

Forgetting Foster

By Dianne Touchell

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Summary

Foster suddenly recognised the feeling that rolled over him and made him feel sick. It was this: Dad was going away somewhere all on his own. And Foster was already missing him.

Foster Sumner is seven years old. He likes toy soldiers, tadpole hunting, going to school and the beach. Best of all, he likes listening to his dad's stories.

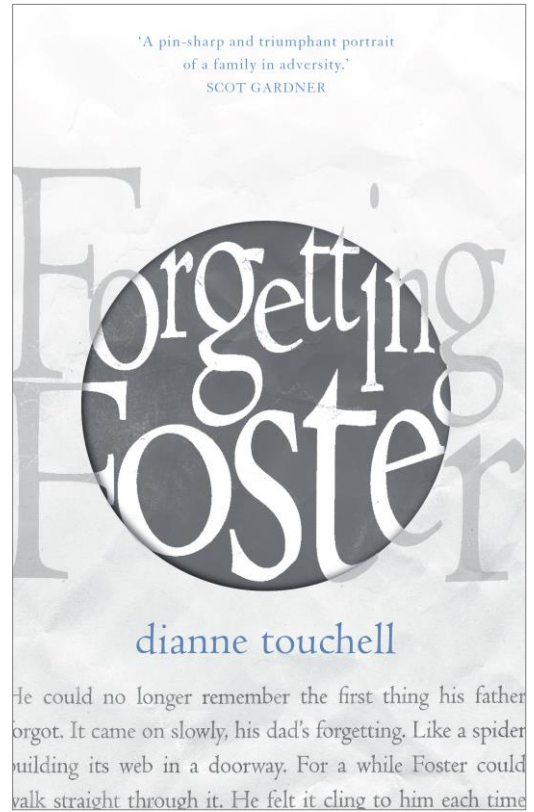
But then Foster's dad starts forgetting things. No one is too worried at first. Foster and Dad giggle about it. But the forgetting gets worse. And suddenly no one is laughing anymore.

A heartbreaking story about what it means to forget and to be forgotten.

Links to the curriculum

Dianne Touchell's **Forgetting Foster** is a powerful and moving novel suitable for study at secondary level. It can meet outcomes in all strands of the Australian English Curriculum (Language, Literature, and Literacy), and is particularly relevant as an example of:

- how metaphor, simile, figurative and literal language can change a text;
- the power of metaphor in conveying depth of meaning;
- a case study of creativity and the craft of writing;
- a case study of stigma and illness;
- an opportunity to evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts;
- how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people;
- how voice can be developed in a text, and used in a sustained manner, and how vocabulary choices contribute to specificity, abstraction and stylistic effectiveness.



In the classroom...



Discussion points and suggested activities

1. "Tell stories to whoever will listen, and then listen to theirs." (p.6) Stories are a key theme in *Forgetting Foster*. Why do you think Touchell chose to hang her narrative around the idea of stories and storytelling?
2. "Foster wondered whether something forgotten stopped existing altogether." (p.51) What do you think about this idea? Can forgotten things still exist? If not, what does that mean for people with Alzheimer's, and the people who love and care for them?
3. *Forgetting Foster* tells a very personal story of Alzheimer's disease. As a class, find out some of the scientific facts about the symptoms, progression and treatment of this illness, and see how this informs your understanding of Foster's experience. Some starting points are:

<https://fightdementia.org.au/>

<http://www.alzinfo.org/>

<http://www.alz.org/au/dementia-alzheimers-australia.asp>

Present the information you find in an informative oral presentation or pamphlet.

4. Foster endures "snickering and nasty jokes" (p.99) at school when his classmates hear about his dad wetting his pants in church. Think about the concepts of 'stigma' and 'compassion' and how these play out for Foster at school.
5. *Forgetting Foster* is told from the perspective of a bright and observant child. Touchell uses his voice and his unique view of the world to tell the story. Choose a key event in the novel and rewrite it from the perspective of one of the other characters. Consider how the experience may have been different for them.

Suggested characters:

- Foster's Mum
- Aunty
- Miss Watson
- One of Foster's school friends
- Geraldine the dog

Suggested events:

- Dad going missing
 - The christening
 - Visiting the care facility
 - The birthday party
6. "He'd turned the tears into something else by the time Mum pulled the car up next to him..." (p.101) Foster experiences a range of emotional responses to his father's illness. Brainstorm what these might be, then think about how they might interact. For example, his shame over the pants-wetting incident turns into anger.
 7. "Foster had come to believe that people who went away came back eventually... The slow erosion of this conviction was making him panicked and tired as well." (p.136) Foster's Mum experienced a brain injury in an accident before the events of the story took place. She recovered from this injury. Alzheimer's is a progressive disease with no cure. Why do you think Touchell chose to use both of these ideas in her novel? What is the effect on the reader of presenting them together?



8. "It wasn't a normal tired." (p.214) The responsibility of caring for people with Alzheimer's often falls to family. Do you think this is fair? What are the repercussions of this for children, and other family members? Who else should help?
9. A family is a unit made up of individuals. His father's Alzheimer's leads to a change in the role of everybody in Foster's family, including his aunt. Create a chart to compare the role of each member of the family when we first meet them, and then at the end of the novel.
10. Imagine you're a reporter writing a news article about the incident at Foster and his Dad's birthday party. Describe the events as a reporter might, including statements from neighbours and guests.

Related and complementary texts

Novels

A Small Madness by Dianne Touchell, Allen & Unwin, 2016

Creepy and Maude by Dianne Touchell, Freemantle Press, 2012

Helicopter Man by Elizabeth Fensham (father with paranoid schizophrenia)

Saving Francesca by Melina Marchetta (mother with depression)

A Blue so Dark by Holly Schindler (mother with schizophrenia)

Pop, by Gordon Korman. (Alzheimer's)

How to be a Real Person (in Just One Day) by Sally Warner. (POV of 11-year-old.)

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. (Adult recalling POV of 6-9-year-old.)

Picture book

Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, by Mem Fox, illustrated by Julie Vivas. (Memory loss)

Adult book for which there is a film version available

Still Alice, by Lisa Genova. (Alzheimer's)

About writing this novel

Dianne Touchell says: I have had two close encounters with dementia in my personal life and have witnessed incidents similar to those in the story. I wrote the first line of this book at the Kimberley Writer's Festival in 2013. It was: "He could no longer remember the first thing his Father forgot". Knowing how difficult it is for carers of people with dementia I began to wonder about the impact on younger children, but still wanted to write for young adults. My interest lies in what it is that creates and sustains a relationship. If love is borne of mutual vulnerability and shared experience, if a relationship is based on knowing someone else through common memories and mutual histories, what happens when one of those in the relationship starts to lose their history. And their personality. Dementia changes everything at its very core. How is love sustained when the person you love becomes unrecognizable? Even if it is only for instances at a time. And in the midst of sudden and often cruel changes, what happens to children on the periphery of carer burnout?

Curriculum notes and discussion questions prepared by Esther O'Rourke-deGraaf.