



## **SMOKE & MIRRORS**

Written by Barry Jonsberg

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 10–14 YEARS OLD (YEARS 5 & 6 PRIMARY, YEARS 7 & 8 SECONDARY)**

**GENRE:** Middle Fiction; Realist Fiction

**THEMES:** family relationships, resilience, hope, humour, illness and death, magic

### **CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Health & Physical Education

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Anita Jonsberg

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## PLOT SUMMARY

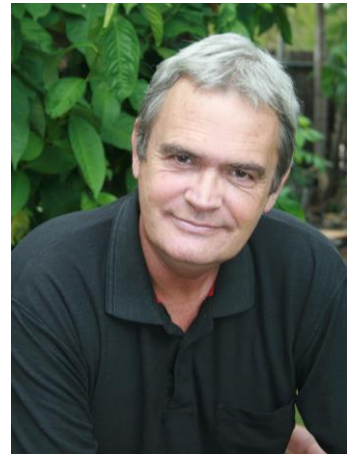
Grace is a teenager who cares about only two things: performing magic tricks and her quirky gran. Gran shares her prickly personality and spiky sense of humour, and she's the only one Grace feels understands her. That is until she meets Simon, an older student who helps turn her magic tricks into a small business and TikTok stardom.

With a painful past she tries hard to ignore, and a therapist who works hard without reward, Grace tries to overcome her fears.

When Gran is diagnosed with a terminal illness, Grace moves in to take care of her. Inspired by her love of magic and a suggestion from a palliative care nurse, Grace realises there may just be a way to create a miracle.

## IN THE WORDS OF THE AUTHOR

'I think that words are the most powerful kind of magic for all sorts of reasons. Just think about what happens when you really get 'stuck into' a new novel. If you're anything like me, then you sometimes can't put it down; you just have to keep reading to find out what happens. Yet a novel isn't real life, like the lives we all live every day. It's a trick played upon you by the writer – in this case using words rather than some of the props stage magicians use (though, as is mentioned in *Smoke & Mirrors*, words are part of their deceptive armoury too). Much the same kind of magic is used in films as well. I hate to break it to anyone, but the world in *Avatar*, for example, doesn't actually exist. But we are made to believe it does by the skilful use of images and sounds as well as words. When reading a book or watching a movie we suspend our disbelief – in effect, we say, 'I know this isn't real but I'm prepared to react as if it is.' Think also about the way some people use words in speeches to get a reaction from their audience. Great public speakers (and teachers will be able to find plenty of examples) know that words can cast a spell over those listening and they use this for their own purposes. And how about lying? Can you spot it in the 'real' world? Do you sometimes use it for your own advantage? Yup. Words are magical things and I wanted to write a book that explored this idea. I started with a blank page and, using my own form of magic, made a world out of it.'



Barry Jonsberg

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## BEFORE READING

- Consider what magic is: is it the ability for phones thousands of kilometres apart to connect wirelessly? Is it the intricate design of a flower? Or a new life?
- Have students make a list of the things they consider magical – their ideas can be collated into a display.

## Q&A WITH BARRY JONSBURG

***Smoke & Mirrors* features heavy-hitting themes of death, euthanasia, family breakdown and PTSD (among others). Why did you want to include them in a middle grade novel?**

'I'm not sure I *wanted* to include them – they just appeared as the storyline progressed. But the question implies that maybe these issues are not suitable for middle grade fiction and this is an issue that I feel is important. Middle grade readers are, in my opinion, much more sophisticated than some people give them credit for. They know about family conflict because many experience that first hand; they understand ageing, death, stress (from various sources) and the rights of people to determine their own destiny – again, through their lived experiences. I am of the opinion that censoring stories that might be hard-hitting, by omission of the unsavoury, is a great disservice to my target audience. It is never a good idea to talk down to middle grade readers because they know when that happens and I don't think they like it. As always, "tell the truth" is a main motivation in my storytelling. Anything else is selling my readers short.'

**What role does humour play in your books?**

'I love the interplay between humour and "serious" issues and I'm nearly always drawn to this in my writing. I have had many reviews that go along the lines of "I laughed *and* I cried" and I'm inordinately pleased by this for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is always good for a writer to affect a reader's emotions (why else do we write?). Secondly, it is a means by which readers are kept off balance and maybe unsure how they should react to the storyline. Plus, I believe that there are too many gloomy clouds hanging over all of us, but especially young people navigating a sometimes treacherous and uncertain world. I don't believe I shy away from those gloomy topics but maybe humour can, in a way, provide a small amount of hope. Laughter is *always* good.'

**Why did you choose to make your protagonist a magician in *Smoke & Mirrors*?**

'Most of my books start with a small idea or an image or a random sentence. I remembered an episode of the television show, *Fool Us* with Penn and Teller, where a magician called Shin Lim performed a series of amazing card tricks that did, indeed, fool the experts. And me. I couldn't understand how he made the impossible possible, no matter how many times I watched it. (Have a look at it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAN-PwRfjCA>.) The thing about magicians, especially those who deal with sleight of hand, is that they *have* to be consumed by their craft. It is all about practice, practice and more practice. So I watched a few more YouTube videos (actually, a lot) and the idea of a young girl who wanted to hone her craft came into my head. Then I read a comment from a famous magician, David Berglas, who said "The impossible I do immediately; miracles take a little longer" and some of the storyline fell into place. In particular, that small word "miracle" stayed with me. So Grace McKellon came into being – a girl obsessed with magic who finds herself trying to perform a miracle. It was only when I finished the book that I realised that, to some extent, Grace and I had a lot in common. A writer is also playing tricks, performing magic, if you like, by making worlds that are not literally real, believable. There's nothing up my sleeves, people, but watch what I do now.'

'I touched on this in an interview in Canada for my book *Catch Me If I Fall*: <https://open-book.ca/News/Anyone-Who-Writes-Fiction-is-a-Kind-of-Magician-Barry-Jonsberg-on-His-Writing-Process-New-Climate-Disaster-Novel>'

**If you had to name one theme that appears in all of your books what would that theme be?**

'I suppose it would be family relationships. We all have family and most of the time our lives revolve around them – keeping, maintaining and improving relationships with those we love. Even if we are not on good terms with family, it still dominates our thinking. For my target audience of young people, family is a huge factor in their lives partly because the vast majority live at home and have to navigate all those tricky personalities, expectations and pressures. Hopefully, most of their experiences are positive and supportive, though clearly some may be negative and damaging. Whatever, the world of family is one that my readers are familiar with and have a strong connection to.'

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### ENGLISH

#### LITERATURE

Engaging with and responding to literature (Year 5: AC9E5LE02; Year 6: AC9E6LE02, Year 7: ACE9E7LE02, ACE9E7LE03, ACE9E7LE04, Year 8: AC9E8LE02, ACE9E8LE03)

Examining Literature (AC9E5LE03 AC9E6LE03 AC9E7LE04)

- Have students predict what the novel is about purely from the front cover – what does 'smoke & mirrors' mean?
- What might the quote from David Berglas: 'The impossible I do immediately; miracles take a little longer' mean? You can watch him here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCBdhuLG2sw> (slightly poor quality, but the trick is clear).
- Have students confer and suggest ways the trick might have been done. (AC9E6LY02)
- The initial chapter is called 'Trick I' – how might this title affect readers' understanding of what will come next?
- Having read 'Trick I', explain, using quotes, how the author creates sympathy for the first-person narrator Grace.
- Re-write the scene in Trick I from the class teacher, Miss Smith's perspective.

- Look at Trick 2, where Grace's Uncle Mike is introduced. How is he characterised by Grace? Note four pieces of information that give you a clear impression of him. Consider if we can always believe other people's perspectives.

On page 13, Grace outlines the three stages of magic tricks: the pledge, the turn and the prestige. Find out about them here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXy6jLR3y2c> (voiceover from the film *The Prestige*).

- Think about the description of setting in Trick 6. Describe a place you have been in that you felt was designed to make you feel a certain way. What colours, furniture, other objects were used and what was the overall effect on you?
- Having read Trick 8, write a personal opinion of Grace's mother, taking into account what we know happened to Grace's father, as well as her interactions with Grace.
- In your own words, describe the character Jim.
- In Tricks 12 and 13, Grace's gran talks about death. It's a difficult subject, yet part of Grace's story. If comfortable, and in pairs, discuss your own/your culture's beliefs about death. If appropriate, the discussion could be guided by this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzqykDdVFc> (Uncle Bob Randall). Remind students that sometimes beliefs can vary from place to place. Do you know the stories of your family members?
- (homework) Grace is making TikTok videos: find your favourite TikTok video – that's appropriate for school – and share with your teacher, who may share some with the class.
- In Trick 18, we see Grace practicing escapology. What answers might she be looking for by mastering this particular trick? Work individually or in small groups to collate your ideas and present them to the class.
- On page 180, Dr D'ath (Dr Death) outlines his reasons for not supporting Voluntary Assisted Dying for Grace's gran. For him, it's a question of ethical decision making. Do you agree with him? Do you know more about Gran than he does? Write your answer with evidence.
- In Trick 22, Grace is in distress. Readers know what her schoolmates don't (dramatic irony). How did you react to others filming her with their phones? Is that an okay thing to do? Why or why not? After thinking, discuss as a class.
- In Trick 24, Grace's mum realises and accepts that she's an alcoholic. Alcoholics don't always drink lots – just very regularly. If you, or anyone you know, needs support (affected family members may need support), it can be found here – there are many organisations who can help:

<https://adf.org.au/insights/advice-family-friends/>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/families-looking-for-help-with-alcohol-and-drug-addiction>

<https://al-anon.org.au/>

- Grace attempts to elicit the Placebo Effect suggested by Nurse Sonja in Trick 25. You can read about it here: <https://eslbrains.com/the-placebo-effect/>. How far do you agree with Grace that this is a good idea for her gran?

(Activities in Health also applicable)

## LANGUAGE

AC9E5LA02, AC9E6LA02

- Look at Trick 27. In what ways does the author create tension here?
- How does Grace's gran's revelation about a trust fund for Grace affect your feelings about her and Uncle Mike? How easily did you distrust Mike and is there anything to learn from that? Are all narrators reliable?
- In Trick 19, Gran refers to a Philip Larkin poem, 'The Old Fools'. Look it up online – if poetry study is part of your course, you might choose to study it, or compare it with the novel.
- On page 60, Grace notes her mother's use of gendered language that denigrates women. Individually, think of other words that might only be applied to certain genders. How many can you come up with? Compare your own lists to see how many there are in each list. Think about what this means. Why do you think the author has Grace use some too?

## ENGLISH ASSESSMENT IDEAS:

Any of the exercises above, singly or in combination, or:

### Analytical (essay or paragraphed answers)

- Explore the character 'Gran'. How does the author convey a full sense of who she is?
- There are many euphemisms in Grace's speech. Suggest why these are used and explore their effect.
- Find allusions to other texts and people – how do these expand on the text's themes?
- Explain, with evidence, what readers can learn by studying *Smoke & Mirrors*?
- Explain, with evidence, whether Grace is a reliable or unreliable narrator.

**Creative:**

- Choose one of the magicians referred to and present a multimodal biography to the class.
- Learn one of the card tricks mentioned in the story and perform it to a small group of classmates.
- Rewrite Grace's escape trick from Simon's perspective.
- Produce a diary of session notes written by Grace's therapist Evelyn.
- Divide the class into four groups and choose one 'magician' for each group. Show the four magicians the following video, which is a tutorial for the last trick that Grace plays in the book (the prediction trick in her final meeting with her therapist). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KSErV5rS6c>. Let them practice the trick and then perform it to their group. Have a class discussion about how the trick worked. Did any of the audience spot how it was done?
- Imagine one section of the novel as a film. Produce a storyboard, cast and director's notes explaining why particular lighting, shots, angles, cuts, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds etc. are suitable for the scene and what you are trying to communicate to viewers.

**HEALTH & PHYSICAL EDUCATION****Interacting with others (AC9HP6P04)**

- Evaluate Grace's relationship with her grandmother when her grandmother becomes ill. How does it change? What are Grace and Uncle Mike's strategies to support her and how effective are they? What services/people support them in their new roles?

**Ethical Understanding**

- Gran asks Sonja, her palliative care nurse, about Voluntary Assisted Dying. In some Australian states, this is a legal process. Find out about it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0BdnqK-OYM>. Spend a few minutes considering, by yourself, whether this is a good or bad process. What would need to be considered by the ill person, their family and health professionals?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Barry Jonsberg** is a multi-award-winning international author, published in twenty countries and translated into fourteen languages. His book, *My Life As An Alphabet*, was made into the award-winning film *H is for Happiness* starring Richard Roxburgh and Miriam Margolyes in 2019. Negotiations are underway for a Broadway musical based upon the same book.

## ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

**Anita Jonsberg** is a Year 10, 11 and 12 English teacher at a College in Darwin. She loves all things books – especially great fantasy!



## OTHER RESOURCES

(Check suitability for your cohort)

Film: *The Prestige*

Film: *The Illusionist* (animated)

## ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Open Book – Barry Jonsberg on His Writing Process & New Climate Disaster Novel:  
<https://open-book.ca/News/Anyone-Who-Writes-Fiction-is-a-Kind-of-Magician-Barry-Jonsberg-on-His-Writing-Process-New-Climate-Disaster-Novel>

David Berglas – Chair Test: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCBdhuLG2sw>

Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts by Graham K Furness:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXy6jLR3y2c>

Aboriginal Spirituality with Uncle Bob Randall:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzqykcDtVFc>

Alcohol and Drug Foundation – How Can I help? Advice for family and friends:  
<https://adf.org.au/insights/advice-family-friends/>

Better Health Channel – Family help for alcohol and drug addiction:  
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/families-looking-for-help-with-alcohol-and-drug-addiction>

Al-Anon Family Groups of Australia: <https://al-anon.org.au/>

ESL Brains – The Placebo Effect: <https://eslbrains.com/the-placebo-effect/>

Eligibility for voluntary assisted dying in South Australia:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0BdnqK-OYM>