

Teachers' Notes

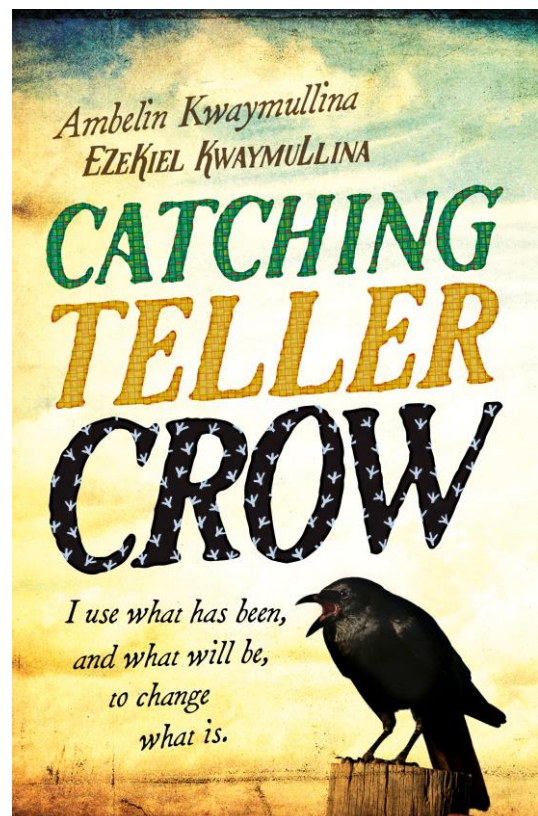
Catching Teller Crow

by
Ambelin & Ezekiel Kwaymullina

ISBN 9781760631628
Recommended for ages 14-18 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

Catching Teller Crow is a young adult novel told through alternating perspectives of two Indigenous female protagonists.

Nothing's been the same for Beth Teller since she died. Her dad Michael, a detective, is the only one who can see and hear her – and he's drowning in grief. But now they have a mystery to solve together. Who is Isobel Catching, and what's her connection to the fire that killed a man? What happened to the people who haven't been seen since the fire? As Beth unravels the mystery, she finds a shocking story lurking beneath the surface of a small town, and a friendship that lasts beyond one life and into another.

Catching Teller Crow seamlessly weaves themes of grief, colonial history, violence against women, love and family through an atmospheric mystery set in a small town in regional Australia.

SYNOPSIS

'I'm not telling you what happened to ask for help.'

'Then why are you telling it?'

...'To be heard.'

Catching Teller Crow is a viscerally powerful metaphysical exploration of grief, spirituality, race, history, power and abuse that unfolds against the backdrop of a murder mystery in a small Australian town.

Set in contemporary times, the novel commences with teenaged Beth arriving in town with her father, Michael Teller, a police detective who has been sent to investigate a fire at a children's home and the unidentified body in its ashes. Beth died months before in a car accident and now exists between worlds, unable to move on until she is sure her father will be able to function without her.

Beth's dad interviews a witness to the fire – Isobel Catching, a teenage girl who was found wandering the town. Catching tells a fantastical tale of 'monsters and other worlds' but can she be believed? As Beth and her dad investigate, they come to realise there is much more behind the fire than they anticipated, especially when more murders occur. The mystery deepens when another disappearance of a local teenage girl is revealed, even though it occurred many years before.

But is Catching's story a fantasy spun by a troubled teenage girl, or is it a metaphor for murder and shocking abuses that span decades in one town and centuries in a country? Through Catching's story, Beth and her dad realise that remembering but not holding on to the past is the only way to be heard and move on. And that preserving one's *self* is paramount in the face of those who seek to diminish who you are.

Style

Catching Teller Crow is a dual narrative told through the voices of two very unusual teenage protagonists: fifteen-year-old Beth Teller, a ghost; and Isobel Catching, a being who can 'walk all the sides of the world' (p.192). Beth's chapters are in first person, past tense prose, whereas Catching's are in first person, present tense verse. The structure and protagonists are unique and the girls' unusual perspectives, powerful voices and intriguing stories immediately hook the reader.

The story is initially told from Beth Teller's perspective. Through her eyes, we meet her grieving father and together, they discuss the facts behind the case he is investigating. Beth relates the main here-and-now plot, based around several mysteries: why is Beth still haunting her father and unable to move on after her death; how can she help her dad to move on; who was killed in the fire and why was it lit?

Beth's characterisation and that of her family members (Dad, her mother and her extended Indigenous family) is consistent and compelling. It provides insight into Indigenous culture, history and traditions (especially surrounding death and grieving) and the history of displacement and racism.

After Beth and her father meet Catching, Catching's voice and story is introduced. Initially, it appears this is separate to the main plot but it becomes clear that her story is intertwined with the town's mystery and holds the key for both Beth and her father to move on. As Beth's story alternates with Catching's, readers start to wonder who we can trust and believe – they each cast doubt on the other's story and truth – in particular, Dad on Catching's tale and Catching on Dad's version of family events.

It is Beth who unravels and reconciles both Dad and Catching's perspectives and the murder mystery. The various mysteries are cunningly plotted, with clues misleading readers about the tragedy of Beth's death and other clues revealed in readers' interpretation of Catching's otherworldly tale.

Catching's voice and her story of 'monsters and other-places' is an astounding strength of the novel; her sections of verse are gripping even when they are so vividly painful. The result is a showcase of searingly sophisticated and graphic themes in a tale of grief, family, torture, murder, heartache and hope. The story is emblematic of the violent foundation of modern Australian society and the untold strength of Indigenous people (especially women) and their descendants who continue to survive.

It is especially about the necessity of their stories being heard.

You told the story to show me how to move on. (p.190)

THEMES

- Indigenous peoples and cultures
- Family
- Friendship
- Love
- Hope
- Death
- Grief
- Violence
- History
- Injustice

Hope

From an interview with the author, on the importance of including hope in every story:

'This is a particular challenge for me at the moment as I am finishing the edits on a YA book about sexualised violence against Indigenous girls. It is hard to locate hope in such a tale. And yet I know that despite the relentless brutalities to which they were subjected, generations of Native/First Nations (N/FN) women held onto their hope. I know that they defied their oppressors with the only choice they had left: to not be diminished by their experience. And so I have my answer. The hope is not in the world which allows N/FN women and girls to be brutalised on a global scale of catastrophe. The hope is not in systems of (so-called) justice that have largely failed us. The hope lies where it has always been – in the hearts and minds and spirits of N/FN women and girls.'

<https://campbele.wordpress.com/2017/11/17/when-women-speak-ambelin-kwaymullina/>

EARLY REVIEWS

'A ghost story as well as a psychological thriller, *Catching Teller Crow* seamlessly weaves together the poetic and the everyday. A magnificent and life-giving novel.'

— Justine Larbalestier

'*Catching Teller Crow* is an up-to-the-minute tale that goes straight to the heart of Australia's darkest history. Through poetry and story, with great sensitivity, the Kwaymullinas pick up and deal with subjects most authors in this country find too hot to touch. Terrible crimes lie at the centre here; viewed through the eyes of young women of unquenchable spirit, they can be approached, examined, and ultimately solved. This novel will turn gazes in the right direction, and make the caw of every crow more resonant.

— Margo Lanagan

'A touching and original story about a dad who is learning how to grieve and a girl learning how to be dead. Together they work to solve the crimes denting holes in a small town. A richly informed new novel by a deadly duo.'

— Ellen van Neerven

'...Distinctly Australian ... novel that blends thriller, crime and ghost story elements... *Catching Teller Crow* can be compared to Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* and E Lockhart's *We Were Liars*. The authors subtly weave the history of colonisation throughout the story, and themes of grief, racism and violence are balanced with those of family, friendship and survival. *Catching Teller Crow* ... features strong Aboriginal female characters and is written by two well-known Aboriginal authors. With its historical and contemporary themes, it will be of interest to secondary students studying Australian history and society.'

— Karen Wyld, *Books + Publishing*, 5-Jul-18, featured 5-star review

<https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2018/07/05/110971/catching-teller-crow-ambelin-and-ezekiel-kwaymullina-au/>

'...The first joint novel from sibling-author team Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina is an intense, addictive book. It is at once sparse and swift; it comes in under 200 pages long, yet is extraordinarily rich with thematic detail and emotion.

Shocking and heartbreaking truths come to light, and as the book progresses it deftly examines racism, violence, terrible historic injustices and corruption within the police force. This is a book that shows trauma and survival. Stories are vital, and *Catching Teller Crow* highlights and champions the transformative and nourishing powers of storytelling. It's a completely gripping book and while highly recommended for young adults, it also deserves a wider readership.'

— Kim Gruschow, children's book buyer for Readings St Kilda bookstore, 20-Aug-18

<https://www.readings.com.au/review/catching-teller-crow-by-ambelin-kwaymullina-and-ezekiel-kwaymullina>

'Rarely do you find a novel as powerful and edgy as *Catching Teller Crow*...the novel explodes with raw power. I adored *Catching Teller Crow*; it is hard and edgy, but softened with real humour and empathy as it explores the hard topics: race, identity, loss, violence and justice. My book of the year!'

— Nicole, Great Escape Books, Aireys Inlet

LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

Catching Teller Crow will be of interest as an 'Own Voice' contribution to diversity in literary themes and writers. It is an Indigenous title that features strong Indigenous girls dealing with violence. It is part of the global conversations on the rights of women and the persisting effects of colonisation.

THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures priority

Study of this novel and the resource texts referred to in these notes can address the following aspects of this priority:

Key Concepts

'The first key concept of the organising ideas highlights the special connection to Country/Place by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and celebrates the unique belief systems that connect people physically and spiritually to Country/Place.'

'The second concept examines the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' culture through language, ways of life and experiences as expressed through historical, social and political lenses. It gives students opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.'

Organising Ideas

Country/Place	
OI.2	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities maintain a special connection to and responsibility for Country/Place.
OI.3	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have holistic belief systems and are spiritually and intellectually connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways.
Culture	
OI.5	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of life are uniquely expressed through ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.
OI.6	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples live in Australia as first peoples of Country or Place and demonstrate resilience in responding to historic and contemporary impacts of colonisation.
People	
OI.8	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' family and kinship structures are strong and sophisticated.

Learning Area statement for English:

'Students begin to engage with the priority as they develop an awareness and appreciation of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature. This includes storytelling traditions (oral narrative) and contemporary literature. Students will learn to develop respectful, critical understandings of the social, historical and cultural contexts associated with different uses of language features and text structures including images and visual language.'

The English curriculum

Year 9

Language	Literature	Literacy
Understand that authors innovate with text structures and language for specific purposes and effects ACELA1553	Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts ACELT1633	Analyse how the construction and interpretation of texts, including media texts, can be influenced by cultural perspectives and other texts ACELY1739
Compare and contrast the use of cohesive devices in texts, focusing on how they serve to signpost ideas, to make connections and to build semantic associations between ideas ACELA1770	Reflect on, discuss and explore notions of literary value and how and why such notions vary according to context ACELT1634	
Explain how authors creatively use the structures of sentences and clauses for particular effects ACELA1557	Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts ACELT1635	
Identify how vocabulary choices contribute to specificity, abstraction and stylistic effectiveness ACELA1561	Analyse texts from familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and discuss and evaluate their content and the appeal of an individual author's literary style ACELT1636	
	Investigate and experiment with the use and effect of extended metaphor, metonymy, allegory, icons, myths and symbolism in texts... ACELT1637	
	Analyse text structures and language features of literary texts, and make relevant comparisons with other texts ACELT1772	

Year 10

Language	Literature	Literacy
Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication ACELA1565	Reflect on, extend, endorse or refute others' interpretations of and responses to literature ACELT1640	Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices ACELY1749
	Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response ACELT1641	Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences ACELY1752

	Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts ACELT1812	
	Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response ACELT1641	
	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	
	Analyse and evaluate text structures and language features of literary texts and make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts ACELT1774	

Senior Secondary English

Catching Teller Crow is also suitable for classroom study at Senior Secondary English level. With the addition of some material, these notes can address the follow learning outcomes:

Unit 1

- understand the relationships between purpose, context and audience and how these relationships influence texts and their meaning
- investigate how text structures and language features are used to convey ideas and represent people and events in a range of texts

Unit 2

- understand the ways in which ideas and attitudes are represented in texts
- examine the ways texts are constructed to influence responses

Unit 3

- understand relationships between texts, genres and contexts
- investigate the effects of different conventions and mediums on responses

Unit 4

- understand how content, structure, voice and perspective in texts shape responses and interpretations

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. *Catching Teller Crow* is told part in prose and part in verse novel. Choose a section narrated by Beth and write it as verse, OR choose a section narrated by Catching and write it as prose. Consider the following questions:

- Which form of writing do you think is more difficult, and why?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each form of writing?
- Why do you think the authors chose to write the sections narrated by Catching in verse novel form?
- Why are the sections narrated by Beth in prose form?

2. In 'The Beginning' chapter (pp. 189 – 197), Beth thinks of Crow that: 'How many times had I seen crows around town and never noticed that one was just a bit bigger and bit glossier than all the others? How often had there been mysterious gusts of wind at exactly the right moment? Crow had been there all along...'

Identify passages in the 'Beth' sections of the book when Crow is present [e.g. in the following chapters: 'The Home' (p.12), 'The Witness' (p.21), 'The Colours' (p.121), 'The Cop' (p.132)]. Choose one of those passages, and write the scene from Crow's perspective. Consider the following questions:

- What does Crow's narrative 'voice' sound like? How is it different to Beth's voice? How is it different to Catching's?
- Does writing the scene from Crow's perspective change the way you understand the story? Does it give you a greater understanding of Crow?

3. In *Catching Teller Crow*, characters often make incorrect assumptions – for example, in *The Witness* chapter, when Beth and Michael Teller wrongly assume Catching is a witness to the fire. Identify other incorrect assumptions characters make throughout the novel. How are these assumptions necessary to the progress of the story?

4. Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina have written that: 'All life is in constant motion, turning and rotating in relation to other life, and it is through these movements that the world shifts forwards or back...the journeys of Catching, Beth, Crow and Michael Teller do not 'advance' because linear days pass, but because they are finding ways to heal. Each of them ultimately reaches a point of transformation where they move out of one cycle and into another.'

- Map the healing journey undertaken by one or more of the following characters: Michael Teller, Beth Teller, Isobel Catching, or Crow. What do you think are the most important healing events for the character you have chosen? How do those events move the character forward?

5. Throughout the book, Catching, Beth and Crow draw strength from their families and friends.

- Identify some of the different ways through which Catching, Beth or Crow's connections to their families and friends make the characters stronger, referencing specific sections in the book.
- Discuss the ways in which connections to other people can make you stronger. Have other people ever been a source of strength for you? How can you be a source of strength for other people?

6. In 'The Deaths' chapter, Catching says to Beth that '...friends always tell each other the truth. Even when it hurts.' (p.98) Identify moments in the book when Catching, Beth and/or Crow demonstrate friendship by telling the truth. Do you think friends *should* always tell the truth? Why/why not?

7. When Catching first meets Michael Teller in 'The Witness' chapter, she challenges a common misunderstanding that all Aboriginal people look the same way (p.25).

- a) Research common myths and stereotypes about Indigenous people. How does *Catching Teller Crow* (or other books by Indigenous writers) challenge these stereotypes?

NB: teachers may find the following resources helpful:

Australian Human Rights Commission, Face the Facts: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/face-facts/face-facts-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>

Reconciliation Australia, Share Our Pride: Beyond the Myths

<http://www.shareourpride.org.au/sections/beyond-the-myths/>

- b) Why is it important to challenge myths and stereotypes? How do myths and stereotypes affect the ways in which Indigenous peoples are treated?

NB: teachers may find the following resources helpful:

Prize-winning author Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's viral Ted Talk on the danger of the single story:

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Beyond Blue, The Invisible Discriminator:

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/the-invisible-discriminator>

8. Consider the following passage from 'The Cop' chapter:

Dad took that personally...as he'd told me a thousand times over, growing up in his father's town had taught him that one person in power could do bad things, but it took lots of people to let those bad things continue. (p.133)

- What are some actions that individuals can take to fight against discrimination and injustice? What actions can your school take? Teachers may wish to make use of the following resources:
 - The 'Innocent Bystander' resource on the *Racism. No Way* website:
<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/teaching-resources/resources/innocent-bystander/>
 - *Racism. It Stops With Me*: Respond to Racism:
<https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/respond-racism>
 - The Bystander Anti-Racism Project at Western Sydney University:
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/challengingracism/challenging_racism_project/our_research/bystander_anti-racism
 - Beyond Blue, The Invisible Discriminator, Create Change at Your School:
<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/the-invisible-discriminator/create-change-at-your-school>
 - Reconciliation Australia, Narragunnawali platform:
<https://www.narragunnawali.org.au>

9. In the novel, two generations of Catching's family were forcibly removed under the legislation and policies that created the Stolen Generations.

Using the resources listed at the end of this section, explore the following questions:

- Who are the Stolen Generations? What are the ongoing effects of the Stolen Generations on Indigenous people today?
- In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a National Apology to the Stolen Generations. On whose behalf was the Prime Minister apologising? Why was it important to apologise? How do you think Catching and her family would feel about the Apology?
- Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina write that the Stolen Generations left Aboriginal families 'with the dual legacy of the terrible heartbreak of Stolen children, and the great strength it took to survive being taken or having a child taken from you.' How do the stories of Catching's family embody both heartbreak and strength? How do these stories help Catching to survive?

RESOURCES

Australian Human Rights Commission, Bringing Them Home website
<https://bth.humanrights.gov.au>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/apology-australias-indigenous-peoples>

Healing Foundation, Classroom Resources
<https://healingfoundation.org.au/bth20/bth20-school-resources/>

Healing Foundation, Bringing Them Home 20 years on
<https://healingfoundation.org.au/bringing-them-home/> and the report itself:
<https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2017/05/Bringing-Them-Home-20-years-on-FINAL-SCREEN-1.pdf>

ABOUT THE WRITERS

AMBELIN KWAYMULLINA and EZEKIEL KWAYMULLINA

Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina are a brother-sister team of Aboriginal writers who come from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

AMBELIN KWAYMULLINA is the author/illustrator of a number of award-winning picture books and a young adult speculative fiction series called the Tribe. She is an academic at the Law School at the University of Western Australia and a commentator on diversity in children's literature.

She likes murder mysteries and sci-fi and is addicted to streaming television shows.

EZEKIEL KWAYMULLINA has written numerous picture books and short novels. *Catching Teller Crow* is his first young adult novel. Ezekiel is currently studying a PhD in creative writing at the University of Western Australia.

He likes video games and anime.

AMBELIN and EZEKIEL come from a family of writers and artists who often work together and Ambelin and Ezekiel have worked together before on a number of short novels and picture books. *Catching Teller Crow* is their first joint young adult novel. They believe in the power of storytelling to create a more just world.

