



A Gift from the Birds

CAROLINE STILLS

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 8+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Stills is the author of a number of acclaimed picture books for children. She won the 2024 Text Prize for *A Gift from the Birds*, her first novel for middle grade readers. Caroline lives in the Dandenong Ranges, east of Melbourne, with her family.

SYNOPSIS

When Millie was nine years old, her mum was diagnosed with cancer. She had to have chemotherapy, which made her sick and made her hair fall out. Millie's mum had good weeks and bad weeks, and this became the new normal for Millie's family. Millie wasn't too worried: she knew the treatment was something her mum just had to do to get rid of the cancer.

But then, on the night of Millie's tenth birthday party, Mum gets worse and has to go to hospital. At first, Millie thinks her mum just over did things at the party, and needs a rest. But days go by, and Mum is still in hospital. Millie desperately wants her to come home, but the doctors say she can't.

Millie misses her mum. She doesn't feel like eating, and throws her cheeseburger on the ground in the backyard. Two crows fly down and eat it, and the next day Millie finds a toy car on the back porch. She feeds the crows again, and they leave her more gifts. But when Dad finds out, he says it's unhealthy for wild birds to be fed by humans, and that Millie has to stop.

Then the worst day happens. Millie's mum dies, and Millie feels like her life has been split in two. When Millie goes back to school, she doesn't feel like hanging out with her friends. She spends lunchtimes alone in the library, or painting in art club. She feels distant from her dad, too, until he changes his mind about feeding the crows. Together, Millie and Dad come up with a plan for feeding the birds responsibly. Millie looks forward to the weekends, when they feed the crows and she receives more gifts.

One morning, Millie discovers she has lost the heart necklace her mum gave her for her birthday. She looks everywhere, but she can't find it. Millie is devastated. The necklace made her feel connected to her mum. Will she ever feel that connection again?

A Gift from the Birds is a thoughtful and courageous novel for middle-grade readers about navigating grief, the importance of friendship, and the healing power of art and nature.



BEFORE READING

1. Look closely at the front cover: there are lots of little details to notice. Make a list of all the things you can see. What do they make you wonder about the story? What predictions can you make?
2. What kinds of birds live in your area? What do you know about them? Do some research to learn more.
3. Have you ever lost someone close to you? How did it make you feel? How did people around you help? What other strategies did you use to cope?
4. The first line of this book is 'Birds can save people's lives'. (p. 1) How do you think a bird could save a person's life?

WHILE READING

1. What does Millie mean when she says she was 'a long time coming'? (p. 1)
2. Why do you think Millie's stomach is in knots at her birthday party?
3. What gift does Millie receive in Chapter 4?
4. Why does Millie feel like her friends are trying 'extra hard to be nice' to her? (p. 30)
5. Why does Millie 'hate' her cheeseburger?
6. Why doesn't Millie want to visit her mum in hospital?
7. How does Millie decorate the shoebox she finds in her wardrobe? What does she put inside it?
8. Why do you think the drive to the hospital and the walk down the corridor to Mum's room seem so much longer to Millie on page 78? What does Mum tell Millie and Dad she needs them to do?
9. Why is Dad upset when he finds out Millie has been feeding the crows? Do you think Millie should stop feeding them?
10. What does Millie mean when she says, 'That phone ringing was the moment that broke my life in two'? (p. 92)
11. Everyone at the funeral is crying, except Millie. 'I had no tears. I don't know why I wasn't crying too'. (p. 100) Why do you think Millie doesn't cry at her Mum's funeral?
12. Why does Dad change his mind about feeding the crows?
13. What does Dad think the crows are saying after they eat the mealworms? What does Millie think they're saying?
14. What does Millie decide to do about Mothers' Day?
15. How do you think visiting the cemetery helps Millie and her dad?
16. What do Dad and Millie make together for dinner on Mothers' Day? Why?

17. What happens to the crows in spring?
18. What is 'missing' in Chapter 21? Why does it make Millie so upset?
19. What is the most precious gift Millie receives from the birds?
20. 'Those crows saved me. And Dad.' (p. 178) What does Millie mean?

AFTER READING CHARACTER

1. Read the description of Ms Dorinda on page 39. What does it tell you about her? How is Ms Dorinda different from the other characters in the story? How does she treat Millie after her mum dies?
2. There are lots of characters in this novel who help Millie and her mum and dad, like Mum's best friend, Lisa. Who are these people and what things do they do to care for Millie and her family?
3. There are a lot of human characters in this novel, but the animal characters are important as well. Create character profiles for each of the five crows: Sheryl, Russell, Shay, Kay and Bob. Use information from the story, research about crows, and your own imagination!
4. Millie's dad only calls her 'Amelia' when she's in trouble. Why does he call her Amelia on page 55, when she asks him to tell her Mum will come home soon? Has Millie done something wrong?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. Why does Millie compare herself to the deflated helium balloons leftover from her party? (p. 27—28) Can you come up with any other similes or metaphors to describe how Millie is feeling in this moment?
2. Read the descriptions of all the paintings Millie does throughout the novel. What do they tell you about how Millie is feeling in each chapter? How do they reflect the events that are happening in the story?
3. Chapter 12 is titled 'The Bad Day' and Chapter 13 is titled 'The Worst Day'. What do these titles refer to? Why do you think the author, Caroline Stills, chose to give the chapters in her novel titles? How do the titles add to your understanding of the story?

THEMES Friendship

1. 'Why do some of Millie's friends stare at her mum when they come over for Millie's birthday party? Why doesn't Millie's best friend, Sophie, stare?'
2. What does Sophie do on Millie's birthday that makes her 'an awesome best friend'? (p. 31) What other things does Sophie do throughout the story that make her a good friend?



3. What is Millie's favourite thing to do at lunchtime? How is this different from Sophie's? What things do you and your friends have in common? What things are different about you? How does it affect your friendship when you want to do different things?
4. How does Millie feel about her dad organising Sophie to come over after school in Chapter 10? Why do you think she feels this way?
5. Why do some of the girls from school look scared when they see Millie at the funeral? What does Sophie do? It can sometimes be hard to know how to help someone who is grieving. How could you show someone who is grieving that you care about them?
6. 'Sophie came and sat next to me. She didn't talk. She just sat with me in silence.' (p. 100) Do you think Sophie should have said something to Millie? Do you think Millie wanted her to? Why is just being with someone helpful sometimes?
7. 'I no longer had friends and that was the way I preferred it'. (p. 146) Why does Millie prefer not to have friends after her mum dies?
2. What does Ms Dorinda suggest when Millie can't think of anything to paint in art club? Why does she say this? What does Millie paint as a result?
3. Try creating your own artwork by just putting paint on a page or canvas without planning what you want it to look like. What happened? How did you feel while painting?
4. What are some other art forms (apart from painting) that can help people process emotions? For example: dance, photography. What art form are you most drawn to? Have you ever used this art form to help you with difficult feelings?
5. In Chapter 18, Millie paints the crows in flight. Ms Dorinda says Millie's painting captures 'movement and energy'. (p. 125) Try painting something so that it looks like it's moving. How can you create energy using lines and colours?
6. Millie isn't happy with her painting of the flying crows, and she ends up throwing it in the bin. (p. 126) Why does she feel this way? Have you ever felt like this about something you've made? Do you think Millie should have thrown away her painting?

Grief

1. 'What does Millie think about the basketball on page 52? Have you ever had this feeling? What were you doing or looking at?
2. What does Millie mean when she says 'At school on Monday, I just did things without really doing them'? (p. 90) Have you ever felt this way? What things have you done without really doing them? Why?
3. What does Millie hold onto as she falls asleep after finding out her mum has died? Do you have a special object like this that comforts you when you are upset?
4. 'It's good to cry, Millie,' he [Dad] said. 'It's the body's way of releasing pain. Of grieving.' (p. 165) Do you agree with Dad? What are some other ways people grieve? What does Millie do with her emotions instead of crying? Does she let them out in other ways?
5. What does Millie wish she'd told her mum about before she died? Is there someone you wish you could talk to who has died? What would you say to them? How could you say it to them now in a different way?
6. Why does Millie finally cry when she realises her necklace is gone? Is she really crying about her missing necklace?

Art

1. Chapter 9, Millie says that her day starts with three good things. One of those things is art club. Why do you think art club is so important to Millie?

RESPONDING

1. 'Those crows saved me. And Dad. They flew into our backyard when we needed them, bringing the healing power of nature.' (p. 178) In what other ways can nature heal us, or make us feel better? Have you ever felt healed by nature?
2. Make a list of all the things Millie (and her Dad) feed the crows. Divide the list into things that are safe for the crows to eat, and things that aren't. Can you think of other safe foods to feed birds? What are some other ways we can take care of wildlife? Do some research to find out how you can look after the natural environment you live in.
3. 'It amazed me how they must have known it was still the weekend, the only time we fed them. They [the crows] were so clever.' (p. 173) Millie is impressed by how intelligent the crows are. Corvids (the family of birds crows belong to) are known to be very smart. Do some research on corvids. What other types of corvids are there? What clever things have they been known to do?
4. Apart from the crows, what other descriptions of the natural environment can you find in this novel?
5. Go outside with a notebook and a pen/pencil. Sit for a while and notice the natural things around you: birds, trees, flowers. Draw the natural environment, or describe it in words blog post or a song.