

A Little Spark

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary



SYNOPSIS

Cate gets to spend every second weekend with her dad, and each time something special and surprising happens. Something that fires the creative spark that Cate channels into her writing.

And everything is fine until Cate's stepdad, Sam, gets offered his dream job in London and her mum decides they are going to move to England with him...

Cate must decide what she wants for herself. She loves both her parents—but she must choose between them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Jonsberg has won numerous awards for his books, both nationally and internationally. He has been published in eighteen countries and translated into many languages. His bestselling novel, *My Life As An Alphabet*, was recently made into an award-winning film, *H is For Happiness*, released throughout the world to great critical acclaim. The same production company is now working on television and film adaptations of his last two novels, *A Song Only I Can Hear* and *Catch Me If I Fall*.

Barry lives in Darwin, in the Top End of Australia, with his wife Anita and his crazy dog, Zorro.

STUDY NOTES

- There are four main types of frontmatter: Foreword, Preface, Prologue and Introduction. Research each and decide which best describes the section beginning: 'My name is Caitlyn Carson, but you can call me Cate or CC...'. Why do you think Barry Jonsberg included this piece before Chapter One begins? In your answer consider the following quote from the passage:
 - 'I've learned that love isn't necessarily what it says on the pack. I know it can inject pain, destroy lives, twist people into shapes that quickly turn monstrous. In some ways we'd be better off without it.
 - 'I suppose that's what this story is about. Love, pain and the mysteries that are people.
 - 'It's also about madness and why we need it.' (p 2)
- What did you learn about Cate and her father in Chapter One? Think carefully about the things they said and did, as well as how they interacted. Come up with a list of words to describe each character. Think very carefully about how these characteristics were expressed, whether explicitly or implicitly. For instance, we know Cate loves her father

because she says it in the chapter (explicit information) but we understand her father to be responsible because he insists on her wearing a seatbelt on the return journey to Melbourne (implicit information).

- Often authors quote lines by other authors to reinforce the themes in their own story. The author, for instance, has Cate's English teacher, Mr Carlisle, quote Dylan Thomas's poem, *Fern Hill*, as an example of a work that moves him. After reading the poem in full, can you find reasons for how it may reinforce *A Little Spark's* themes? In your answer consider what Cate said on p 2 of the novel (see earlier quote). Extension question:
 - How might Mr Carlisle's other favourites, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* also reinforce the book's themes?
- Read the conversation between Cate and Elise on pp 37–39. Why do you think the author uses humorous banter here? Is it just to entertain the reader or does humour play a role here in conveying information about each character and the relationship between them?
 - Look closely at the conversation Cate and Elise have on pages 53–55, that starts with “‘If I go to London...” I said...” and ends with ‘...I could see pain in Elise's eyes, though she worked hard to hide it.’ Might humour here (and in the earlier passage) be used to hint at some underlying sadness felt by both characters?
- Consider the change in tone when Cate meets her father after school on p 71. How might the humorous conversation between the two characters directly before this scene have contributed to the dramatic change in tone in the next conversation between them? How else has the author heightened the tension in this scene?
- ‘I'm not sure which was first, the sound of screeching tyres or the violent twisting of the car... Then my body gave up. My last thought was that at least my wig was still on.’ pp 74–75. What literary techniques has Barry Jonsberg used in this passage to convey the sense of a sudden and very violent collision? (Hint: simile, repetition and changes in sentence length are just some.)
- Drama and tension ebb and flow more intensely in the novel after the car crash. Consider some of the peak moments of drama and tension and contrast them with the humorous events surrounding them.
- Were you surprised that Cate's father had organised the special events? Did this revelation change how you viewed him and the relationship between him and Cate?
- We feel we know everything about Cate because she is the narrator of her story but do we really? Consider the fact that she doesn't inform us that her father is responsible for the special events until p 83. Where else does she fail to include the reader in the novel? Why do you think the author chooses to sometimes exclude the reader and what is the effect when the truth is finally revealed to us.
- “‘I'm sick of being a freaking token in a game,” said Elise. “But what can I do?”” p 46. Apart from sharing the experience of parental divorce, how does Elise's frustration here mirror Cate's own anxiety about moving to the UK?
- In what way would you say that *A Little Spark* is a story about growing up and learning to make choices?
- Cate quotes Robin Williams during her parents' court case. “‘You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it.”” What does this quote mean to you?
- Using events in the story, discuss how Cate's understanding of love—whether a parent's for a child, a child for a parent or between friends—changes and matures in the course of the novel.