

P is for Pearl

By Eliza Henry Jones

Book Summary:

From the talented author of the celebrated novels *In the Quiet* and *Ache* comes a poignant and moving book that explores the stories we tell ourselves about our families, and what it means to belong.

Key Learning Outcomes

ACELT 1807, ACELT1632, ACELY1746, ACELY1744

Themes

Trauma, Belonging, Mental Health,

ISBN: 9781460754931 19.99

eBook: 9781460709344

Notes by: Fiana Stewart

Recommended Ages: 14+

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About the Author

Eliza has qualifications in psychology, English, grief, loss and trauma counselling and completed an honours thesis exploring bushfire trauma in fiction. Her work has appeared in places such as The Big Issue, The Guardian, The Age and Daily Life. She's particularly interested in writing about grief, trauma and landscape. She has been a Writer-in-Residence at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in WA and in 2015 undertook a residential fellowship at Varuna in NSW.

Eliza's debut novel *In the Quiet* was published in 2015 as part of a three book deal with HarperCollins Australia. It was shortlisted for the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction, the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and was longlisted for the Indie Awards and ABIA Awards. Her second novel *Ache* was released in 2017. *P is for Pearl* is her first novel for young adults. She lives on a little farm in the Yarra Valley of Victoria.

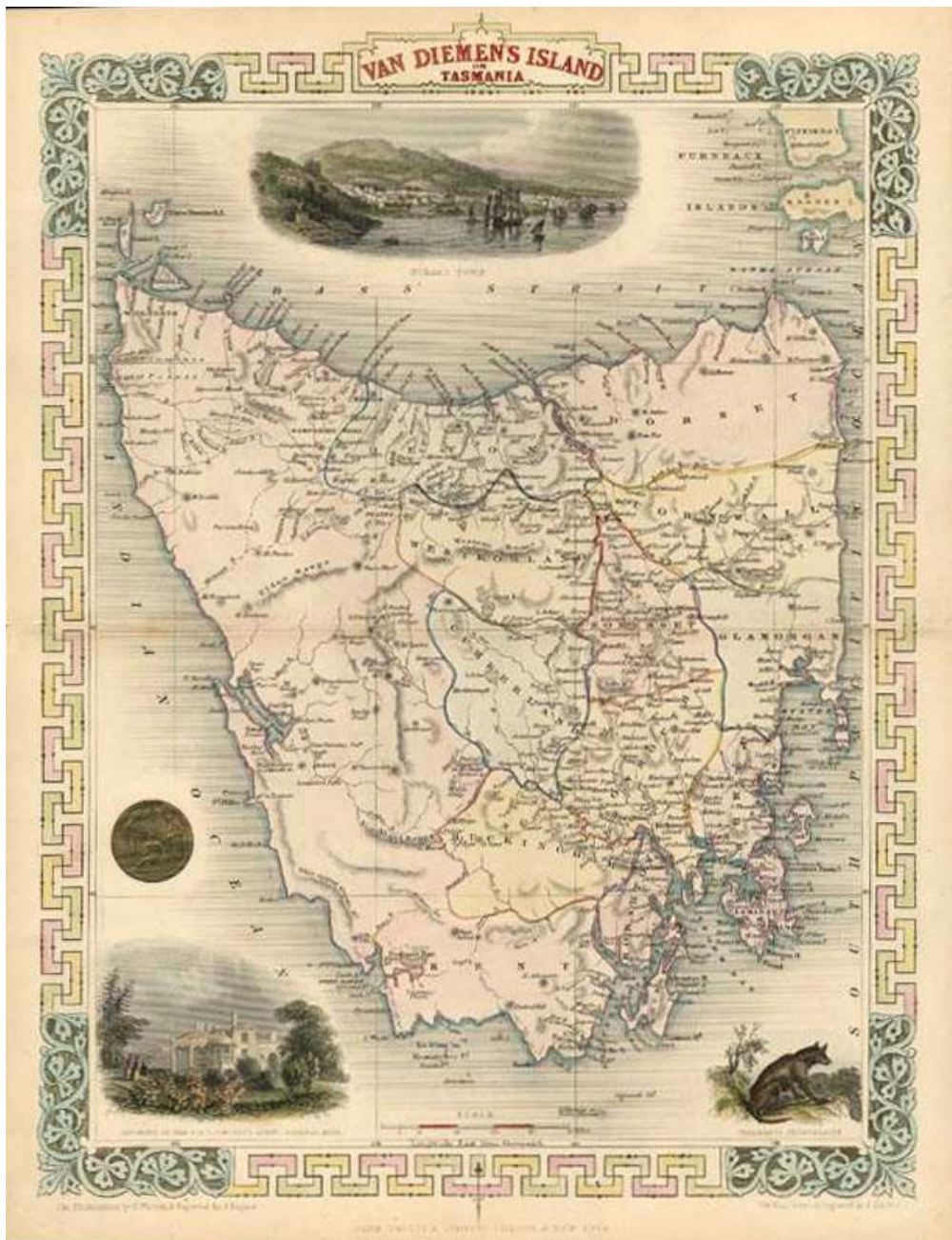
Book Summary

Gwen is a senior in high school and is battling the loss of her mother and younger brother. She has a best friend Loretta and a beloved sister Evie. Gwen struggles to come to terms with difficult memories of her mother. She runs across the coastal town of Clunes and tries to escape her pain. A new arrival in town is a welcome distraction. Her new crush lives in the historic Songbrooke. Songbrooke is an old artists commune that is slowly coming back to life. The mysterious Elsa will give Gwen opportunities to discover herself and her family's past. Gwen also has to contend with a troublesome stepbrother and interfering stepmother. She must navigate through memories of the past and face up to reality. With the help of some eccentric characters in her hometown of Clunes, Gwen meets every challenge.

Before Reading

To get a better understanding of the setting there are some activities below on Tasmania.

1. First, you can get an impression of Tasmania from an early map of the region.



<http://www.antiqueprintclub.com/> Print from 1853

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1. Do you notice anything significant about the region?

Some personality profiles will help you to develop an understanding of how this state developed over time. Look at the link below,

<http://www.maritimetas.org/collection-displays/displays/over-seas-stories-tasmanian-migrants/early-free-settlers>

2. How did key personalities shape the history of Tasmania?

3. What helped Tasmania evolve from a penal colony?

The landscape in Tasmania has inspired many literary works. Notably there are tales of ghosts described in the following link.

http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/G/Ghost%20stories.htm

4. What do you think inspired stories such as these?

5. How does the colonial history relate to the popularity of this folklore?

The ABC has a collection of stories about modern day Tasmania.

6. Pick two of these stories and reflect on how the composer explores what is significant about Tasmania.

7. Outline what attracted you to each particular story.

<https://open.abc.net.au/explore?sortBy=interest®ionId=9>

Techniques

In your own creative writing, it's important to employ writing techniques to convey your meaning. Use some examples from the novel to develop your own confidence with techniques.

Hyperbole

"I grinned, trying to show as many teeth as possible." (Pg. 4) Gwen frightens a patron at the café.

Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration usually for humorous effect.

Your turn...

Sarcasm

There is an endearing but begrudging friendship between Martin and Gwen. *"How'd you know it was me?"*

Martin *"By the feeling of dread in my stomach."* (Pg. 14)

Sarcasm is the stating of contempt or ridicule.

Your turn...

Personification

According to Evie *"...our beach was always in the middle of a tantrum."* (Pg. 45)

Personification is giving a human quality to an object.

Your turn...

Simile

Loretta questions Tyrone about him not surfing. *"You just bob around out there like a cork."* (Pg 49)

Simile is a comparison using 'like' or 'as'.

Your turn...

Juxtaposition

The contrast that's evident in Gwen's memories of her mother are jarring. They create ambiguity for the reader. *"Who I always thought of when I encountered smashed windows and coloured scarves."* (Pg. 83)

Juxtaposition is the placement of two contrasting things together.

Your turn...

Euphemism

Gwen uses a lot of euphemistic language when describing her mother. It reveals a refusal to accept the reality of her mother. Instead of emotionally out of control Gwen says she was someone, *"who felt things too deeply."* (Pg. 83)

Euphemism is an expression used as a substitute for something blunt or offensive.

Your turn...

Intertextuality

Gwen's mum used to tell her the original 'The Little Mermaid' story. A tragedy she thought relevant to her mother. "He chose someone else and she died." Gwen blames her dad choosing Bidy for her mum's death. (Pg. 266)

The Little Mermaid was originally a Hans Christian Anderson story and was not like the version made popular by Disney's film. An adaptation of the original story can be found below,

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/pdfs/transcripts/the_little_mermaid.pdf

Intertextuality is the reference in a text to another. It can highlight an important theme or hint at deeper meaning.

Symbols

Water

Water is seen as menacing in Gwen's dreams. Her mother distrusted the ocean and wouldn't take the kids to the beach. This ends up being ironic as it was in their own pool that Jamie drowned and later would claim her own life.

Gwen by contrast loves running by the ocean.

Mermaids

Loretta had drawn a picture of her and Gwen as mermaids when they were younger. Gwen's mum used to tell her mermaid stories. Gwen even sees mermaids in the shapes and contortions of the waves. The clay mermaid that Gwen made her mum, she discovers in a second-hand store in Craigsville. She feels her mother's possessions are seen as disposable and this upsets her deeply.

Tyrone suggests to Gwen that there was something unexplained in the water with him when surfing months ago. He believes it is connected to Gwen.

Loretta kindly suggests they make mermaid costumes, just as Gwen's mother had intended to.

Setting

Clunes is a small, remote town with an extreme climate. Often covered in mist with long cold months it seems a world away from mainland Australia. In the background is the story of Songbrooke, the old artists commune that brought notoriety to the town.

Gwen notes, *"People always had a reason to move to this place at the bottom of the world."* (Pg. 24) There is a sense of mystery and foreboding in the landscape. At Wade's point, *"Sometimes there were all kinds of strange things thrown up on the rocks. Wreckages..."* (Pg. 44)

"The tide was moving in as I ran along the shoreline. Always crashing, always unsettled..." (Pg 45)

1. How do you think the plot of the novel is reflected in the landscape?

Gwen finds solace in Wade's Point. She sees it as sheltered, hidden and hers alone. She feels akin to this landscape and draws strength from it during her runs there. This is brought into question when she discovers that the boy who died was her mother's brother.

Songbrooke has a rich history as an artists commune. Some famous artists worked and lived there. Elsa hopes to revive it to its former glory. She too is a well-known artist collecting coastline objects for her installations. In doing so she is celebrating the environment. Songbrooke eventually becomes a beacon for Gwen. She is employed by Elsa to scour the coast for art objects but is also tasked with the morning care of the animals. She then sits in a disused cabin and draws or does homework. It becomes a meditative and therapeutic space. Her connection to Songbrooke is deepened when Mau tells her that her mother and siblings lived there. Mau painted them, her mother as a mermaid.

2. Whilst the landscape and water surrounding Clunes can seem menacing, Songbrooke is like an oasis. What evidence supports this?

Activity

Imagine you are interviewing Elsa before she reopens Songbrooke as an artist's retreat. You might ask about Songbrooke's history. What her own art pieces are about. You could also ask what inspired her to work on its reopening. Perhaps ask her what makes Songbrooke so especially inspiring for artists.

Remember to use two distinct voices for the interviewer and Elsa. Review how Elsa speaks in the novel to help you write her responses.

Include five questions and responses.

Themes

Trauma

Gwen has some insight into grief, shown in her comments about Loretta's reactions after the café incident, "I'd noticed that, how most people said the same things over and over when something had shocked them." (Pg 8)

One of Gwen's challenges will be to try to move on from the trauma of losing her mum. At the start of the novel, troubling memories and an incomplete understanding of her mother are sabotaging Gwen.

1. How has trauma affected Gwen's daily life, both at home and school?
2. What methods does Gwen employ to try to cope with the grief she feels?

Memory

Gwen is distressed by what she sees as an inability to remember Jamie her brother. She feels too disconnected from him and it frightens her, "*But at the very least he should be remembered properly.*" (Pg. 86)

Likewise, she doesn't like that there isn't more evidence of her mother's life. "*....how she had lived here her whole life and yet not left any trace of herself. It was kind of unsettling. I didn't like the idea of disappearing.*" (Pg. 111)

One way Gwen countered these feelings was to visit her mother's close friend Mau at the Crystal Quotient shop. She furnished Gwen with stories, "*It gave me the best feeling, still being able to learn things about her even though she wasn't here anymore.*" (Pg. 111)

Loretta offers to help Gwen locate all her mum's things that are missing. "*For a moment it seemed possible. Tracking down every scarf, every scrap of drawing, every tea pot and fridge magnet and vase and doona cover.*" (Pg. 141)

1. Though those around her try to comfort Gwen, what is it about memories that make Gwen feel incomplete?

Much of the novel follows Gwen's efforts to regain the memories of her mother. In part, this seems to help diminish the derisive labelling from the town. It becomes obvious that Gwen doesn't want to admit the truth about her mother. This is made harder because her father rarely speaks of his late wife.

One diary entry tells of Gwen's memory of the mother smashing all the glass in the living room. She hid with her brother under her bed. It is then clear why she has recurring fears of this sound and why the café incident triggered the trauma for her.

Memories come back to Gwen at The Oak Hill Pub. As a small girl she would join her mother at the pub as she drank beers. Now Gwen resents this and sees her childhood was chaotic in contrast to the predictable comfort of Bidy's household.

2. What are some of the reasons that Gwen may gloss over her mother's real personality?

Belonging

As with all high schools there are cliques and a social hierarchy. Gwen, Loretta and Gordon see themselves as outsiders, in a town where being outside the norm isn't accepted. The exclusive surfer crowd dominates the school.

As a social outsider Gwen is shocked when Ben interacts with her. They share a passion for running. Her first crush is a teenage rite of passage and going through this milestone is a sign of her maturing.

Gwen is held back by the past. There are repeated mentions in Gwen's diary of her mother calling her Pearl. Mau also calls her Pearl. This conflict with her identity seems to complicate her already troubled relationship with the past.

Mental Health

More back-story is revealed as Gwen describes her mum being "loud and colourful" (Pg. 13) This is often repeated and sounds like a euphemism. Understanding is displayed by Martin the police sergeant, "*He'd called around a lot when mum had been alive...people around here don't know what to do with people who are loud and colourful.*" (Pg. 13)

Gwen's mother is described as an outsider. Lack of understanding is ingrained in the small town. Gwen's tone is critical of this and she sees it as injustice. After the incident in the café, Martin tells Gwen the man was, "*Transferred to Hobart. We can't do much with people like that down here.*" (Pg. 14)

Activity

Mental illness is dealt with mainly from the child's point of view in the novel. Gwen's understanding at the start of the novel seems defensive of her mother and very limited. She struggles with the perception of the town.

1. What are some myths surrounding mental illness in our society?
2. How might they be dealt with in a more positive way?
3. What does Gwen learn by the end of the novel about her mother's mental illness?
4. In what ways does this allow her to move on and achieve acceptance?

Characters

Gwen

Gwen is at odds with the small-town mentality of Clunes. She shows great insight in regards the unhinged man lashing out at the café. When discussing it with her friend Gordon she shows understanding, *"The guy was just sick. People in this town just can't stand anything out of the ordinary."* (Pg 19) *"They'd responded to my mum in pretty much the same way. And she hadn't been sick. She'd simply been a creative type."* (Pg. 19) It's clear that Gwen doesn't appreciate the bigger picture with her mum and is sweeping over the reality.

Whether it is baseless or not, Gwen feels self-conscious at school because of the loss she has endured. *"The girl with the ghost family."* (Pg 59). The family history project leaves Gwen at a loose end. She uses Bidy's family and feels that her classmates pity her.

1. In what ways is grief holding Gwen back?

Gwen uses running to mentally and emotionally escape. She goes so far that sometimes the police sergeant Martin must drive her home.

Gwen is weighed down by her experience of grief. She believes that Bidy her stepmother is an unwelcome intruder in her trauma. Her memories of her mother are sacred to her and only her father could understand.

It is clear she isn't coping when her nightmares return. They are triggered by the café incident. There is the overpowering symbolism of water in her dreams. We learn about this through her diary entries. (Pg. 51)

Gwen oscillates between wanting to control the incessant thoughts of her mother and seeking them out. There are unresolved identity issues; she used to be called Pearl. *"I won't think about being Pearl."* (Pg. 145)

1. What must Gwen do in order to achieve resolution and peace of mind?

Gwen misses belonging to her mother and is envious of Tyrone and Evie belonging to Bidy. As Gwen reaches boiling point, the tension becomes palpable. From her punching the wall in the kitchen, to smashing her mother's photo in Bidy's frame. *"And I thought of the glass shattering at the café, and for a moment my chest tightened and I felt panicked and dizzy."* (Pg. 159)

The repetition of glass shattering acts as a trigger point for Gwen.

Gwen reaches a level of acceptance after her outburst with her father and Bidy. Compounded by Mau clearly stating that Gwen's mother had a mental illness. Gwen builds a more realistic view of her mother. She discusses her anger at her mother, something the therapist was encouraging all along. Gwen reaches a mature acceptance and stops blaming her father.

She is also able to resolve her difficulty remembering her brother Jamie. She found reminiscing with her father brought it all back. *"And suddenly I could picture him...I'd needed Dad to help me."* (Pg. 292)

3. What does Gwen gain by achieving acceptance of the past?

Loretta

Loretta is a huge support to Gwen. They have been friends since they were young. Loretta is her constant companion. As seen from staying at one another's houses and Loretta being a sensitive and protective friend. Loretta feels responsible for Gwen. She tutors her in math, offers to make mermaid costumes with Gwen and is a constant support.

Ben

Makes a concerted effort with Gwen. He shows understanding on the nature of loss, that it's a constant. (Pg. 81) His experiences with his sister Amber show his emotional maturity. Ben does not believe the town gossip about Gwen's mum. Though his persistence, Gwen learns to trust him.

Gwen's mum

"My mum wasn't crazy. She was vibrant and lively. She was beautiful and creative and felt things too deeply." (Pg. 228) Gwen feels a constant need to defend the memory of her mother.

When her brother Jamie died, Gwen is taken to Biddy's to stay and does so for over three months. She is jolted by the contrast of the two households when returning to visit her mother. Seeing her in a new light, looking crazy. Her house, which she didn't notice as unusual, she now sees as a chaotic mess.

Gwen still clutches to a superficial portrait of her mother because the truth is too unsettling. By the end of the novel Gwen reaches a deeper and more holistic view of her mother.

Gwen's Father

Gwen's distrust of her father starts when she believes he instigated an affair with her teacher Biddy. Gwen and her father have an estranged relationship. She makes numerous failed attempts at more personal interactions but her father is always distracted.

Gwen feels disconnected from her father. However, a realization dawns on her, viewing Mau's painting she sees it's not her mother she resembles, but her father. Therefore, she does belong to him. (Pg. 277)

Creative Writing Activities

Activity One

Mermaids feature heavily in the novel. Being a mythical creature they ignite the imagination. It is easy to see why Gwen would be so captivated.

Writers will often use recurring symbols in their work to heighten meaning. A mythical symbol also creates a supernatural element in the story. Below is a link to descriptions throughout history of different ways mermaids have been imagined by various cultures.

<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/mythic-creatures/water-creatures-of-the-deep/becoming-mermaids/>

Pick one of these descriptions to feature in a short story where the mermaid is the central character. How will they interact with others? Is your story otherwise realistic? Will they also have supernatural powers? Do they exist to teach the characters something?

Aim for 800 words.

Activity Two

Gwen engages in diary writing throughout the novel. In these entries she explores troubling thoughts, her dreams and her memories.

Review the text type:

- Diary entries are written in first person.
- They use emotive language and often hyperbole.
- They are only written from one point of view and are subjective.
- Diary entries are revealing, analyze past events and center on emotional exploration.
- The purpose may be writing to understand, to vent feelings or confess secrets.

Pick another character in the novel aside from Gwen. Perhaps Ben wants to confess his feelings for Gwen or vent his frustrations with his sister. Choosing Loretta you may explore her concern about Gwen or desire to leave Clunes for university on the mainland. If you pick Gordon the diary entry may center on his hidden feelings for Loretta.

Be sure to consider the register, diaries are usually informal. The language choices should reflect the personality and thinking style of the character. Decide if the entry takes place directly after an event in the novel.

Aim for 600 words.

Activity Three

As the novel proves, memories are imperfect and they may fade or reappear over time.

Pick a memory of an event in your life. Write the event exactly as you remember it with as much detail as possible.

- What were you wearing?
- What time of year was it?
- Do you remember the weather?
- Think of the five senses and see how vividly you can recreate this event for your reader.

After you have written your first draft ask someone else who was there at the time to tell you their interpretation as they remember it. What was different to your memory? Did you leave things out you can now include?

As you are writing your final draft you may notice more holes in your memory. Perhaps you will be surprised how much you remember.

Aim for 700 words.

Activity Four

Dream symbolism

Gwen is haunted by bad dreams in the novel as she struggles to come to terms with painful memories and loss. In her dreams, water often features.

In pairs ask each other to describe a dream you've had.

Try to include as many details as you can. Remember that it isn't important that it makes sense.

Now your partner is going to decode your dream for you. Remember that dreams include symbols and are often abstract. You can invent reasons for things happening in your partner's dream and attach meaning to it. Perhaps the dream is trying to teach them something or explain something that has happened in their life.

For story writing in future it's a good idea to keep a dream journal so first thing in the morning you can jot down what happened. Later you can use this as inspiration for stories.

Paragraph Questions

1. Memories are a torment for Gwen and this never changes. Do you agree?
2. The sibling relationship between Gwen and Evie gives Gwen comfort. What evidence supports this?
3. Gwen's mother was just misunderstood. Is this an over simplification, if so, why?
4. Gwen's emotional life is stunted. Discuss with close reference to the text.
5. The only character that cares for Gwen is her friend Loretta. Do you agree?
6. The setting in the novel is irrelevant; the story could take place anywhere. Is this true?
7. It is impossible to understand loss if you haven't experienced it. Discuss.
8. What is the most significant turning point for Gwen?
9. In what ways is this novel optimistic?
10. Outline the importance of sibling relationships in the novel.

Assessment Task Year 8

Strands: Literature LT

Mode: Writing

Outcomes:

- ACELT1807 – Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts.
- ACELT1632 – Create literary texts that draw upon text structures and language features of other texts for particular purposes and effects.

Task:

Writing from the perspective of Gwen, compose a letter to her mother.

Text type: Letters are subjective; they may also use emotive language. You must reveal the purpose in writing the letter. Letters of correspondence should include questions.

Some things you may like to include,

- Friendships and school life
- Experiences at Songbrooke
- The milestones that she has missed
- Her relationship with her sister Evie
- The emotional struggles with grief
- Feelings towards her mother

Word limit: 800 words

Assessment Task Year 9

Strands: Literacy LY

Mode: Writing

Outcomes:

- ACELY1746 – Create imaginative, informative and persuasive texts that present a point of view and advance or illustrate arguments, including texts that integrate visual, print and/ or audio features.
- ACELY1744 – Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse texts, comparing and evaluating representations of an event, issue, situation or character in different texts.

Task:

Gwen is entering a short story competition and has decided to write about Clunes and the people of the town.

Include references to specific places and characters in Clunes.

Short story text type:

- What voice will you use?
- What perspective is the story written from?
- How will you create pace in you story?
- Use similes and metaphors to create imagery.
- Use specific description and be selective.
- What are your characters trying to achieve?
- What stands in there way?

Some ideas are below,

- A wreckage is discovered washed up on the beach
- Mau experiences a psychic vision
- Evie runs away from home
- Songbrooke opens as an artist community

Word limit: 800 words

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About the author of the notes

Fiana Stewart has taught high school English for over 15 years. She has a special interest in teaching creative writing. She studied Shakespeare at Cambridge University as part of a study abroad program. Having completed a Bachelor of Arts she continued to pursue her Diploma of Education and Masters in Creative Writing. Fiana also completed a Diploma in Book Editing & Publishing. She has experience working in the publishing industry and extensive experience reviewing children's literature. Fiana spent three years on the NSW committee of the Children's Book Council of Australia. Most notably she ran the Aspiring Writers Program. She has vast experience in online education and believes in empowering students through the world of literature.