

# Lani and the Universe

AUTHOR

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Upper Primary

## SYNOPSIS

Lani Scrub has a plan: study hard and become a world-renowned scientist like her hero, Kit Galway, who wrote *The Meaning of the Universe*.

The plan is ruined when Lani's mum decides to 'find herself' by joining a nature-loving community called Passing Waters.

Lani should have known things were up when they got backyard chickens.

At Passing Waters Lani fails every test thrown her way—despite coaching from nine-year-old nature kid Lentil and a chef/astronomer named Meadow.

Turns out failing is hard, and what's worse is their tree change is making her question the meaning of the universe . . .

And when the community's future is threatened, will Lani Scrub pitch in to save the day?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria writes works of fiction and for theatre. Her novel for young adults, *The Dream Walker*, was nominated for the Queensland Literary Awards and the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards.

Her first book for middle grade readers, *Gus and The Starlight*, was published in 2022, and was shortlisted for best children's fiction in the Aurealis Awards.

*Lani and the Universe* is her latest book. It celebrates the magic in nature, science and in our every day.

Victoria lives in Queensland with her family and a very silly cat . . .

## THEMES

- Resilience
- Families
- Choices
- Belonging

**STUDY NOTES****BEFORE READING**

- Consider the title. What connotations does the word 'universe' have for students?
  - What is students' understanding of the term? Use a fast-paced strategy such as Round Robin brainstorming to record shared thinking, eg. sticky notes, either physical or digital. Take all the suggestions and generate a word cloud that can be used on the class learning wall.
- What 'wondering' do students have about the universe? Create a Wonder Wall to spark inquiry-based learning alongside reading the novel. This can be added to as students read *Lani and the Universe*.
- What ideas are suggested by the cover art? Using only the front cover of the book, can they identify:
  - Text type
  - Genre
  - Setting
  - Main character/s
  - Possible events or plot points.
- Ask students to identify all of the techniques used by the artist and designer on the cover, and as a class discuss how these elements work together to give the reader a sense of what the book will be about.
- The main character appears to be dressed in a school uniform but is clearly not at school. What reasons might explain her being dressed this way in a wild setting with a joey?
- Have students had the experience of a big change in their family life such as moving house (whether within close proximity or much further such as interstate or overseas)?
- Have they experienced other changes about which they had no say (even if they were mostly happy about them), such as a new sibling. How did they feel?
- How did they overcome any resentment or sadness about these changes?

**WHILE READING**

- Plot the key events in the narrative as the class reads *Lani and the Universe*.

**Language**

- Organise topic-specific vocabulary groupings on a class learning wall or in student glossaries. One section might contain the language pertaining to the universe, eg. pulsars, Milky Way and black holes. Another could be for words related to *Passing Waters*, eg. commune, caftans and affirmations.
- There are many puns used throughout the novel. 'Passing Waters, a community committed to flow', p 38, is just one example. The term 'passing water' is also a euphemism. Answer the following questions about puns:
  - Define the terms pun and euphemism for the class.
  - Explain how 'passing waters' fits these definitions.
  - Why do students think the author has chosen this to be the name that Kevin has given the community?
  - What effect does the use of this term have on how the reader thinks and feels about the community?
  - What other examples of puns can students find in the text?
- There are several references to songs throughout the novel, most of which are tied to what might be described as 'hippie culture' eg., '... an ancient-sounding song about someone wearing flowers in her hair' (p 31), 'a heart of gold', 'blowing in the wind' (p 187). Using the snippets of lyrics that are given in the novel, ask students to find the songs to which they belong.
  - What are these songs about; what common themes or topics link these songs?
  - The author has used these songs and lyrics to create a particular impression of *Passing Waters* in the mind of the reader. How would students describe the impression this gives them?
- What is meant by the following idioms:
  - tree change (p 11)
  - rat race (p 12)
  - ... need to find [yourself]? (p 14)
  - It's all so... greige. (p 28)

- . . . Kit and I had a falling out. Creative differences, you might say. (p 128)

Can students find other examples of idioms?

- Find definitions for words that are unusual or unfamiliar and record them in a table with the following headings:
  - Word
  - What I think it means (Using contextual clues, guess the meaning of each word.)
  - What it actually means (Using appropriate resources check each word's actual meaning.)

### Characters

- Create a character web to show the connections between the primary and secondary characters.
  - For each connection, find a quote from the novel that the class/students think best characterises the nature of the relationship.
  - For relationships that change a great deal over time, for example Lani's mother, there may need to be more than one quote.
- Discuss the concept of character traits using the four categories: feelings, actions, dialogue and thoughts.
- As a class, work through a character profile for Lani that includes basic information such as appearance, age and family, as well as her key character traits (as discussed previously).
  - Include at least one quote to support the different observations on the profile.
  - As Lani changes quite a bit over the course of the novel, it may be appropriate to include sections for the beginning, middle and end of the novel.
  - Divide the class up into small groups and allocate each another important character to create a character profile to share with the class.
- Kevin is a complex character; how he would like others to see him and the image he has created are sometimes in conflict with his own behaviour. As the leader of Passing Waters, he has created many of the rules for the way the community lives, as well as writing the manifesto that the Folk chant (p 59) to greet Lani and her mother. Gather evidence from *Lani and the Universe* which demonstrates how Kevin would like to be viewed.
  - However, it's revealed over the course of the novel that Kevin is not who he seems to be. This is revealed both through the insights of those who know Kevin well, including Lentil, as well as Kevin's own actions. Find examples from the beginning of the novel which foreshadow Kevin's true nature.
  - How does Kevin's image unravel across the events of *Lani and the Universe*?
- Lani and Lentil are very much opposites, however they eventually become good friends. What makes Lani and Lentil seem so different early on?
  - What do they have in common, even at the start?
  - How do the events of the novel change the way they see each other?

### AFTER READING

- Why does Lani's mother feel the need to keep trying new activities or experiences?
- How does Passing Waters help Peta to 'find herself'?
- Is this what she expected when she and Lani moved into the community?
- Compromise means making concessions or agreeing to disagree. For Lani and her parents, this means they have the best of both situations—city during the week, Passing Waters on weekends. How does the eventual resolution fit the definition of compromise? In what ways do you think Kevin, Dr Kit, the community tenants and others have to adapt?
- A theme throughout the entire book is authenticity, whether in the way people choose to live, how they behave, or what they say. Does Lani feel like an impostor? What about Lentil?
  - How does this relate to the relationship between Lani and Astrid, especially Astrid's betrayal and then the reconciliation?
  - Have the students ever behaved in a way that is more 'impostor' than 'authentic'? Discuss this in the light of the many examples throughout the text and develop a class credo on what living authentically might look like.
- One of the important things Lani learns through the experience she and her mother have when they move to Passing Waters is not to make assumptions or make judgements about people based on first impressions. How do the members of the Passing Waters community challenge Lani's assumptions?

- Lani reflects on the difference between confidence and arrogance. What have students learnt about the difference in these two qualities from reading *Lani and the Universe*?

AUTHORS OF NOTES

**SUE WARREN AND JEMMA MYORS**