

The Things We Promise

By J.C. Burke

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Recommended for readers aged 15+ years.



Summary

Gemma is 17 and all she can think about is looking perfect for her first school formal. Her older brother Billy—whose hands have worked magic on Cher and Demi Moore—is coming home from New York to do hair and makeup for Gemma and two of her friends. But when Billy arrives, something is wrong. He’s tired and ragged and incredibly thin. The worst has happened, the thing her mother said Billy was safe from—Billy has AIDS, and he has come home to die. Gemma’s world is no longer a sure thing, her best friend is starting to avoid her and people at her school are claiming they might catch something just by association. But as Gemma discovers, through the dark unknown there are unexpected acts of love and kindness, and somehow Gemma finds the strength to be there for Billy, a strength she didn’t know she had.

Use in the curriculum

The Things We Promise is suitable for mature Year 9 English classes, as well as Year 10 and senior years English. Its tone is very engaging and many teenagers are surprised to discover the shift in attitudes towards HIV/AIDS since the 1990s. It presents opportunities to explore style as well as themes.

Themes

Themes include AIDS, family, death, friendships, Australia in the 1990s, sexuality, adolescents, growing up, prejudice, promises, relationships.

Style

J.C. Burke is brilliant at recreating the early 1990s in all its fashion and music mayhem – think hot pink taffeta, Doc Martens, Levi’s 501s and Madonna. But it is the more mundane details she includes that truly capture a sense of the times: from video rentals to using coins in a phone box—and indeed that phone boxes even existed. We are reminded of just how much we have changed over recent decades. And most importantly, Burke doesn’t flinch from portraying the 1990s attitudes and opinions about AIDS which today seem so appallingly out of touch.

Classroom discussion could focus on the excellent use of dialogue and the first person voice of Gemma, the narrator and protagonist. The author has two hurdles here: firstly, to write convincingly as a teenager; secondly, to convincingly locate the story in the 1990s. How well do students think she has achieved these goals? How have elements of her style helped/hindered her?

Australian Curriculum

Study of this novel can be used to address the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities of Personal and Social Capability and Ethical Understanding and the following Australian Curriculum English content:

Visit <https://www.allenandunwin.com/resources/for-teachers> for free down-loadable teachers notes, reviews by teachers, extracts and more. And sign up to the Allen & Unwin e-newsletter to receive monthly updates on new resources!

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In the classroom...

Year 9

Language	Literature	Literacy
Understand that roles and relationships are developed and challenged through language and interpersonal skills (ACELA1551)	Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (ACELT1635) Analyse texts from familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and discuss and evaluate their content and the appeal of an individual author's literary style (ACELT1636)	Interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue, event, situation, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts (ACELY1742)

Year 10

Language	Literature	Literacy
Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people (ACELA1564) Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication (ACELA1565)	Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812) Compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts such as poetry to evoke particular emotional responses (ACELT1643)	Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)

Discussion questions

1. Before reading *The Things We Promise* **research** the topic of AIDS to answer the following questions:
 - What do the acronyms HIV and AIDS stand for?
 - Define HIV and AIDS and explain their connection?
 - How is AIDS transmitted and who is most at risk of contracting it?
 - Watch the Grim Reaper advertisement on YouTube and explain why it was so controversial at the time of broadcast.
 - What role did Princess Diana and Elizabeth Taylor play in the AIDS campaign?
 - Who was Eve van Grafhorst and what does her story tell us about how AIDS victims were treated by Australian society during the 1980s?
 - Does AIDS exist nowadays?
2. 'Silence =Death. The big black letters stood out against the white fabric. How impressed would my English teacher be? I was wearing irony. Or rather it was wearing me. But that's the thing about irony—you don't always know it at the time.' (page 2)
"...Probably her and Princess Di are the ones who've helped fight the fear and ignorance the most.'
I spat back, 'Isn't that called *irony*?' (page 202)

Define the term *irony* and explain why Gemma considers both situations ironic?

Extension question: Silence is a continuing motif in *The Things We Promise*. **Discuss.**



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3. Read Melina Marchetta's quote on the cover of the book. Why do you think she says that this story is both timeless and timely?
4. Gemma is a very different person by the end of *The Things We Promise*.
 - How has she changed and what are the reasons behind this change?
 - How does her relationships with Andrea and Louise reflect this change?
5. **Compare and contrast** Andrea and Louise in terms of how they support Gemma.
6. **Retell** the story from Andrea's point of view, making sure you explore the reasons for her early reaction to Billy's illness, as well as how and why that response changes by the end of the novel.
7. **Whole Class Discussion:** Read the following tweet sent by Donald Trump Jnr during the 2016 US election 'If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you. [sic] Would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem.' Do you think the First World has replaced a fear of AIDS with a fear of refugees/Islam?
8. 'Time changes everything. That's what I was thinking about when I fell asleep. Sometimes it changes it for the worse. Sometimes it's for the better.' (p. 361). How has our attitude to AIDS changed since the 1990s, and is this change for the better or worse?
9. Type 'The Names Project' into Google Images to see a variety of quilts created to remember AIDS victims. Now **design** your own version of a quilt for Billy, Saul and Zane, using elements from the story to illustrate each man and his life.
10. **Text comparison:** compare and contrast poetry about the fallen young men of WWI by Wilfred Owen with modern poetry about AIDS.

Author's motivation

'I was astounded that my kids knew so little about HIV/AIDS. To them it was a disease of the third world. Sad? Yes. A health problem? Yes. But a plight they viewed at a distance, feeling like it had no real relevance or meaning in their world.

'They knew little about the course of the disease, the way it ravaged the body. Also they were ignorant as to how HIV/AIDS spread like a "plague" in sections of the community in Australia and overseas during the 80s and early 90s. First world, educated, privileged citizens, like them, were dropping dead like flies at the end of summer. Too often these people were ignored, scapegoated, ostracised by their families, politicians, their towns, religious leaders and the press. And this happened while the rest of us watched on, wondering when it was going to "get" us.

'Then to seal the deal, I was flicking through a book chronicling the 20th Century and noticed that photos of Princess Diana, a notable AIDS ambassador, were splashed on every second page, yet there was one discreet mention of AIDS in the corner of one page: the death of Freddy Mercury.

'Now, I was on a mission. But I had to reacquaint myself with this time. The music, fashion, films, sayings, political and social issues on the domestic and international front. I spent a solid week in the NSW State Library just scrolling through the newspapers.

In the classroom...

'But what really brought me back to that time were endless conversations with old friends about what we remembered. One friend told me about going to see a mate of his who was dying of AIDS at home. It was a summer night and they were sitting outside. He remembered watching a mosquito circle them, the whole time terrified that it would bite his friend and then him and that he'd die of AIDS, too. That's just a classic example of the fear and ignorance of that time.'

J.C. Burke

Related texts/Further reading

Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan. Text Publishing, 2013. Two high school students attempt the Guinness World Record for kissing, with support from parents and teachers. Told by an older narrator, a man from the 'AIDS generation', who reflects on changes and mourns those who have died from disease or violence. (*Magpies, The Source*) This novel is a thematic companion to David Levithan's groundbreaking *Boy Meets Boy* (HarperCollins, 2003, 2013)

Closets are for Clothes by Rachel Cook. Black Dog Books, 2010. Part of 'The Drum' series. Gay and lesbian history in Australia, written for teenagers. Non-fiction information but chapters open with fictionalised first person accounts.

The Grim Reaper ads of 1987

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U219eUIZ7Qo>

AIDS Trust of Australia

<http://www.aidstrust.com.au/aboutus.html>

The Making of Modern Australia, episode three

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/makingaustralia/educationextras/episode-three/clip-five.htm>

(ABC documentary with teachers notes)

"A Time to be Loud and Furious: AIDS activism in Australia"

<https://www.afao.org.au/library/hiv-australia/volume-12/vol.-12-number-2/a-time-to-be-loud-and-furious-aids-activism-in-australia#.WC0A1iQz0-8>

(Article on the website of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations. Reviews the history of AIDS campaigns from 1980s to 2014.)

"In Time of Plague: How poetry about AIDS has shifted through the years" by John McIntyre. Essay, quoting US poets.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/articles/detail/70183>

"Poem for Doomed Youth by Wilfred Owen

<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen2.html>

"Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen

<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html>

About J.C. Burke

J.C. Burke has published a number of acclaimed books for teenagers and young adults, including CBCA Notable Books *White Lies* and *The Red Cardigan*, Aurealis Awards finalist *Nine Letters Long*, *The Story of Tom Brennan*, *Faking Sweet*, *Starfish Sisters*, *Ocean Pearl*, *Pig Boy* and *Pretty Girl*. *The Story of Tom Brennan* won the 2006 CBCA Book of the Year, Older Readers, and the 2006 Australian Family Therapists Award for Children's Literature and it is currently on the NSW HSC syllabus list. *Pig Boy* won the Ned Kelly Award for Best Crime Fiction in 2012.