

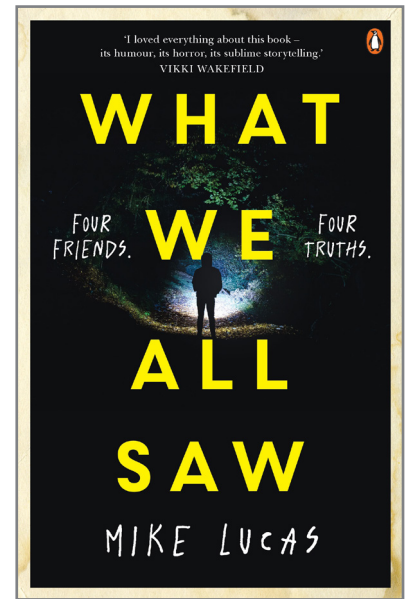
What We All Saw

AUTHOR
MIKE LUCAS

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary



SYNOPSIS

Witches only exist in stories. Everyone knows that. But what if the stories are real?

FOUR FRIENDS. FOUR TRUTHS. ONE NIGHTMARE.

If you wander into the wood ... If you hear scratching sounds from the Old Quarry ... If you go too close to the edge ...

WATCH. OUT.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Lucas is the author of several picture books including Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Book *Olivia's Voice*. He has also written and published several books of humorous children's poetry, has had work highly commended in magazines and contributed to poetry anthologies.

In 2017 Mike was one of the main organisers of the Adelaide Festival of Children's Books. He presents writing and poetry workshops at schools, owns a bookshop in Blackwood, South Australia, and works as a full-time engineer. He doesn't sleep much. Find out more about Mike at mikelucas.com.au

STUDY NOTES

- What is the Doomsday Book? Research this historical text from medieval England and its importance in tracing generations and places through history.
- Are there any abandoned buildings or historical sites near where you live? Research their history and write a story about someone who might have lived there.
- Many authors are inspired by events in their own lives, but some stories are more personal than others, and help the author to process emotional events in their life through their writing. Macquarie Dictionary describes catharsis as 'the effect of art in purifying the emotions (applied by Aristotle to the relief or purgation of the emotions of the audience or performers effected through pity and terror by tragedy and certain kinds of music)'. How do you think writing this book helped Mike to work through the emotions he experienced after losing sight in one eye? Why do we read stories about trauma or tragedy? What benefits do such stories have in increasing our empathy and in helping us to process our own emotions?

BEFORE READING

- Look at the book's cover. Identify visual techniques used in the design that help you form ideas or assumptions about what the story will be about.
- What genre do you think the story is? Which elements of the cover gave you hints about the genre (for instance, colours, fonts chosen, imagery)?
- What do the title and image tell you about 'seeing'?
- Predict what you think may happen in the story. In this short premise make sure to include what you think the characters will be like, what they will 'see' and how the story will be resolved.
- The blurb on the back cover is very short. Why do you think the publishers and author chose to give minimal information about the characters and story in the blurb?

WRITING STYLE

'Nineteen seventy-six was the year we covered up the death of a twelve-year-old boy, hiding his body from his family and the world forever. It was the year we learned the truth, and the lies, about Hags Drop. And it was the last year Shell, Gray, Charlie and I spent together as childhood friends.' (p 1)

What We All Saw is narrated with the framing device of the fictional perspective of a man aged in his forties, who is looking back at the tragic and traumatic events of one summer in his childhood. The framing device sets up a story within a story.

The story is written in first person, and past tense. It also includes dream sequences and stories told by characters, which are separated out from the main narrative in italics.

- Why do you think the author chose to use the framing device of an adult looking back at childhood? Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of this framing device. How does it change your reading of the story?
 - What other books or films have you read or seen that have a similar perspective of an older person looking back at an earlier point in their life?
- The novel could also be described as a 'coming of age' story, because it is about a pivotal time in Sam's life, between childhood and becoming a teenager, when he is a part of events that someone his age wouldn't usually deal with, or that cause him to have to make adult decisions. What other novels have you read with 'coming of age' themes, or that feature a pivotal time in a young person's life that changes them forever?
- Would you consider Sam to be an unreliable narrator? Or is he telling the truth as he saw it or remembers it? What factors in the story make it difficult for Sam to get to the truth of what happened?

KEY STUDY TOPICS**STORYTELLING**

- In many ways *What We All Saw* muses on the power of storytelling to shape and affect our perceptions of the world. Charlie tells a story about a witch to his friends, which then potentially affects how they perceive later events. The narrative constantly questions reality and philosophises about truth versus belief, folklore versus history—cleverly making the point that if you're the storyteller, you get to make up what other people believe to be true. Discuss the power of storytelling in influencing truth. How does Mr Grant's and Charlie's storytelling elevate their stories? Do you think stories are better when certain elements are fictionalised?
 - Re-read Mr Grant's and Charlie's stories, thinking about the narrative voice and tone. How is it different to the way the rest of the story is written?
 - What are some of the techniques Charlie and Mr Grant use to keep their listeners interested in the stories they're telling? Does the author, Mike Lucas, use some of the same techniques? For instance, consider how these storytelling techniques are used in the story (and the stories within the story!) to build tension, mystery and intrigue:
 - Pauses

- Distractions
- Cliffhangers
- Surprise
- Escalating tension
- Conflict
- Backstory
- Foreshadowing
- Misdirection.
- What do you believe happened? Did the ending explain what happened, or were you left with more questions about the truth?

WITCHES—MYTHS, FACT AND HISTORY

- What do you know about witches? What stories or media about witches have you read or seen? How are witches portrayed in popular culture?
- Research the history of the persecution of witches. How has our perception of witches or witchcraft changed over time?
- Watch the following TED-Ed video on the Salem Witch Trials: <https://youtu.be/NVd8kuufBhM> The video says the Salem Witch Trials are ‘a cautionary tale of the dangers of groupthink and scapegoating’.
- What is ‘groupthink’? What are the possible risks of groupthink? What strategies and actions can we take to ensure that we avoid groupthink?
- What is ‘scapegoating’? Which characters could be considered scapegoats in *What We All Saw*? For instance, discuss whether these characters are scapegoats and why or how they came to be seen or treated this way: Flora; Gray; the German prisoners of war.
- Consider in particular the reasons given on p 284 for why ‘They needed somebody to blame’. You might also consider the saying ‘History is written by the victors’, and how it might apply to the treatment and depiction of so-called witches.
- What parallels can be drawn between historical trials such as the Salem Witch Trials or Bideford Witchcraft Trials and what Flora and her mother experience in the novel?

REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY

- Think about books and films you have read or seen that portray disabled characters, and whether the depiction of disability could be considered positive and realistic, or negative and stereotyped.
- Consider the ways in which society has changed over the last century in terms of inclusion and accessibility. What resources might be available to Shell if she were twelve years old in the 2020s rather than the 1970s? What areas could still be improved to make our society more accessible and inclusive?
- What is ableism? Research ableism and ableist language and find examples. Are there words or terms that you have used without realising they are considered ableist?

‘SEEING’ AND THE SENSES

- Think about the title *What We All Saw* and the way the story plays with the motif and symbolism of ‘seeing’ and ‘sight’, as well as other senses.
- Make a list of what each of the characters in the story see, hear, smell, taste and touch that are relevant to working out the ‘truth’ of what happened. How do their senses mislead them versus help them?
- Read pp 88–89 where Shell describes how she listens and understands instead of seeing with her eyes. Does Shell ‘see’ more than the boys do, or just differently?
- Write a scene or short story that uses all five senses to describe the setting and what is happening. Use these descriptions to evoke a particular tone, emotion and genre—for instance, horror or fear, romance and love, adventure and action, or conflict and anger.

FRIENDSHIP

- Fill out a character web detailing the characteristics of the four friends. Pay close attention to their upbringing, strengths, weaknesses, interests, etc. (For example, Gray comes from a broken home. How does this affect his dispositions, his adulthood, and how others treat him?) Pay particular attention to the opening chapter and how it shows the dynamic of the group.
- Based on your character profiles, write about how their friendship helps them uncover the truth. How do their different strengths help Sam, Charlie, Gray and Shell work together?
- Did you think the friends would stay together when they went to high school? Why or why not? Were there any parts of the story that indicated they wouldn't? Gather evidence for your answer.

HORROR AND GOTHIC LITERATURE

- Research the basic tenets of the horror genre and make a list. See if you can identify these tropes in other books/movies/TV shows you've come across. What scared you most? Identify similar tropes present within *What We All Saw*. Some of these might include:
 - nightmares
 - an abandoned house
 - a local legend
 - sinister scraping sounds
 - a supernatural circus.
- Make a list of how the author uses these tropes, but also how he subverts them or shows them to be not true or not as the character or reader had believed them to be.
- Write a story that incorporates some or all these elements you have uncovered. It can be the beginning of a story describing the setting, an ending, an extract or a full short story. Up to you!
- Research 'gothic fiction' or 'gothic literature' and compare *What We All Saw* to other works of gothic fiction you have read or seen. What do you think the differences are between 'horror' and 'gothic' stories?