

TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Burnt Out

Written by Marguerite Hann Syme

The author

Marguerite Hann Syme was born and educated in Adelaide. She grew up in the Adelaide foothills with her musician father, artist mother, and two brothers. It was a very happy childhood. ('[There were] more than forty kids under ten ... in my street: a lot of them visited because we had a Hills hoist painted in four colours and with four seats to swing around on, plus a big blackboard on the wall.') Her formative years were filled with music, art and books.

Marguerite travelled overseas when she was twenty-two. She worked in London, roamed around Europe, and 'accidentally' returned to Australia eighteen months later, marrying soon afterwards. She and her husband lived with their first two children in a log cabin in the Adelaide Hills. On 16 February 1983, Ash Wednesday, they lost their home and everything in it to the bushfires that ravaged the Hills and many other parts of southern Australia.

After the fire the family returned to the Hills, and built a new home there. A third child (the 'bushfire baby'), was born at the end of 1983.

Margie has been writing fiction since 1992, nurtured (as she puts it) by the South Australian Writers Centre. Initially she concentrated on radio and stage plays, and adult short stories - many of which have received commendations and won prizes. In 1998 her first children's book, *Chickpea*, was published by Scholastic. It was shortlisted by the CBCA for its Book of the Year (Younger Readers) Award in 1998; a sequel, *Velvet*, is in production. A picture book, *Bushfire*, illustrated by David Cox, was released by Scholastic in September 2000.

Apart from her writing, Margie has made videos on teaching art for her mother, Marjorie Hann, who is a well-known artist.

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Burnt Out: The cover

The 'shout line' on the front cover describes this book as An Australian Story. The elements of the illustration support this: the desiccated gum leaves; the spurt of gum blossom, like a miniature flaming torch; the colours of brown and dull gold and ochre. There are few human elements apart from the key and coins in the foreground - and the burnt match on the spine. Fire has destroyed all life. But there is life on the back cover: one gumleaf is tinged with green, and the ladybird on it provides a splash of colour - in contrast with the small form of the dead beetle on the front cover.

Questions for discussion

- Why has the cover artist kept human elements to a minimum?
- What is the effect of the colours used?
- Does the cover give a correct impression of the kind of book this is? What sort of cover would you have chosen for this book? Why?
- What is the significance of the ladybird? Can you remember a nursery rhyme about a ladybird?

Structure

The main story is presented very simply, almost as a diary. The lives of the bushfire family are described over a momentous three months - from Christmas Day 1982 until a few weeks after Ash Wednesday 1983. The author has chosen to 'frame' this simple linear story by presenting it as a painting - a metaphor that is used frequently throughout the main narrative. In the first chapter ('Paint the Setting'), she invites the reader to choose a subject; to place the easel in position; and to wander around the environs before making sketches as a basis for a painting. We take in the home, the setting, the view, the essence of the place. In the second chapter ('Mould the Characters'), the reader is asked to make the main characters - the woman Jo and the man Cam - come alive by modelling them in clay.

At the end of the narrative, we examine the completed work ('Let the Colours Run'): *Step out of the picture now, stand back from the easel. Contemplate the painting. Ask yourself: Have I captured the essence of what I was after? Is there balance to the composition? Have I resolved what I was trying to say? Visual sense moves almost shockingly to something more physical: Dip your finger into the swirls of colour and taste the legacy of bushfire madness.* Finally we make a new picture - the picture of now ('another life - a new expression').

Questions for discussion

- What is the purpose of the artistic metaphor? Why do you think the author has chosen to introduce her story in this way?
- What is the effect of the metaphor? Does it give the reader a greater sense of involvement, or does it create a distance between the observer/creator and the thing observed/created? Does it allow the reader to see more clearly the setting and the characters?
- Clearly the author is familiar with the techniques of artistic expression. Go through the book and try to find some of the many references to drawing and painting, both actual (eg Zoe's drawing of rabbits, Eddie seeing pictures in the clouds) and figurative (eg 'The picture of destruction refuses to paint itself' on page 48).

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The Characters

Burnt Out is a true story, but it has been written as fiction. The main characters are essentially real people, but they also have been 'created' to some degree. Nearly all the names have been changed. Charlie the big orange cat really was called Charlie, and Tanny, too, is a real character in every way.

Most writers base at least a part of their writing on their own experiences, or invent characters based on people they know or have met. In *Burnt Out* the situation is rather different. Events described in this book reflect vividly and accurately the real experiences of the author and her family. Their lives, the way they lived, are recreated in astonishingly evocative detail. The characters are – in virtually every respect except their names—the author, her husband, their two children, and the author's family: her parents, brothers, and so on. Their homes and occupations as described in the book are or were their homes and occupations in real life.

There is no doubt that the complex character of Jo is the author. Cam is her husband, and his story of what happened on Fire Day is recounted in his 'real' voice. The children appear in the book with their remembered appearances and personalities of eighteen years ago. The family's trauma is described exactly as they experienced it.

Reading the book is like looking at a series of snapshots, slice-of-life scenes strung together. The result is that we feel that we are reading about people we know far more intimately than we know most fictional characters.

Margie Hann Syme says of this book that it is the most difficult thing she has ever written. Although she was writing of her family's experience as fiction, she still felt a duty to report what happened, and its effects, as faithfully as possible. Attempts to further fictionalise the story (adding a plot, inventing purely imaginary characters) were unsustainable. She describes it as a 'straight account'. But is it?

Questions for discussion

- Because she is writing about her own personal experiences, the author is to some extent writing 'with her heart on her sleeve'. The pain and loss she felt, and still feels, are very much a part of the novel. What is the effect of this subjectivity on *Burnt Out*?
- *Burnt Out* might best be described as fictional biography. Discuss the definitions of fiction, nonfiction, biography, autobiography. What are the main differences between them? Very broadly, what is the function of each of these genres? How would the author's 'voice' be different for each?
- If *Burnt Out* is essentially a true story, why do you think the author wrote it as fiction? Imagine how it might have worked if written (a) in the first person, (b) with a completely invented storyline.
- *Burnt Out* is written in the present tense. What is the effect of this? What would be the effect if it were written in the past tense?
- In an earlier unpublished draft of the story, all the main characters (father, mother and the two children – James, aged 7 and Zoe, aged 5) described part of their experience in their own 'voice'. In the published version, the viewpoint, apart from the beginning and ending of the

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story, is exclusively that of Jo (the mother). Why do you think the author chose to use a single rather than a multiple viewpoint?

- To which character do you relate most strongly? Why?

Setting and Place

Ash Wednesday, 16 February 1983, has gone down in history as the day of one of Australia's most disastrous bushfires. Many people died, and countless properties were destroyed. Most people will remember Ash Wednesday as an anonymous tragedy of almost mythical proportions. *Burnt Out* brings it back to the human and the particular. It is the day when James and Zoe lost their beloved stripy-vested teddies, when Jo lost the memories of her childhood and adolescence, when Cam saw his shed 'burning in this perfect shape of a candle flame—only fifteen foot high' (page 62) and then, unable to do anything about it, stood in the road and watched his house burn to the ground.

Burnt Out presents the family's home, their living place, as it was 'before' and 'after' the fire. In effect these are portraits in which the setting itself, although not humanised, takes on its own very definite character. When they drive back up the freeway to see the destruction for the first time, Jo says ... 'losing the house is like having someone in the family die' (page 95).

The initial depiction of the family's log cabin, 'green, compact, homey', contrasts vividly with the post-fire destruction. 'The kids wanted to see their house ... But it isn't supposed to look like this' (page 101). The pre-fire setting is outlined in the first chapter as the reader (in the guise of artist) travels around the house and the house block, taking in every detail: what is contained there, inside and out, and its fundamental place in the family's daily life. This sequence, where each place and object is noted in an almost detached way as raw material for a painting, is poignantly revisited in Chapter 13, as Jo tries to remember, for the insurance company, all these same things that she has always taken for granted. What has she lost? *Think every room. Think every wall outside. Think roof. Think back garden. Front. Sides. Think of it all. Think childhood. Think youth. Think music. Think books. Think photos. Think cooking pots. Think spices and sauces. Think saucepans and bread tins. Think wedding. Think babies. Think 'gone'. No ...!* (pages 122-3)

Questions for discussion

- Although *Burnt Out* is all about the trauma caused by the bushfire, the bushfire is not described as it happens, but only in Mrs Yelders' chatty conversation and in Cam's retrospective reporting. Neither Jo nor her children actually sees the house burn. In a sense, then, this might seem to be a story without a focus. The 'crime' is performed off stage. Does this increase or decrease the dramatic impact of events?
- There is a strong appeal to the senses in the writing of *Burnt Out* - a concentration on rendering exactly colour, texture, appearance. Things and places are important, as is the evocation of what daily life was like in 1983. The author's approach is almost documentary in its faithfulness to reality. What is the effect of this? What impact does it have on the reader?

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Social Issues

In her acknowledgements, the author thanks the people and organisations from whom her family received help after Ash Wednesday. 'Unknown individuals stepped forward as well as family, friends, neighbours, churches, business houses and service and community organisations ... Whenever I hear the sirens wail I pay homage to our firefighters.'

Burnt Out raises a number of pertinent issues relating to the treatment of victims of a natural disaster.

The effects of the fire may be physical (destruction of property, personal injury), geographical, environmental (land, animals) and psychological.

Questions for discussion

- **Family dynamics.** Discuss the effect of the fire on each of the family members in *Burnt Out* (Jo, Cam, James, Zoe), and on the members of the extended family (Jo's family, the grandparents). How did it affect family relationships?
- **Personal loss.** The loss of home and possessions is also a loss of identity. We are to some extent what we own. Why is the loss of some possessions felt more keenly than the loss of others (Jo mentions books, photographs)? Why did Jo mourn in particular the destruction of her records?
- **Memories.** What are memories? Are they 'real'? For Jo, the loss of her memories is an issue that still troubles her, years after the fire. 'Now she can't remember what she loved, and wonders why this should matter so much.' Why *does* it matter so much?
- **Charities.** Who are they for? Who benefits? How do communities respond to (a) traumatised people, (b) natural disasters, (3) the expectations placed on them? Explain Jo's reluctance to accept any charitable offering, simply because it is offered, and her resulting feelings of guilt. *Jo feels warped saying 'No', inwardly begs the well-meaning donors to understand that although she and her family have nothing, they're still permitted choice, taste, preference* (page 120). Most charitable bodies are genuinely caring and helpful, but there is another side to charity. *Burnt Out shows* that there are greedy people who take advantage of charity givers, and thoughtless people who take advantage of those in need by passing on to them unwanted cast-offs.
- **Dispossession.** Consider the idea that people who are the victims of a natural disaster are dispossessed just as surely as those who become refugees as a result of political events. Through no fault of their own, they are suddenly homeless, bewildered, dependent on the charity of others, and subject to the policies of controlling bodies such as social security, the police and insurance companies.
- **Myths and expectations of human behaviour.** Do people react to crises in ways 'expected' of them, or do they in fact react very differently? We expect crises to bring out 'the best' in people, but is this the case? Are such expectations (especially of family/relatives, on whom the brunt of caring for victims often falls) fair? Many people find it difficult to relate to victims of natural disasters. They are unable to be 'normal' in their presence. Eric, on page 100, is

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described as 'the first of many with "that look" in their company. A look that says, *I am so uncomfortable. I don't know what I'm supposed to say. Let me leave without fuss.*' Why do some people react in this way?

- **Fire safety issues.** What does *Burnt Out* say about people's disregard for fire safety (eg Jo continues to stuff the pot-bellied stove with paper)? Jo says that perhaps she could have prevented the fire - could she? In an Ash Wednesday situation, could any measures have protected people and property against the intensity and capriciousness of the fire?
- **Rebuilding.** Even after the fire, Jo and Cam never considered that they wanted to live anywhere other than the Adelaide Hills. People will continue to live in areas that are especially susceptible to bushfire. Talk about (a) reducing the impact of fire by building 'fire-proof' houses, and maintaining the environment (cutting back scrub, etc), and (b) the importance of the Country Fire Services and the Special Emergency Services.