

Teacher
Notes

TEACHER NOTES

WORDS THINGS

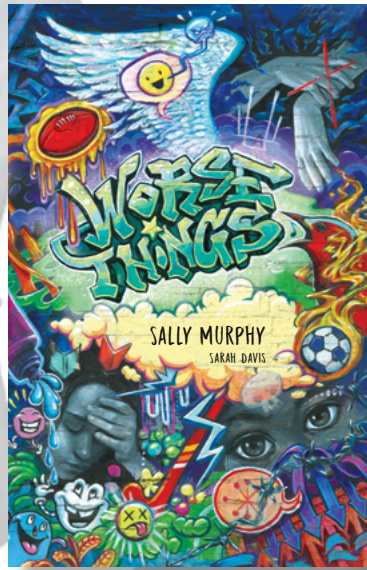
SALLY MURPHY

SARAH DAVIS

TEACHER NOTES BY
LEONIE JORDAN

WALKER & BOOKS

WORSE THINGS



Worse Things
By Sally Murphy
Illustrated by Sarah Davis
9781760651657

From the award-winning author of *Pearl Verses the World* and *Toppling* comes a story about connections, the ways they are made and what happens when they are lost.

When you're part of the team the sideline is a place of refuge of rest of reprieve. But when you're out of the team the sideline changes. Suddenly it's the loneliest place of them all.

After a devastating football injury, Blake struggles to cope with life on the sideline. Jolene, a gifted but conflicted hockey player, wants nothing more than for her dad to come home. And soccer-loving refugee, Amed, wants to belong. On the surface, it seems they have nothing in common. Except sport.

A touching and inspirational story about the things that bind us all.

Sally Murphy on writing *Worse Things*

This story came from watching my two sons play and umpire sport, and their resultant adventures with broken bones. I wanted to explore the frustrations of being left out of the sport you love, as well as other issues around sport. When I started writing, I found that the characters wanted me to really explore how sport can impact our sense of belonging. – and how that sense goes well beyond sport.

Sarah Davis on illustrating *Worse Things*

Because Sally's verse puts us right inside the characters' heads, I wanted to avoid representing how they looked and instead to reflect their inner worlds – their emotions and preoccupations. Graffiti art was a great way to do this, since as a style it has a lot of energy and mixes realistic and symbolic images together. Throughout the book you can find symbols and motifs that echo the thoughts and experiences of Jolene, Ahmed and Blake.

About the Author

SALLY MURPHY grew up loving books, babies and beaches, and nothing much has changed. Sally is a university academic, teaching teachers how to teach. Sally's Books with Walker Books include *Pearl Verses the World* (illustrated by Heather Potter) which won the children's book category for the Indie Book of the Year awards, 2009; was awarded Honour Book in the Younger Readers category, CBCA Book of the Year Awards, 2010; and won the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards, 2010, Best Book for Language Development, Upper Primary (8-12 years).



About the Illustrator

SARAH DAVIS is a multiple award-winning illustrator, and associate art director for Walker Books Australia. She won the CBCA Crichton Illustration Award for her first picture book, *Mending Lucille*, in 2009, and since then has gone on to illustrate more than 40 titles, in a range of styles and genres. Sarah is also proud to be an ambassador for Room to Read.



About the Author of these Notes

These resources were created by Leonie Jordan. Leonie is a former Secondary School English Teacher and Children's & Youth Librarian who has presented at the State Library of NSW on numerous occasions. She has worked for a number of publishing companies including Walker Books Australia and Allen & Unwin, and regularly reviews and creates test material for Educational Assessment Australia, writers of the NAPLAN, ICAS and GAT assessments.



Level

- Primary: Years 4-6 / Ages 9-12

General Capabilities

- Literacy
- Information and Communication Technology Capability
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Personal and Social Capability
- Ethical Understanding
- Intercultural Understanding

Cross-Curriculum Priorities

Australia & Australia's Relationship with Asia – Organising Ideas OI.5-OI.8

	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
ENGLISH			
Language	ACELA1488 ACELA1489 ACELA1490 ACELA1491 ACELA1493 ACELA1496	ACELA1501 ACELA1504 ACELA1505 ACELA1508 ACELA1512	ACELA1517 ACELA1518 ACELA1520 ACELA1522 ACELA1525
Literature	ACELT1602 ACELT1603 ACELT1604 ACELT1605 ACELT 1606 ACELT 1607 ACELT1794	ACELT1608 ACELT1609 ACELT1795 ACELT1610 ACELT1611 ACELT1612 ACELT1798	ACELT1613 ACELT1614 ACELT1615 ACELT1616 ACELT1617 ACELT1618 ACELT1800
Literacy	ACELY1688 ACELY1689 ACELY1690 ACELY1692 ACELY1694 ACELY1695 ACELY1697	ACELY1698 ACELY1699 ACELY1796 ACELY1700 ACELY1701 ACELY1702 ACELY1704	ACELY1709 ACELY1816 ACELY1710 ACELY1711 ACELY1712 ACELY1713 ACELY1801 ACELY1714

Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian Curriculum (www.australiancurriculum.edu.au). However, this is not an exhaustive list of Australian Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text. Information is current as of January 2020.



Themes

A range of themes are explored in *Worse Things* including:

- Change
- Connection and belonging
- Exclusion and alienation
- Resilience/overcoming adversity
- Healing and recovery
- Family
- Parental expectations
- Friendship
- Death and bereavement
- Refugee experiences
- Sport

Activities & Discussion Questions

Choose from the following questions and activities.

Before Reading

- View the front cover of *Worse Things*. Based on the title and cover illustration, what do you expect the book will be about? What genre and tone will it have? Where might it be set? Who do you think the main character/s will be?

After Reading

Plot

- Retell the story to a friend from memory. Then, look at the worksheet showing the symbols used at the start of each chapter. How does your retelling change? Do you include more information? Do you focus on things other than what happened; for examples, themes and mood?
- Create a graph or diagram depicting the main plot points of the story. Use different colours to represent the various characters and the points where their stories interconnect.

Language Style & Structure

- American verse novelist Virginia Euwer Wolff said in a 2001 interview with *The Horn Book*: “Writing my prose in funny-shaped lines does not render it poetry.” In your opinion, what does make a piece of writing poetry?
- Choose a section from *Worse Things* and read it aloud, pausing at the end of each line. Then, reread the section, pausing only at commas and full stops as you would in a traditional novel. How does the story feel different when read in these ways?
- *Worse Things* is a verse novel, meaning it is written in free verse, a form of unrhymed poetry that tries to mimic how people speak. How would the novel have been different if Sally Murphy had used a traditional prose style (i.e. the book was written like a traditional novel)? Do you think you would have enjoyed the story as much? Why or why not? Why do you think verse novels have become so popular with young readers?
- A post on the Poetry Box blog which looks at two of Sally Murphy’s earlier books offers this definition of a verse novel: “You could think of it as one very long poem! But it is more than that. It is a story in the shape of a poem. Think of it as a very long story with line breaks (so the words don’t go to the end of the line). This gives the story RHYTHM! You might find lots of other poetry features as well (similes, metaphor, rhyme, alliteration, repetition).” Discuss this definition as a class. Is there anything you would add to it? (You may like to look at the full blog post at <http://nzpoetrybox.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/dear-sally-murphy-i-love-your-novels-in-verse/>)
- *Worse Things* uses a first-person narrative style (“I”) and free verse to tell the stories of the three characters. Choose a challenging experience from your own life and try recounting it in a similar style. Alternatively, you may like to choose a section from a prose novel you’ve read and rewrite it as verse. Try to experiment with some of the language techniques Sally Murphy uses such as metaphorical language and repetition.



- Interview a classmate about their interests and the type of books they like to read. Then, research verse novels on the internet and suggest three verse novels they might enjoy. For each book include the title, author, year it was published, the blurb and a brief explanation of why you suggested it for them.
- Read another verse novel by Sally Murphy or a different author. (A list of suggested verse novels for middle grade readers is provided at the end of these notes.) Draw a Venn diagram showing similarities and differences with *Worse Things* in terms of subject matter, themes, setting, language style, structure, character and point of view.
- Definitions are interspersed throughout the novel, with each word, its pronunciation, class and definition taking up a full page; for instance, "LONELY / [Lone*ly] (Adj.) / To stand apart / sit apart / be apart / but not a part." (p. 39) Locate all the definitions in the book. Although they are presented as they would be in a dictionary, do you think they are real dictionary definitions or that Sally Murphy wrote them herself? Why? If Sally Murphy did write them, how do they differ from a standard dictionary definition? Why do you think she has included them? Discuss the way these definitions create a sort of "word collage" similar to Sarah Davis's illustration style.
- Write your own short story incorporating three definitions. Include two copied from the dictionary and one which you write yourself. Exchange stories with a classmate and see if they can work out which definition is yours and which are from the dictionary!
- People often describe events in terms of what they see. However, the opening section of the book (p. 9-11) focuses on sound, with Blake's experience of being injured in the football game conveyed by what he hears around him. Think of a recent experience in your life. Write a poem describing this experience where you focus on a sense other than sight; i.e. sound, smell, touch or taste.
- Analyse the author's use of language techniques such as metaphor ("his smile is plastered on for my benefit" p. 31), simile ("poems like gems / words like priceless pearls" p. 45), alliteration ("curios / to be collected / and coveted" p. 46-47), rhyme ("scoring / soaring" p. 35) and repetition ("I do not understand / this crazy game / ... I do not understand much at all." p. 37) Work in small groups with each group allocated one section of the book to find examples in. Share these with the rest of the class.
- Sally Murphy plays with sentence structure throughout the book, alternating between long sentences, short sentences, single words and phrases, and using line breaks to shape rhythm and pace; for instance, "I score / again. / We win / again. / They hate me / again." (p. 117) Photocopy a double-page from the novel. Using coloured highlighters or pencils, highlight each sentence in a different colour to the previous one. (You can just alternate between two colours if you prefer.) What do you notice about the way the sentence length varies?
- Colloquial language and idiom is used to establish the contemporary Australian setting and the age of the characters; for instance, "bludgers" (p. 54) and "It's not his fault my life is crap" (p. 122) Is there any character who doesn't use colloquial language? Why do you think this might be?

Setting

- *Worse Things* is set in the NSW town of Cowan. Locate this town on a map.
- What words would you use to describe Cowan, based on the book? In what ways is Cowan similar and different to the place you live? How different is Cowan to Amed's previous home?

Character

- Which of the characters in the book do you empathise with most? Why?



- Discuss the way that the voices of the three narrators are both similar to and distinct from each other. Are there clues as to who is speaking, other than what they're describing? For instance, Jolene's sections are often structured in lists (p. 58-59) while Amed uses simple, formal language and fewer contractions ("You are at the middle of this" p.17)
- Choose one of the three narrators and write an additional section of the novel, to take place a year after the funeral. Think about ways you can recreate their voice through structure and language.
- Joy Alexander writes, "The most prominent feature of the verse-novel is voice; it is ideal for the audio-book." Working in pairs, choose a section of the novel to record as if you were making an audio book. Think about how you can use your voice to bring the character to life through pace, volume, expression and other vocal techniques. You may also like to use sound effects or music to add atmosphere.
- Write a monologue in the voice of a character other than Blake, Amed or Jolene. Some possible subjects could be Amed's aunt, Jolene's mother or Blake's football teammates. Perform your monologue to the class using at least one prop or piece of costuming to help establish your character.

Key Themes

- Write a letter to Sally Murphy telling her what you learnt from the novel. You may like to send your letter to her via her publisher, Walker Books Australia.
 - Create a mind-map depicting the main themes of the novel. Draw a picture or icon to represent each theme.
 - Locate quotes to illustrate each of the themes. Use these to write an essay exploring the main ideas of the novel.
- ## Alienation and Exclusion
- "I watch / and I wait / for the day / when perhaps I will feel / that I belong here / in this strange town / in this strange land." (p. 26) In what ways do the three narrators each experience exclusion?
 - "Now I'm just me. / But I'm not really sure who I am / without footy." (p. 133) Blake has to rediscover his identity without being a football player in the same way that Jolene must rediscover herself without her father and Amed must rediscover himself in a new country with a new family. What are some things that you consider central to who you are and would it difficult to be without?
 - Amed refers to finding himself "kept separate again by the invisible fence of language." (p. 69) How does Amed's language serve as a barrier to belonging? In what way is this similar to what Blake experiences with his "broken wing ... flapping in a sling" (p. 77)?
 - "You don't know / what it is like / to live with memories / darker than midnight. / You don't know / what it is like / to have nobody to talk to / about those memories." (p. 75) How does talking to people help with healing? With a friend, discuss a time when someone helped you to deal with something difficult.
 - Amed says, "At school / there are many many books. / Rows and rows of shelves / in the library. / I would like to read them / absorb their stories / their lessons / but my English is poor / and I can barely / make out their titles. (p. 93 -94) How does Jolene's relationship with books differ from Amed's?
 - Imagine that you had to move to a country where you didn't speak the language. What challenges might you face? What would you find most difficult about this?
 - Research some of the challenges child refugees like Amed confront as they start life in a new country. Using the information you've found, create a poster promoting empathy for refugees.



- “People think your life is perfect. / They just presume. / Money / brains / possessions. / You have it all. / They don’t notice the aloof mum / or the absentee dad.” (p. 105) What does this reveal about the way we judge people we don’t know? Talk with a friend about a time when you’ve been judged by others. What was this like? Is there anyone you might be making assumptions about?

Connection and Belonging

- Jolene says, “I belong here. / I’m myself here. / Cowan is home.” (p. 87) while Amed hopes “that Cowan / will not always seem so strange / and one day I will call it home.” (p. 147) How important is home in having a sense of belonging? What things make a place your home? In what ways does Cowan become Amed’s home by the end of the book?
- “We laugh together. / We sing together. / We can be quiet together / and no one thinks there’s anything / wrong with that.” (p. 102) Although Jolene is initially excluded by her hockey teammates, her friendship with Jia, Sasha and Daisy gives her a sense of belonging. Reread pages 102-103 then use this as inspiration for your own poem about why you love your friends or family.
- “We have no words for her today / but we are here / to show her she is not alone.” (p. 201) How do Sarah Davis’s illustrations complement the text to enhance this theme of connection?
- “Today he is struggling / with a compass and pencil / his arm in a splint / and I offer to help. / I’m not a cripple / he mutters / and I almost turn back to my own work / but instead I just say / I know. / But you’re making a mess of that. / And he lets me help / even says a grudging thanks / when we’re done.” (p. 134) In what ways do each of the characters help others in the novel?
- “The words / cannot express / my amazement / that such a book as this / exists. / Books for grown-ups / for boys like me / for people who

have no words / no voice.” (p. 154-155) Make a list of books in your school or public library that would be suitable for students such as Amed.

- “Football? I ask / holding the ball towards him. / Come?” (p. 186) Sport is an important way that people in the novel connect without language. What are some other ways that people from different cultures can connect?
- As a class, discuss the sports that different class members play. What do they enjoy about these sports? Make a chart showing the popularity of each sport.
- Create a mobile symbolising how the different characters in the book are connected.

Change/Healing and Recovery

- “I loved him, you know. / Almost as much as I love you. / Those words. / Those words from my heartless mother / are what it takes / to release the dam. / My tears flow. / They flow for my dad. / They flow for my mum. / They flow for me. / Mum cries too / and at last we are together.” (p. 189-190) Losing her father enables Jolene to develop a closer, more authentic relationship with her mother. What are some other ways that characters in the book experience growth or positive change as a result of their suffering?
- “There are worse things in life / than a grumpy mum. / I look over at Mum / waiting alone near the car. / A dead dad is one of them.” (p. 173) Each of the characters in the book is confronted with their own “worse thing”, and not only survives the experience, but is expanded or strengthened by it in some way. What are some of the things you worry about happening in your life? How does the book help you deal with these fears?
- Coping with change is one of the key themes of the novel. Think about some difficult changes you’ve experienced in your life; for instance, changing school, moving house, the death of a pet or family member or getting a new sibling. Choose one of these changes and design a



pamphlet which aims to help other young people who may be going through a similar experience. Arrange your ideas in short sections such as “Background information”, “Tips for coping” and “Where you can learn more”. You may even like to include your own experiences as a case study or real-life example.

Family

- Discuss the way each character’s relationship with their family changes over the course of the novel.
 - Read pages 58-59 where Jolene’s list of things she would rather do than play hockey is contrasted with her list of things her mother would prefer her to do (nothing). Are there any ways you feel your parents want different things for you then you want for yourself?
 - Jolene says of her father, “I want to tell him / I need help too / ... but I never do. / He’s too busy saving the world / to save me.” (p.128-129) How is her relationship with her father different to her relationship with her mother? In what ways is it similar?
 - “She looks at the framed photograph on her lap. / In it there are two smiling faces – hers and mine. / It was time it was framed, I say. / We must have a family photo on display.” (p.197 -198) How do Amed and his aunt grow as a new family throughout the novel?
- Photocopy the front cover. Use arrows and labels to identify different parts of the cover and explain how these relate to the story. Remember, not all of the cover elements relate to events that happen in the book: some of them could be symbolic or suggest the setting or mood.
 - Create an alternative cover for the novel. Present your cover to the class, explaining how you used visual elements such as colour, contrast, composition, framing, font and symbolism to engage readers and convey the key ideas.
 - A visual symbol or icon is used at the start of each chapter. For instance, chapter 1 begins with the image of a lightning bolt. Discuss the way these symbols relate to the written story.
 - Throughout the book, the three protagonists come to be associated with different symbols: Blake with a bird, Amed with an eye and Jolene with a book. Why do you think Davis has chosen each of these symbols?
 - Choose another book you have enjoyed reading and create symbols to represent each of the characters. Present these to the class and explain why you have chosen them.
 - Examine the illustrations which accompany the written text, discussing Davis’s style and use of visual techniques. How do these illustrations support the text? Do they expand or introduce any ideas that the written text doesn’t?

Visual Literacy

- Sarah Davis uses a collage style on the book cover, incorporating elements of street art/graffiti, charcoal sketches, cartoons, colour illustration, symbols and naïve or representational art. Discuss the composition of this cover. What things do you notice first and what do you notice only when you look closely? Why do you think this is? Consider such elements as size, positioning, colour and style.
- Choose one section of the novel and illustrate it in your own style.



Additional Resources

Information on Sally Murphy

- Sally Murphy's website: <http://sallymurphy.com.au>
- An interview with Sally Murphy: <https://australianchildrenspetry.com.au/2015/03/04/interview-with-sally-murphy/>
- Sally Murphy discusses why she writes "sad" novels: <http://readingforaustralia.blogspot.com.au/2014/05/why-so-sad-by-sally-murphy.html>
- Sally Murphy discusses why and how she writes verse novels: <https://australianchildrenspetry.com.au/2014/09/18/in-verse-why-and-how-i-write-verse-novels/>

Children's Poetry Websites

- Australian Children's Poetry: <https://australianchildrenspetry.com.au/>
- Poetry4Kids: <http://www.poetry4kids.com/blog/lessons/poetry-writing-lessons/>
- Poetry Box: <https://nzpoetrybox.wordpress.com/>
- Poetry for Children blog: <http://poetryforchildren.blogspot.com/>
- Red Room Poetry: <https://redroomcompany.org/>

Quotes on Verse Novels

The following quotes may be useful for teachers to think about when discussing verse novels with students. Source information for each quote is provided in the section below

- "... an emergent typical verse-novel house-style can be identified. The entire story is told in the form of non-rhyming free verse. Very often each section is less than a page in length and only rarely more than two or three pages. Usually each of these sections is given a title to orientate the reader, which may indicate the speaker, or contextualise the content, or point to the core theme. The form lends itself to building each section around a single perspective or thought or voice or incident." - Joy Alexander
- "One of the things that particularly appeals to me is the surrounding white space on a page. It helps set up the poem, it allows space for impact, and a poem can even dance on the page as word placement spills over, up and down the page. For me, this is where a single poem or line on a page can stop me in my tracks and the white space allows me as the reader, to pause and connect with the narrator of the poem. There is a beauty in this form. Authors using this form know how important the last line of a poem can impact the reader. It can and often does pack a punch so hard that as readers we stop, unable for a moment to go on, while we take in what we have just read." - Desna Wallace
- "The verse novel must, in fact, do double-duty, having all the elements of both genres. This means a verse novel must have the music and imagery that we find in poetry and at the same time character development and story structure of a novel. Verse novelists must write good poetry and a good story, and they must combine the two seamlessly in order for the verse novel to work." - Gabriela Pereira

Further Information on Verse Novels for Children and Young Adults

- *Note: Some of the novels discussed deal with challenging themes and may be more suitable for older readers.



- Joy Alexander, *Children's Literature in Education* Vol. 36 No. 3, "The Verse-novel: A New Genre": www.longwood.edu/staff/miskecjm/381verse.pdf
- Sherryl Clark, *Australian Children's Poetry*, "How to Read A Verse Novel": <https://australianchildrenspoetry.com.au/articles/how-to-read-a-verse-novel/>
- Kelly Jensen, *Bookriot*, "100 Must Read YA Novels in Verse": bookriot.com/2016/03/22/100-must-read-ya-books-in-verse/
- Kirkus Reviews, "Novels in Verse for Children": kirkusreviews.com/lists/novels-verse-children/
- Gabriela Pereira, *diyMFA*, "What is a Verse Novel?": <https://diymfa.com/reading/what-is-a-verse-novel>
- Sonya Sones, *SonyaSones.com*, "Some Novels in Verse": sonyasones.com/imreading/novelsinverse.html
- Melissa Taylor, *Imagination Soup*, "14 Novels in Verse (That Get Kids Reading)": <https://imaginationsoup.net/12-novels-in-verse-that-get-kids-reading/>
- Sarah Tregay, "List of Middle Grade Novels in Verse": <https://www.sarahtregay.com/middlegrade.html>
- Desna Wallace, *The Sapling*, "Verse Novels for Children & YA": thesapling.co.nz/single-post/2019/11/14/Book-List-Verse-Novels-for-Children-and-YA
- Kathryn Apel, *On Track*
- Katherine Applegate, *Home of the Brave*
- Jeannine Atkins, *Finding Wonders: Three Girls Who Changed Science*
- Sherryl Clark, *Farm Kid**
- Sherryl Clark, *Motormouth**
- Sherryl Clark, *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)**
- Sharon Creech, *Hate That Cat*
- Sharon Creech, *Heartbeat*
- Sharon Creech, *Love That Dog*
- Andrea Davis Pinkney, *The Red Pencil*
- Steven Herrick, *Naked Bunyip Dancing**
- Steven Herrick, *Pookie Aleera is Not My Boyfriend**
- Karen Hesse, *Aleutian Sparrow*
- Karen Hesse, *Witness*
- Karen Hesse, *Out of the Dust*
- Marilyn Hilton, *Full Cicada Moon*
- Ron Koertge, *Shakespeare Bats Clean Up*
- Ron Koertge, *Shakespeare Makes the Playoffs*
- Thanhha Lai, *Inside Out and Back Again*
- Lorraine Marwood, *Ratwhiskers and Me**
- Lorraine Marwood, *Star Jumps**
- Sally Morgan, *Sister Heart**
- Hugh Montgomery, *The Voyage of the Arctic Tern*
- Sally Murphy, *Pearl Verses the World**
- Sally Murphy, *Roses are Blue**
- Sally Murphy, *Toppling**
- Betsy Rosenthal, *Looking for Me*
- Eileen Spinelli, *Birdie*
- Eileen Spinelli, *Dancing Pancake*
- Caroline Starr Rose, *May B.*
- Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*
- Jacqueline Woodson, *Locomotion*

List of Suggested Verse Novels for Middle Grade Readers

- Kwame Alexander, *Booked*
- Kwame Alexander, *The Crossover*
- Kathryn Apel, *Bully on the Bus*

Name: _____

Worse Things Plot Activity

The pictures below are used at the start of each chapter in the novel.

Complete this activity in pairs.

1. Retell the story of *Worse Things* from your memory (that is, without referring to the pictures).
2. Now, tell the story again using the pictures as a guide. Is your second telling different? In what way? Do you remember more? Do you focus on things other than plot, such as theme or mood?

