

# Teachers' Notes

written by

## Michelle Prawer

# Hiding Edith

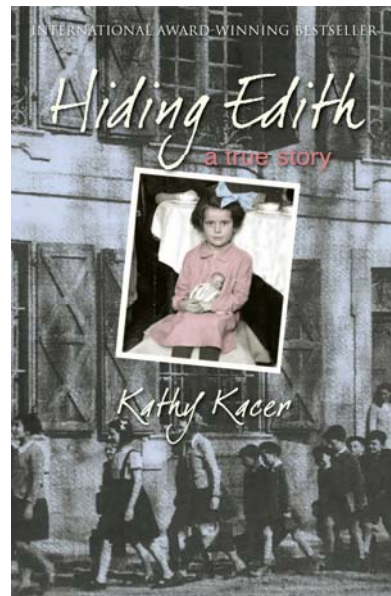
## Kathy Kacer

ISBN 978 1 74237 5298

Recommended for ages 11 – 14 yrs

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## INTRODUCTION

Hiding Edith is an account of a child survivor who, by the age of 9, is responsible for her own survival; a child, having to suffer the traumas inflicted on her by the adult world. As such, this book lends itself to examination in both the English and SOSE areas of study providing a vehicle for an in-depth examination of the impact of war on children and indeed on wider society. An examination of the role of bystanders and their culpability in times of conflict would also be a challenging area for discussion. Additionally, through an exploration of anti-Semitism, an analysis of the treatment of minority groups in society could also be tackled with a particular focus on anti-Semitism then, now and through the ages.

Other themes for study include:

- the responsibility of nations of the world to speak out against injustice;
- the need for and purpose of studying history.

## PLOT SUMMARY

This is the true story of Edith Schwalb, an Austrian Jewess who spent most of the Second World War separated from those she loved. Her parents do their best to protect her and organize a place for her in Moissac children's home where, in spite of suffering and hardship, she does manage to survive. But the protection offered by the brave people of this town is ultimately threatened and Edith must assume a false identity in a new children's home at Ste-Foy-la-Grande. Here she is ignored and feels the isolation even more acutely. As the bombs begin to fall, heralding the end of the war, Edith is moved to the home of a generous farming family who care for her until she is ultimately reunited with her family. It is a tale of suffering, kindness and struggle which celebrates the generosity of righteous gentiles<sup>1</sup> who sacrificed their own safety for the Jewish children they hid. But it is also a tale which highlights the way war harms and scars children for life.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### CHAPTER ONE—MAY 1938-VIENNA, AUSTRIA

1. The text (p. 6) tells us that the Nazis were "stopping Jewish people from doing things they normally did like going to parks and playgrounds and even to stores." Indeed there were official laws prohibiting Jews from communal spaces and communal organizations.

**Activity:** Research the Nuremberg Laws and present your findings to the class. Why do you think that regimes throughout history have resorted to discrimination against minority groups?

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<sup>1</sup> *Righteous Gentiles* is a term used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis. The term is sometimes also translated as *Righteous of the World's Nations*.

2. Papa and Edith are accosted by a Nazi whose "...face showed such disgust!" When he realizes that Papa is the famous soccer player he has admired, his demeanor immediately changes, "the man was smiling now" (p.11)

- What do we see about the power of indoctrination from this incident? This raises the question of independent thinking versus the imperative to obey the laws of the land.

**Activity:** Oxford Debate<sup>2</sup>: 'That one should always follow orders'

3. Edith needs to choose one thing to take with her as the family flees Nazi persecution in Austria.

- What single item might you take with you as a keepsake? In what way does this item encapsulate your life to date?

**Creative writing activity:** The teacher should bring in old black and white photos of families or family members like the one of Edith and her family on page 15. (These can often be found in op. shops or downloaded from the web, though real ones would be more authentic for this activity.) Photos should be laid out on tables and students should be invited to select one and then directed to write a family history for the chosen family or individual. To blend in with the theme of the book, the teacher could specify that the photos depict individuals from the same city as Edith Schwalb. Students will need to research Vienna at the time of World War 2 and include details of life at the time. (The web site of the Holocaust Centre of Israel, Yad Vashem, has a photo archive accessible on line at [www6.yadvashem.org/wps/portal/photo](http://www6.yadvashem.org/wps/portal/photo))

## CHAPTER 2—MAY 1940-BELGIUM

1. When Edith's family escaped from Austria, they had to rely on others to survive the trip on foot to the Belgian border. Sometimes Mutti had to use her jewels to bribe the locals to help (p. 19) but there were non-Jews who, in contrast to the indifference and collaboration of most, sacrificed their own safety to help Jews. These people are known as Righteous Gentiles.

**Activity:** Research the term Righteous Gentile. Investigate at least one individual who has been given this title of honour.<sup>3</sup>

Present your findings about these people in an oral presentation to the class.

2. Gaston is Edith's new little brother born in Brussels after the family's relocation.
  - Does Gaston's birth say something about the optimism of human beings or the naivety of human beings?

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<sup>2</sup> An Oxford debate is an impromptu debate which involves the entire class. A proposition is put forward and students stand to the left of the classroom if they disagree or to the right if they support it. Comments pass across the room as students attempt to persuade others to cross the floor.

3. Many who experience war as children comment that they have been robbed of their childhood.

- From your reading of this chapter, comment on the impact of war on children.

### **CHAPTER 3—FEBRUARY 1943 BEAUMONT-DE-LOMAGNE, FRANCE**

1. “What’s the use of thinking about the future?” asks Therese of her sister Edith (p.28). “The war will never be over.” War clearly affects people differently and they bare different, life-long scars. Some can retain their optimism and others remain bitter and negative, finding it difficult to cope.

**Activity:** Research the impact of war on children in different communities through some wider reading of contemporary YA books. (See Resources and Further Reading, below.) Prepare a presentation to the class in the form of an oral book review.

2. Moissac Children’s Home was a real place that saved Jewish children during the war.

**Activity:** Research the key figures of Shatta and Bouli Simon who were responsible for saving these children. Write their obituary to be published in the local newspaper.

**Activity:** Research the Jewish Scouts of France, their history, their emblem, the structure of their organisation and what they continue to contribute in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **CHAPTER 4—THE DECISION**

1. Mutti decides to send her children away (p.32) in order to ensure their safety but the decision must have been an agonizing one.

**Activity:** Write a diary entry recording Mutti’s thoughts which ultimately led to this decision. Bear in mind the tension involved in her decision making.

### **CHAPTER 5 MARCH 1943-LEAVING MUTTI**

1. When Mutti leaves Edith at the children’s home, she says “Remember who you are.” (p. 38)

- What does Mutti mean?
- How can Edith hope to do this? Does she succeed? Find examples in the text that indicate her success or failure in this regard.

### **CHAPTER 6 MEETING SARAH**

1. To keep her sense of her own past alive while at Moissac, Edith tries to “...make bits of memories into pictures...” (p.41)

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<sup>3</sup> Go to [www1.yadvashem.org/yy/en/righteous/stories/index.asp](http://www1.yadvashem.org/yy/en/righteous/stories/index.asp)

**Activity:** You are to be taken from your home and community. What are the main memories you preserve as pictures or frozen moments in your mind? Why did you choose these and how do they reflect you and your past?

2. Shatta explains the situation of the town of Moissac to Edith. "...the people in Moissac know we are Jewish...everyone—children, grown ups..." (p.44)

**Activity:** Research other towns, organizations and even countries which, in spite of the threat to their own safety, did indeed stand up and protect the Jews in their midst. Present your findings. What is your assessment of the voice of conscience and its presence or absence during the atrocities of World War 2? Do you believe the world today has a conscience when it comes to standing up for the oppressed? Justify your response.

## CHAPTER 7 – CHAPTER 11—LIFE IN MOISSAC

1. Life in the children's home seems to be safe and even quite pleasant. There are friends with whom to play, school to contend with and sufficient food to make life quite bearable but, of course, the absence of family remains a burning vacuum in Edith's life, in spite of Gaston being next door and Edith's mother and sister maintaining a degree of contact. Edith concludes, "Mutti had been wrong to bring her here." (p. 59) Sarah tells her to "Stop whining...You're lucky you have a mother... Most of us don't know if our mothers are alive." (p.79) but Edith was "...aching with sadness" (p.79).

When Eric Goldfarb is asked if he would leave with his parents should they arrive to collect him, (p.72) he says "I've been away from my family for so long that I can't really picture us together. Besides, I'm old enough to look after myself." While Eve is also safe in Moissac, Eve's family chooses togetherness over the safety of the children's home and they attempt to take Eve to Switzerland with them. This choice must have been an agonizing one for Eve's family.

- What would you have done? Why?
- Do you think Edith is lucky or unlucky? Explain your answer in detail.

2. Gaston is separated from his family and is angry that Edith does not visit him immediately. "It was as if someone had turned out the light in his once-bright eyes" (p.61). Separation is frightening for children under any circumstances but being left with strangers can cause life-long trauma. Indeed Edith tells us (p.91) "Once she had innocently believed in the future, but now all her hope had evaporated."

**Activity:** Invite a child survivor of the Holocaust<sup>4</sup> to address the class. Prepare a list of questions focusing on the impact of separation on their family life and on their ability to form solid

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<sup>4</sup> In Melbourne, Jewish Holocaust Centre web site (03) 95281985 [www.jhc.org.au/visit.asp](http://www.jhc.org.au/visit.asp), or similar in your state?

relationships later in life. Make sure you research the area of child survivors<sup>5</sup> before you conduct the interview.

3. In spite of the war, the children in Moissac sing in a choir (p.58), keep the Sabbath (p.64) and learn skills. They carry on as much as possible with ordinary life.
  - Why? Is this way of living simply an example of self delusion? Examine Edith's approach to Gaston on page 65 when answering this question.

## CHAPTER 12- CHAPTER 17

1. As the children go "camping" to escape a Nazi raid, Edith questions the sincerity of the people of Moissac. "Are they really our friends? When the Nazis come will they keep our secret?" (p. 86) the chapter ends with a girl of the town peeking out from a shutter as they leave.
  - Re-read this section on page 87 and explain the implication of the wave.
2. The "camping" trip lasts for 5 days and Edith has to admit that "...they had remained safe and had had fun... She had forgotten that she was in danger." (p. 95)

**Activity:** With this in mind, research the concept of 'survivor guilt.'<sup>6</sup>

3. It is 1943 and "The French authorities are supplying the Nazis with lists of Jews in this area so they can transport us to concentration camps." (p.99)
  - Comment on the actions and responsibilities of governments towards their citizens.
  - Compare the response of the French with the response of the Danes. Why do you think this was the case?

**Activity:** The mayor of Moissac was clearly an exceptional individual. Research the man and as a class produce a memorial wall in his honour. Include his biography, testimonies of others and facts about his bravery. If possible, find documents and photographs of the time.

4. Eric is involved in producing false documents to ensure the survival of the children. (p.101)

**Activity:** Make a false ID document for someone else in the class and interview them about their lives as they assume their 'new identity'. Try to maintain the new persona for a week during your English classes or if possible, in all classes. Record your thoughts, struggles and challenges in a diary. Do you think that maintaining such a ruse would be easy?

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<sup>5</sup> Read some of the following stories written by child survivors published by Makor Library  
*There Will Be Tomorrow* by Guta Goldstein.

*Tell it to the Squirrels* by Judy Kolt.

*Snippets from My Family Album* by Alice Landau

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survivor\\_guilt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survivor_guilt)

Some survivors had to live under assumed identities for years. This had a significant impact on their ability to resume their old life. Some people never actually did so, maintaining elements of their false identities for life. Assumed names, birth dates and family links became 'truth'.

- Investigate some of these many examples.

5. Eric declares that he is joining The Resistance. (p102)

**Activity:** Research 'The Resistance' and present your findings to the class.

Eric also refers to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Research this event for a class presentation. Watch the video 'Uprising' (TV 2001) directed by Jon Avnet which gives a clear overview of this event. Go to [www.mchekc.org/Resourcesjewish resistance.htm](http://www.mchekc.org/Resourcesjewish%20resistance.htm) for other resources on Jewish resistance.

6. Edith is mindful of her mother's injunction to "Remember who you are." (p.38)

- How can she hope to do this under the circumstances of an assumed identity? Find examples in the text that testify to her success in this.

7. When it is time to leave, "Edith had not said goodbye to Shatta or to Bouli or to any of the other children" (p 110) but she is well aware that she does not have the words to thank them for all they have done. In May 2004, Edith returns with many of the survivors from Moissac and erects a plaque in honour of Shatta and Bouli. (See p.166) The inscription in the photograph is in French.

- Write the caption that Edith may have written on this commemorative plaque.
- Why do you think Shatta was firm about, "No sentimental goodbyes."? (p.110)

## CHAPTER 18 – 22—LIFE IN STE-FOY-LA-GRANDE

1. When the girls arrive at Ste-Foy-la-Grande, Madame Picot reminds them that they are being taken in "...at great risk." (p.114) She has "...neither the kind words of Shatta nor the warmth of Bouli" (p.114) and reminds them that they ought to be grateful for what they are given. "No one was deliberately cruel. They were simply ignored." (p.119)

- Comment on the act of giving to others and the giving of charity and explain how sometimes giving can be done without generosity.

In Judaism the highest form of charity is giving anonymously and the greatest kindness is to give a person in need a means of earning their own livelihood.<sup>7</sup> Why do you think this is the case?

- Is it fair to judge Madame Picot or to compare her to Shatta and Bouli?

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<sup>7</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, by Maimonides, Laws of Gifts, 10:1, 7-14

When Germaine visits, she brings them "...a small piece of chocolate and an armful of compassion." (p.120)

- What is meant by 'an armful of compassion' and why is it significant at this time?
2. In spite of being in a more hostile environment, the girls continue to observe their Sabbath (p.117).
    - Explain the importance of ritual in this situation.
  3. Edith and Sarah must pray in a foreign environment and observe foreign rituals. This may be quite threatening but Edith concludes that "God was God no matter where you were or how you prayed. The God in the church was the same god that she knew..." (p.128)
    - What is your view on this idea of God? Can a non-Jew find God in a synagogue and can a Muslim be heard in a church? Justify your answer and argue your case with the person next to you.

**Activity:** The teacher should collect all the arguments presented on the board and then students should write an argumentative essay on the subject: that 'God is open to all prayer' or that 'Religion often hampers our access to God.'

4. When Sarah learns of her mother's death, she is devastated and quite confronted by Jacques's words, "With Maman gone I am free to go." (p.136).
  - Do you think Jacques is heartless/selfish? Consider the fact that Jacques is heading off to join The Resistance. Can you explain the meaning of his words?
5. Explain the symbolism of the butterflies which arrive and depart as Jacques tells of his mother's death. (p. 137)
6. When Madame and Monsieur Merlau take Edith into their home with open hearts, they are, according to their own words, "only doing what all decent people should do." (p. 147)
  - Do you agree? If so, why was this sort of behaviour so rare that it was honoured with the title *righteous gentile*?
7. The bombers arrived on June 6<sup>th</sup> heralding the end of the war, and the Americans promised to root out the Nazi enemy and free those oppressed. Recently, documents have been released that indicate that in spite of America's pledge to capture the Nazis, some of the Allies were complicit in concealing Eichman's<sup>8</sup> whereabouts after the war and even used Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie as a secret agent for West Germany.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A senior Nazi and SS Obersturmbannführer, he was head of the Department of Jewish Affairs of the Gestapo and was chief of operations in the deportation of Jews to extermination camps.

<sup>9</sup> [www.ejpress.org/article/48453](http://www.ejpress.org/article/48453)

- Does this prove the lesson that Edith learns at Ste-Foy-la-Grande "...that she had only herself to rely on?" (p116)
  - If we can not rely on the integrity of our representative democratic governments, should we take justice into our own hands? Justify your response.
8. As the war ends and the children are reunited, many remained "...imprisoned in their own despair." (p.156)
- Explain this expression.
9. Edith learns that Papa died after the Allies had already taken over the concentration camp.
- Explain the nature of his death.
  - Research this phenomenon and how many died in this way after the war was already over.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

It is in the structure of this book that much of its power lies. Draw student attention to the way the narrative is interspersed with diary entries and ask the following questions:

1. Edith Schwalb's story is true. Kathy Kacer, the author had to interview Edith in great detail in order to write this book. Indeed Kacer had to step into Edith's shoes, absorb her experiences and her responses.
  - Do you think she was successful in conveying Edith's story and Edith's emotions? Were you convinced that this was indeed a believable account? What impact, if any, does the knowledge (p.167) that Kacer made up some details and altered others, have on the power of the story?
2. This story is told through text, photographs and documents. In addition, there is the author's note which brings the story to the present day.
  - How successful is all this in conveying the story of someone else's life? What section/s might have been added to enrich this biography?

## **RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING**

### **GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE HOLOCAUST**

The World Must Know: the history of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust memorial museum

By Michael Berenbaum  
ISBN 0316091340

The Holocaust: the world and the Jews, 1933-1945

By Seymour Rossel

\*The Holocaust (picture information book)

R.G. Grant

ISBN 0 7502 2083 X

## **NON-FICTION TITLES ABOUT CHILDREN IN THE HOLOCAUST**

I Never Saw Another Butterfly: children's drawings and poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942-1944

By Hana Volavkova

ISBN 0805210156

The Children We Remember

By Chana Byers Abells

ISBN 0064437779

The Diary of Anne Frank

By Anne Frank

\*Witness: voices from the Holocaust

Anthology of recollections

ISBN 0732810269

## **BIOGRAPHIES OF CHILDREN WHO SURVIVED THE HOLOCAUST**

There Will be Tomorrow

By Guta Goldstein

ISBN 1876733020

Hannah Goslar Remembers: a childhood friend of Anne frank

By Alison Leslie Gold

ISBN 0747540276

I am A Star: child of the holocaust

By Inge Auerbache

ISBN 0140364013

Child of the Holocaust

By Jack Kuper

ISBN 0708817262

Mischling, Second Degree: my childhood in Nazi Germany

By Ilse Koen

ISBN 0140313567

The Diary of Laura's Twin

By Kathy Kacer

ISBN 9781741756678

## **WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN**

### **Non-fiction**

In Times of War: an anthology of war and peace in children's literature

Ed Carol Fox, Annemie Leysen, Irene Koenders

ISBN 1862054460

Children and War

Robin Cross

ISBN 0 7502 1223 3

\*The Way of a Boy (Ernest was seven when he was interned on Java with his mother by the Japanese)

Ernest Hillen  
ISBN 0 14 017975 5

## **Fiction**

### **Two challenging picture story books:**

\*The Tie Man's Miracle: A Chanukah Tale (the Holocaust)  
Steven Schnur  
0688134637

\*My Dog (civil war in former Yugoslavia)  
John Heffernan  
1876289120

## **Novels**

\*Number the Stars (Annemarie becomes involved in the Danish underground work to save her friend, Ellen, and other Danish Jews)  
Lois Lowry  
ISBN 0 00 673677 7

\*And the Stars were Gold (A displaced Polish boy's journey across Europe in WWII)  
Gale Hiçyilmaz  
ISBN 1 85881 481 2

\*Elli: coming of age in the Holocaust (an example of faction)  
Livia Bitton-Jackson  
0586062580

\*Let the Celebrations Begin  
Margaret Wild  
ISBN 1862910235

\*The Miracle Tree (56pp, illustrated. Three people divided for twenty years by the devastation of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki)  
Christobel Mattingley  
ISBN 0 7336 229 0

\*Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Famous story of one girl's struggle with the effects of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima)  
Eleanor Coerr  
ISBN 0340266074

\*No Gun for Asmir / Asmir in Vienna (Asmir becomes a refugee when war comes to Sarajevo in the 1990s – an example of faction)  
Christobel Mattingley  
ISBN 0140367292 / 0140380353

\*Andi's War (A young girl's family is broken apart during the Greek civil war)  
Billi Rosen  
ISBN 057115340

\*Year of Impossible Goodbyes (Having fought with the resistance against the Japanese occupation of Korea in WWII, Sookan's family then seek freedom in the dangerous escape to South Korea during the Korean War)  
Sook Nyui Choi  
ISBN 0 440 40759 1

\*Secrets in the Fire (Young girl living in war-torn Mozambique with the danger of land-mines)  
Henning Mankell  
ISBN 978 1 86508 181 6

\*Parvana and \*Parvana's Journey (Young girl living in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and then as an internally displaced refugee)

Deborah Ellis

ISBN 978 1 86508 694 1      &      978 1 86508 999 7

No Safe Place (Four young refugees struggle to reach the UK via people smuggling routes)

Deborah Ellis

ISBN 978 1 74237 410 9

\*Little Brother (Searching for family under the Khmer Rouge)

Allan Baillie

ISBN 0140341994

\*Hana's Suitcase (Story of a young girl, Hana, who does not survive the Holocaust. Her story is traced by a group of youngsters in Japan.)

Karen Levine

ISBN 978 1 74114 167 2

\*Dark Hours (German children are trapped in a basement during the firebombing of Dresden.)

Gudrun Pausewang (trans. by John Brownjohn)

ISBN 9781741149210

Milkweed (Jewish boy in WWII Poland survives on the streets. Some disturbing content; best for older teenagers.)

Jerry Spinelli

ISBN 9781843624851

## **WEBSITES**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

[www.ushmm.org/](http://www.ushmm.org/)

and for suggested approaches to teaching the Holocaust, see

<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/>

Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne

[www.jhc.org.au](http://www.jhc.org.au)

(13-15 Selwyn St., Elsternwick 95281985)

The Sydney Jewish Museum

[www.sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au](http://www.sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au)

(148 Darlinghurst Rd., Darlinghurst)

## **FILMS**

The Wave. Set in an American high school, this movie explores the story of a teacher who wants his students to understand the power of propaganda and how Hitler was able to turn an entire nation against the Jews.

Shoah: an oral history. This film is a 5 part detailed history which interviews Polish peasants, train drivers, survivors. The account is compelling.

120 mins

Schindler's List.

The story of Oscar Schindler and his attempt to save Jews

Steven Spielberg

187mins

The Diary of Anne Frank

George Stevens

163 minutes

B&W  
20th Century Fox

## **LIBRARIES**

Makor Jewish Community Library has copies of most of the items in the bibliographies above.

Go to their web site: [www.vicnet.net.au/~jlibrary](http://www.vicnet.net.au/~jlibrary)

\*Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre, Victorian Department of Education and Training, has copies of the asterisked items in the bibliographies above and resource lists on the topics of war, refugees and human rights:

[www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/lem/lmerc](http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/lem/lmerc)

Language and Multicultural Resource Centre, South Australian Department of Education.

[www.lmrc.sa.edu.au](http://www.lmrc.sa.edu.au) .

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **KATHY KACER**

Kathy Kacer is a Canadian writer. She has won many awards including the Silver Birch, The Red Maple and the Jewish Book Award. A former psychologist who worked with troubled teens, Kathy now writes for young readers about the Holocaust and travels around the country speaking about how to teach such sensitive material to young children. Kathy lives in Toronto with her family.

### **MICHELLE PRAYER**

Michelle Prayer is an English teacher and librarian who is passionate about young adult literature and picture books for older readers. She is currently enjoying a mid life crisis in her local book shop. She spends her 'free' time assessing VCE English, working for the Children's Book Council and YABBA and is a member of the Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge selection panel.

Michelle is the mother of 7 children who are all keen readers.