

Countdown to Yesterday

AUTHOR

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ISBN: 9781761340598

RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid Primary



SYNOPSIS

James wishes he could go back in time. Back to when his mum and dad were together, when he had one home, when his family laughed and climbed hills and went to the movies.

After meeting the enigmatic Yan, a girl who looks at the world differently, James discovers time travel might not be impossible after all.

But if James can live forever in one of his six favourite memories, which one will he choose?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shirley Marr is a first-generation Chinese Australian living in Perth and an author of young adult and children's fiction, including YA novels *Fury* and *Preloved*, and children's novels *Little Jiang*, *A Glasshouse of Stars*, *All Four Quarters of the Moon* and *Countdown to Yesterday*. She describes herself as having a Western mind and an Eastern heart. She likes to write in the space in the middle where they both collide, basing her stories on her own personal experiences of migration and growing up in Australia, along with the folk and fairy tales from her mother. Arriving in mainland Australia from Christmas Island as a seven-year-old in the 1980s and experiencing the good, the bad and the wonder that comes with culture shock, Shirley has been in love with reading and writing from that early age. Shirley is a universe full of stars and stories and hopes to share the many other novels that she has inside her.

Find out more about Shirley at shirleymarr.net.

THEMES

- Adjusting to changes in the family (parents separating)
- Making new friends
- Resilience
- Memory and perspective
- Time travel
- Nostalgia
- Cultural differences

STUDY NOTES**WRITING STYLE**

- *Countdown to Yesterday* is written in a first-person voice and in present tense. The book begins with a flash-forward to a scene in two weeks' time. Why has author Shirley Marr chosen to write this story in first person, from James's perspective? How would the story be different if it was written in third person, or even second person (like Shirley's previous book *A Glasshouse of Stars*)?
- Often books will feature flashbacks to the past, to deepen our understanding of the characters. *Countdown to Yesterday* instead starts with a flash-forward. Why has Shirley Marr chosen to start the story this way? How does this first scene create intrigue and interest? What did you think the story would be about when you read this first scene?

Genre

- *Countdown to Yesterday* is a contemporary, realistic story but with an element of science fiction. When you started reading the book, did you think James would really be able to travel back in time? How did your opinion change throughout the story?
- Have you read any other books that feature a time travel element or that are realistic but with an element of magic or science fiction?
- How does the time travel element of the story add to James's understanding of the world? What does he learn? Would you like to travel in time? What time period would you go to?

BEFORE READING

- Take a close look at the cover of the book before you read it. From the type and illustrations used, what do you think this book might be about?
- What genre do you think the book will be? What elements on the cover give you that impression? Can you think of other books, movies or television shows that might be in the same genre?
- What do you think the title means?
- Read the blurb on the back. How close were your guesses as to what the book was about? Did you guess there would be a time travelling element? How is this indicated on the front cover illustration?

AFTER READING**Adjusting to Changes in the Family**

- James is sad that his family is changing and breaking up. Can you relate to how he is feeling? Why or why not?
- James starts to see his mum and dad in a different light as the story progresses, and learns things he didn't know about them. What examples in the book can you find? (For instance, James's mum loves colour; James's dad has a motorbike he wants to fix.) What things have you learned about your own parents or caregivers that make you see them as individuals with their own hopes and dreams?
- Family separations can be hard on everyone. What things do James's parents do to make things easier for James? (For example: finding new routines and taking James for fun outings.) What other things could James and his parents have done to make this challenging time less stressful?
- Why does James's mum want to make the Rocket cake?

Memory and Perspective

- James takes comfort in the poster of David Bowie on the back of his bedroom door. Do you have a space or an object that brings you comfort? How is this connected to memories you have of your family or friends?
- James has six favourite memories from his past, but he starts to realise that the way he remembers those times may not have been accurate or there may have been other sides to the story. Choose one of James's memories and compare his original memory with what he sees when he travels back in time. What is different, and how does it change James's perspective?
- To look at something 'through rose-coloured glasses' is to view it overly optimistically or positively without considering the potential negatives. Do you think James is looking at his memories through rose-coloured glasses? Why/why not?
- Choose a scene from the book and write it from another character's perspective (such as Yan or Roscoe). What would

that character experience or see differently?

Symbolism and Motif

The Australian Women's Weekly Children's Birthday Cake Book

- What role does this iconic Australian cake book play in the book?
- What does James learn about other people from their reactions to the book?
- Why are the parents at the school so serious about the cake competition?
- Why do you think this real-life recipe book, which is over forty years old, has endured in its popularity for so long?
- What would it mean to James to have his mum make a cake from the book, and what do you learn in the story about why it's difficult for his mum to do so?
- What does Yan's family think about the cake book?

Major Tom

- An iconic fictional character created by singer David Bowie for the song 'Space Oddity', Major Tom is sent into space and loses communication with Ground Control. What does the song mean to James?
- What different explanations do his parents give about what has happened to Major Tom, and what do their explanations say about their characters?

Out-of-date books and computers and the 'On the Way Out' room in the library

- Why do you think Yan reads old, out-of-date computing books? Why does the room in the library filled with old, broken furniture, out-of-date textbooks and defunct technology feel like a safe space to Yan?
- What do these old technologies symbolise in the story, with James wishing that he could go back to the past? Does Yan also wish she could go back to the past, or is she reading the books for a different reason?