



Birdy

SHARON KERNOT

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Credit: Gary MacRae

Sharon Kernot lives in Mount Barker, South Australia, with her family. Her first verse novel *The Art of Taxidermy* was shortlisted for the 2017 Text Prize, the 2019 CBCA book of the year, the Prime Minister's Literary Award and the NSW Premier's Ethel Turner Prize. *Birdy* is her second verse novel.

SYNOPSIS

Maddy has been unable to speak ever since 'the Incident', and so she and her mum and her brother Charlie (aka the Professor) go to stay in an old farmhouse on the outskirts of town. Her mum says they could all use the break, but Maddy knows it's because of her.

Maddy doesn't want to make friends. Not after what happened with Meg's boyfriend and the photo that ended up all over social media. Not after the night that ruined her life, the night she's too ashamed to talk about. But then she meets Levi. Levi's in town for the uni holidays, and she talks enough for two people. And she doesn't make Maddy explain anything.

Old Alice sits alone in her house waiting for her daughter, Birdy, to come home. Birdy has been gone for years, but Alice sees something in Maddy that reminds her of her daughter, and she invites her into the clutter and grief of her house.

Levi tells Maddy about all the rumours, that Birdy was taken by her school friend, that she ran away with her teacher. But nobody really knows. Maddy is drawn into the mystery of the lost girl and when she finds and reads Birdy's diary, she reflects on what it means to disappear, or to want to.

Birdy is a verse novel about healing, freedom, and the words we cannot say.

BEFORE READING

1. Read the opening verse, 'A Fairytale' aloud in class. What tone does it set for the rest of the novel?
2. Read the book's blurb. What do you think some of the book's themes might be?
3. Read this information about mutism and discuss as a class. What are some of the causes of mutism?



<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z/health-reference/selective-mutism>

Charlie focuses his attention on. Discuss their significance to the story.

- Is the way Maddy sees herself accurate? Why or why not?

WHILE READING

- How does Maddy describe herself before 'the Incident'? What are some of the things that have changed since?
- Which emotions make it difficult for Maddy to speak?
- What makes Maddy feel calm?
- Does Maddy like her silence?
- How does Charlie look out for Maddy? While they're both outsiders, Charlie and Maddy are very different. What are some of the major differences between them?
- Who is the 'ghost of Birdy'? What happens when Maddy first sees her picture?
- What are the first words Maddy speaks aloud in the book? Describe the circumstances that make her feel comfortable enough to speak.
- What does 'making progress' look like to Maddy?
- What draws Maddy to Birdy's diary, and to the mystery surrounding her disappearance?
- Why does Levi taking a selfie trigger Birdy's anxiety? What is she afraid of?
- What's the significance of Birdy's bluebird bracelet?
- What helps Maddy face the reality of what happened to her? When she explains the 'consequences of [her] actions and theirs', (p. 242) what do you think she says?
- What is Alice's gift to Maddy? What is it that she hopes for?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

- We are introduced to Maddy and the setting at the same time. 'We are here because of me.' (p. 5), and 'It's the perfect place for me.' (p. 6). What does she mean by these words? How does she describe the setting, and what does this reveal about the way she sees herself? How does her relationship with herself change as her relationship with her surroundings does?
- Who is 'the Professor'? Where does this nickname come from?
- What are Maddy's first impressions of Alice? How would you describe their friendship?
- Maddy says that Charlie 'lives in the world with fully focused, magnified attention' (p. 116). Choose three of the items or facts that

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Written in verse

Birdy is a free-form verse novel, which means that it uses poetry to tell the story, but isn't limited to specific patterns of rhyme or metre. Some say that this allows free verse to mimic natural speech. Do you agree? Consider the following questions about the structure of the book.

- Why does Maddy feel as if she can express herself more freely in poetry?
- Maddy writes that even when she doesn't understand the meaning of a poem, 'the rhythm and the rhymes – some full, some slant – dance in my mind' (p. 24). Do you agree? Is it possible to connect with the emotion of a poem even if we don't understand its exact meaning?
- Explore the shape of the poems on the page. Are they all the same? Discuss the way the shapes of some of the poems reflect their theme?

THEMES

Silence

- How have Maddy's words been used against her in the past?
- Make a list of words and phrases Maddy uses to describe the way it feels not to speak. How do the words feel in her body?
- Maddy wonders 'why don't we talk about Maralinga? This is our history. It happened here.' (p. 191). Why do you think we're so silent about this moment in our past? Is silence the best answer?
- What are some of the things Maddy wants to say to people but doesn't? What stops her? What has stopped you from sharing things with people in the past?

Shame

- How does Maddy feel around other people? Discuss the way her shame shapes the way she compares herself to others.
- Maddy describes 'the Incident' on p. 52. Does this description tell you everything you need to understand what happened to her? Is there anything in this list that she should feel ashamed of?



Later, she says that she 'deserve[s] the shame' (p. 141). Do you agree? Why or why not?

3. What are some of the things Maddy says about herself that make her feel ashamed? What would you say to her if you could? When Charlie tells Levi about Maddy's selective mutism she wants to 'sink into a pit of shame' (p. 72). How does Levi respond to this revelation? How does her response make Maddy feel?

Friendship

1. How does Maddy describe her friendship with Levi? Would you say that this is similar to or different from the way she felt in her friendships before 'the Incident'? Why?
2. Are Maddy and Alice friends? How would you describe their relationship?
3. Why doesn't Maddy tell Levi why she's avoiding her? What is she afraid of?
4. What does Levi say when Maddy tells her about 'the Incident'? What does she tell Maddy about her friends? Do you agree?

<https://www.bu.edu/dos/files/2020/11/I-am-From-conversation-generation-exercise.pdf>

3. Verse novels have a lot in common with graphic novels, because in the space between the words, there is an opportunity and an invitation for the reader to make meaning. Choose one of the poems from the novel, and turn it into a graphic novel or comic strip instead. You can download a free comic strip template here:

<https://www.teachingideas.co.uk/art/comic-strip-templates/>

4. 'Everyone had a theory', Levi tells Maddy (p. 156). What are some of the theories surrounding Birdy's disappearance? What do you think Levi believes? Come up with your own theory based on the information provided in the first half of the book, and write a short poem from Birdy's perspective.
5. Research the 'long dark history' (p. 129) of Maralinga, and discuss the way the real-life events have inspired and shaped parts of this novel. What happened there? How were the Indigenous inhabitants of the area treated? How are the lives of the characters in *Birdy* shaped by these events?

RESPONDING

1. Using the template below, inspired by 'Word Salad – a poem' (p. 20), write a poem about something you're passionate about.

_____ a poem

Find a bowl and tip in

A _____

A _____

A _____

Of _____

Now take a _____ and _____

And _____ and _____ until

Or _____

Repeat and repeat and repeat

Until you're _____

And _____

2. Even the most basic elements of your own life can be turned into a poem. Read George Ella Lyon's poem, 'Where I'm From' at this link:
<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>

Use this template to create your own 'I Am From' poem.