won't stay.' (p 30) How difficult must it be for a new partner to be observed in this cynical way?

COMING OF AGE & RITE OF PASSAGE

KEY QUOTE: 'He looks like a tiny man and he's all serious and sensible, but some of his ideas are like a little kid's, someone who doesn't understand the world very well at all. I'm probably like that too. I'm a good writer, but I don't get great marks because I don't follow the formula like in Naplan. And I read books about words that are meant for adults, but I can never think of the right words to say when I'm speaking. Maybe Harry, too. He's really smart at maths and actually all subjects at school, and he's great at footy, and he totally looks like a man. But he's not coping with something. What's happening to him that he has to write that list?' (p 69)

DISCUSSION POINT: Finding Melanie's grave (p 254) gives Reed the answers he has been seeking. He knows now that she is at rest, that he bears her name as his own, but more importantly that his adoptive parents chose to give him Melanie's surname as his Christian name even though they weren't prepared to tell a child of his origins. Does this discovery represent a turning point in his progress to adulthood?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lissa is going through a confusing time with her parents having divorced, her father living in China, her mother busy with her work, her brother suffering some sort of crisis, and as she is going through puberty as well. How does she mature in the course of this novel?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'I read that if you're my age and you like another guy, it could just be a stage. I read that like thirty times. A stage. I could wait for it to go away.' (p 75) How damaging is it for a young gay person to be told that they are just going through a 'stage'?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Do you know? Can you guess what I'm about to tell you?' I take a breath. 'Is it that you think you might be gay?' (p 238) Harry's sexuality is a question left unanswered at the end of the novel. Why is this question left open-ended?

FRIENDSHIP, PEER GROUP PRESSURE & BULLYING

KEY QUOTE: 'A friendship group has a life,' says Mum. 'A beginning, a middle and an end. And individual friends, too. You know the old saying – a friend is for a reason, a season or a lifetime.' (p 124)

DISCUSSION POINT: Amber (and her acolytes Sadie and Poppy) are mean to Lissa, whose best friend Hana has gone back to WA, making her even more vulnerable. 'The originals are the ones who've been at the school since prep. I only came in Year Seven. Which makes me not an original. Hana wasn't an original. Sadie isn't one either, but she pretends to be. Amber is one of the originals. She's actually like queen of the originals.' (p 21) This description could apply to many schools where members of the 'in-group' victimise those considered less popular than they are. How can we avoid being drawn into such potentially damaging adversarial relationships?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lissa refers to 'the wit of the staircase', by which she means that when someone like Amber taunts her, she often finds no way to reply until after they have parted: 'What I should have said was, "I'm not upset about a piece of chewing gum, I'm upset because this is another small example of how you're a total B to me every day.'" You know what they call that? The wit of the staircase. It's like you think of the best thing to say when you're walking back down the staircase after an argument. I always have that. The wit of the staircase. And sometimes, I have no words at all.' (p viii) Discuss with students the power of words and how cruelty can be met with powerful words without resorting to abuse.

DISCUSSION POINT: There is a suggestion throughout the novel that Harry is bullied by the 'guys from footy' – they send him inappropriate pictures that will embarrass him, tease him for not having a girlfriend, and suggest that he has an STI because he doesn't like the public showers. Although he's good looking and good at footy, he's not really 'one of the guys', and this makes them uneasy. That's why Harry presumes the guys are playing some kind of awful joke on him, when the photos of Amber emerge – because they have been insidiously doing this kind of thing to him and he presumes it's escalated. Why do you think they behave this way towards Harry? Do they perhaps sense he is different from them? Perhaps they find this threatening?

SOCIAL MEDIA, BULLYING AND EXPLOITATION

KEY QUOTE: 'Mum, people your age don't get it, that's not the way the world works.' Harry sighs like an old man. 'Kids get destroyed on social media all the time.' (p 166)

DISCUSSION POINT: 'There's nothing I can do. What rule has been broken? Just stuff that adults talk about, like fairness, respect, truth – stuff that maybe used to happen, but people don't care about that anymore. The worst thing I could do is defend myself.' (p 62) Is social media really so lawless? What should adults do to prevent teenagers being damaged like this?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'There might be new laws in the future, but how will police arrest every bully on social? Anyone who shares something that isn't true? It's basically a huge uncontrolled experiment we're in. I don't know how, but change has to come from us.' (p 144) What can teenagers do to combat social media trolling like that inflicted on Harry?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'I think of what Ms Ritter, our English teacher, says: that we live in a post-truth world.' (p 242) Is there any such thing as a post-truth world?

DISCUSSION POINT: Creating fake identities online can also be dangerous as Amber demonstrates in trolling Harry. What might be the consequences of this activity, both for the sender and the recipient or recipients?

DISCUSSION POINT: Texting can also be dangerous as misunderstandings can easily arise. Lissa worries when Hana doesn't reply to her 'streak' and presumes she has cooled in her friendship. Such misunderstandings often lead to aggressive text exchanges. Invite students to discuss their experiences of this.

KEY QUOTE: 'You need to be careful when you start going out with guys, Liss. The way some guys talk about girls, how they rate them, how they have these competitions to see who can make out with the most girls over a footy season. They're always getting girls to send them nudes and stuff like that, then they show them around, sometimes they sell them. It's really off.' (p 163)

DISCUSSION POINT: Amber's behaviour is dangerous because she believes that flirting with the older boys will make her more attractive to them, whereas she actually makes herself far too available to some abusive behaviours. Discuss with students the need for mutual self-respect in relationships.

DISCUSSION POINT: Lissa has little confidence around boys which is why Harry warns her. Her lack of experience makes her vulnerable, as well. Discuss with students the protective mechanisms they need to develop in order to avoid exploitation.

DISCUSSION POINT: The #metoo movement, now a global movement, began on social media to raise awareness of and protest against the sexual harassment and sexual assault of women by men. Discuss how social media can become a powerful tool for women who might not otherwise have a voice and for those who are working to stop exploitation of women.

DISCUSSION POINT: Discuss with students some examples in the book of the following: boys mistreating boys; boys mistreating girls; girls mistreating girls; girls mistreating boys.

ACCIDENTS OF FATE

KEY QUOTE: 'Like you crashed your car because you were texting. Or left a candle burning and your whole house burnt down. Or had a baby when you weren't old enough. Or kept a secret that would change everything. I wonder if that's what happens to some people? That they make a mistake they can't come back from.' (p 176)

DISCUSSION POINT: Discuss with students how sometimes an accident can turn one's life around in unforeseen ways.

DISCUSSION POINT: What accidents of fate occur in the course of the action in this novel?

GUILT & FORGIVENESS

KEY QUOTE: 'I wanted that baby to know that I thought about him, I cared.' Reed puts his brownie neatly on the table. 'I know.' He stands up as if he's about to make a little speech. 'Thank you for giving me that opportunity.' Mum looks at Reed as if no one else is at the table. 'I wanted to be forgiven.' (p 267)

DISCUSSION POINT: Fiona's lifelong sense of guilt has largely been hidden from her children. How destructive is guilt? How does one overcome it?

DISCUSSION POINT: Who else in this novel feels guilty and why?

SCIENCE

CLIMATE CHANGE

KEY QUOTE: 'Sometimes the smog worries me, makes me think of climate change, and that maybe in the future days will always look like this. Like in China, there's terrible smog.' (pp 6–7)

DISCUSSION POINT: Both Lissa and Reed express concerns about climate change. Invite students to research this subject.

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel refers to the Wombat State Forest protests in the 2000s (p 244) in which Reed's birth mother was involved. Invite students to find out more about this protest and to relate it to today's environmental concerns.

DISCUSSION POINT: Debate the pros and cons of environmental protests.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE

DISCUSSION POINT: This first person account gives us Lissa's view of the action. Imagine how differently any scene in the novel might be viewed if seen from Harry's perspective? Or from their mother's?

SYMBOLISM

DISCUSSION POINT: Rain and snow are obviously key symbolic ideas in this novel. What does the title suggest symbolically?

DISCUSSION POINT: What other symbolism did you notice in this novel?

LITERARY DEVICES

ACTIVITY: Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

Simile	'stakes for the garden up against the house like leaning wooden soldiers.' (pp 3–4)
Metaphors	
Personification	
Other	

DISCUSSION POINT: Lissa considers the sound of words (pp vi and vii) and how they make her feel. Discuss with students words that have particular resonance for them emotionally.

ACTIVITY: Lissa also discusses 'homophones' (p 3). Read more about this topic and ask students to come up with a number of examples.

ACTIVITY: Lissa mentions 'contronyms' (p 39). Read more about this topic and ask students to come up with a number of examples.

ACTIVITY: Lissa loves words and mentions several interesting ones, eg 'kvetching' (p 6) 'saudade' (p 157), 'solastalgia' (p 241) and 'synchronicity' (p 268). Ask the class to come up with a favourite word which is not commonly used and which others may not have heard of.

ACTIVITY: The chapters in this novel are all one-word titles, and are words which are particularly resonant, such as Reed, Mist, Fleeting, Forgive, Mercy, Serendipity, Earthfall, Joy, Splashdown, Move, De Facto, Lullaby, Solstice, Alone, Surrender, Saudade, Fathom, Authority, Forsaken, Truth, Infinity, Synchronicity. This could be seen as another list of Lissa's favourite words as each of them is intriguing in meaning; each of them is explained in the context of that chapter. Invite students to write a definition for some of these chapter titles.

ACTIVITY: Lissa also includes several lists – of things about Hana to make a poem (p 47); Harry's list (pp 60–1); 'Things I Don't Know' (p 95); 'Questions I don't know the

answers to' (p 223); 'Things I've learnt about people' (p 270). Invite students to create a list of things which they've discovered in reading this novel.

HUMOUR

Activity: Identify techniques by which humour is provoked. Add quotes to the following table:

Sarcasm	
Irony	
Exaggeration	
Black Humour	
Other	

STRUCTURE

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:

a) *The novel is told chronologically with first a brief introductory chapter entitled 'Reed' (pp vii and viii) before the following Chapters which fall into Parts headed Tuesday, Wednesday etc to Monday, and then short sections entitled 'Three Weeks Later', 'Six Months Later', 'Five Years Later'. So most of the action takes place in one week.*

DISCUSSION POINT: What effect does this condensed time frame have on the action?

b) *Between the chapters in this novel there are short lyrical poetic pieces of prose in italics, which act as commentary on what has come before.*

DISCUSSION POINT: Discuss any one of these pieces and what it suggests. How does it link the chapter before with the one which follows?

c) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters are another way of structuring a narrative, for example:*

Beginning: 'A Lone. Solo. Lonely. Alone. So many Is and os. Wow.' (Ch 13, p 172)

Ending: 'We should have told you this a long time ago . . .' (Ch 12, p 170)

DISCUSSION POINT: Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

d) *Suspense is always a key to any narrative's structure.*

DISCUSSION POINT: What elements of the story created suspense for you?

SETTING

DISCUSSION POINT: Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices. *Read this passage:* 'Two parrots with their speedy clockwork wings make a bright green blur through the trees. Even though we live in the suburbs, there are a lot of birds around. From our deck you see parrots, those colourful ones that dart and swoop and have a chirpy call, and the myna birds that are smaller but more aggressive, and the magpies with their warbling song. We used to sometimes see a tawny frogmouth or even a kookaburra, but I haven't seen one of them for a while. There are lots of gum trees but you can hear the traffic hum on the main road not far away. So it's quiet, but not truly quiet. I've lived here my whole life. This was the first house Mum and Dad bought, and then when he left, we stayed.' (p 28) What devices are used in this description?

ACTIVITY: Invite students to write a similar passage observing the place they live in, using such devices.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS: Lissa Freeman and her mother Fiona and brother Harry; Reed Lister; Troy, her mother's new friend.

MINOR CHARACTERS: Lissa and Harry's father Nick and wife Wendy and their twin babies Coco and Clementine; Lissa's best friend Hana (whom we only meet via texts); Lissa's frenemies Amber and Sadie and Poppy; Jan and Peter Lister, Reed's parents; Eliot, Reed's brother; his partner, Sienna and baby Mercy; Grace the netball coach; Lorraine, Amber's mother.

ACTIVITY: Read Lissa's description of Reed; '*Sadie would say... like a little man.*' (p 12). What does it tell you about him? What devices are used to paint a picture of him? Invite students to write a description of a character like this.

ACTIVITY: Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events that demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of each person.

QUESTION: Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

WRITING TASKS

ACTIVITY: Write a diary entry by Reed about his first meeting with Lissa.

ACTIVITY: Write a poem in ballad form describing Reed's journey with Mercy.

ACTIVITY: Write a letter as if written by Hana to Lissa about her first few weeks in WA.

VISUAL LITERACY

ACTIVITY: Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. [See **Bibliography.**]

ACTIVITY: Design a new cover for this book.

ACTIVITY: Create a book trailer for this novel. [See **Bibliography.**]

FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'You think mercy means kindness, like compassion. But I looked it up and it's a bit different from that. Have mercy. It's more like kindness to someone you have power over.' (p 39)
2. 'But sometimes the language I'm using to read them is different from the language that they speak.' (p 42)
3. 'It's all the same to them, just stuff to talk about. Stuff they've seen on Insta. Screenshots from Snapchat, from private Insta stories. Stuff people said about other people. They don't care if it's true or not. It's just stuff.' (p 45)
4. '*When you're a little kid, you can make mistakes like taking something that wasn't yours, or saying something mean, or lying to your parents about how many biscuits you'd eaten. But those things won't change your life. Then when you're older, you can make a mistake that you can't come back from.*' (p 88)
5. 'I like going to Mum's work, and not only because of the hydrotherapy pool. I like seeing my mother as a person out in the world, separate from me and Harry.' (p 106)
6. 'Once there's no respect for laws, for basic fairness, justice, for honesty, where are we at?' (p 167)
7. '*Every bit of a person's hate, or anger, or jealousy can go public now. Be anonymous. Have power. And no one can afford to make a mistake, not even a small one. But don't we all make mistakes?*' (p 227)
8. 'Or did I somehow feel what Dad always knew? Like, even though I was a little kid, I'd captured something in the air, sensed it deeply, in a way I couldn't understand. The wisdom of everything everywhere around me. 'Hey, maybe your donor is Bruce Springsteen!' says Reed.' (p 249)
9. 'So Troy has his own past. Even though he seems to look at things in a straightforward, simple way, says it's easy to be well, his life has still been complicated. It's like everyone has a hidden history.' (p 251)
10. 'And that made me think. Hurt is an adjective as well as a verb. Like, hurt people hurt people.' (p 264)

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. **Compare this novel to other young adult novels** which deal with similar issues such as adoption or social media bullying. [See **Bibliography**.]
2. **Design a poster to advertise this book.**
3. What other **title** might this book have had?
4. **Debate any of the topics** covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.
5. Locate and study **poetry** which deals with the feelings explored in this novel, for example read popular performance poet Steven Herrick's verse novels. [See **Bibliography**.]

CONCLUSION

This is a heart-wrenching account of two teenagers in a search for the truth in their families and in their own lives. Reed's discovery that he is adopted has turned his life upside down, but in attempting to find his birth mother he uncovers another secret in Lissa's life. The story is told with elegance and grace and is imbued with the author's love of language which makes each page a eulogy to language, and the novel a tribute to its power to overcome adversity, to restore hope and contentment, and to form bonds with others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Godwin is the highly acclaimed and internationally published author of many books for children and young people, across all styles and ages. Children's Publisher at Penguin Books Australia for many years, Jane was the co-creator with Davina Bell of the Our Australian Girl series of quality historical fiction for middle readers. Jane's books include her novels *Falling From Grace* and *As Happy as Here* and picture books *Go Go and the Silver Shoes* (illustrated by Anna Walker), *The Silver Sea* (with Alison Lester and patients at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne) and *Watch This!* (with designer Beci Orpin and photographer Hilary Walker). Jane is dedicated to pursuing quality and enriching reading and writing experiences for young people, and spends as much time as she can working with them in schools and communities and running literature and writing programs. For further information see: janegodwin.com.au

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- Hall, Leanne 'Engaging poetry for kids & teens' *Readings blog* <https://www.readings.com.au/news/engaging-poetry-for-kids-and-teens>
'Poetry for 'Teens' *Poets.org* <https://poets.org/poetry-teens>
'Teens' *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/teens>

Other Non-Fiction and Website Teaching Resources:

- 'Book Trailers' *Insideadog* <<http://www.insideadog.com.au/teachers/book-trailers>>
'Book Trailers for Readers' by Michelle Harclerode
<<http://www.booktrailersforreaders>>
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award.