

# Kyla

Author: Frances Cherry

## Synopsis

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Kyla has had a tough life. Her mother died when she was younger and she doesn't even know who her father is. However, she is happy. She lives with her grandmother Nora and her cat Jezzie. They provide all of the love and stability that Kyla needs. When Nora dies suddenly, Kyla's life is turned upside down. She is forced to leave her home and friends in Auckland and move in with her Aunt Caroline in Wellington. Kyla doesn't like Caroline. She believes that she was not a good daughter to Nora because the two were often in conflict.

Caroline has no idea what it is like raising a teenager. She has her own life and her own friends and little room to accommodate anyone else. Kyla can't stand living with her and has trouble fitting in at her new school. In order to make friends Kyla begins to tell lies about her life. She makes up parents and brothers and sisters. The trouble is that it becomes hard for her to keep track of what she has told people and eventually she gets caught out.

Mortified that her lies have been discovered and sick of living with Caroline, Kyla decides to go back to Auckland where she is sure Nora's neighbours will take her in. However, Kyla's journey north doesn't go as smoothly as she hopes and she soon discovers that it can be dangerous for a young girl travelling alone. By running away Kyla also opens up old wounds of her aunt's and forces her to come clean about Kyla's family. All of Kyla's life, people have been keeping things from her to 'protect' her. It is now time for her to learn the truth, but will she be able to live with it?

## Text Type

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*Kyla* is a realistic and gritty novel about the difficulties of growing up and dealing with grief. Told from Kyla's point of view, the reader is given insights into her thoughts and feelings about her situation and is able to understand her angst as she struggles to adapt to her new life in Wellington. Kyla is an utterly believable character whose actions and reactions to her situation are credible.

The story is set in New Zealand and many places mentioned will be familiar to readers. As the main character is a teenage girl this story will appeal particularly to readers of that gender. The story touches upon themes such as dealing with

grief, the significance of family, the consequences of secrets and lies and the importance of sharing your feelings with others.

## Sharing the Novel

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*The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-17), Chapters 3-13 (pp. 19-106) and Chapters 14-26 (pp. 107-191).*

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas raised in the novel. They should understand inferences and make predictions. Encourage them to relate Kyla's experience to their own lives and broader knowledge. Have them track the journey that Kyla makes in the novel as she moves from grief, to anger and finally to acceptance of her situation and a deeper understanding of her family and past. Students should be able to identify important themes and ideas raised in the novel and explain how they are developed by the author. Encourage discussion about the significance of secrets and lies in the novel.

## Introducing the Novel

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Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Why do you think the phrase 'some families lie' is written above the title of the story? What might some families lie about? Why do people lie?
- Who is Nora? What happens to her?
- Who does Kyla go and live with? How does she feel about her new home?
- Why is it difficult moving and starting a new school? What advice would you give to Kyla?
- What does Kyla do to make herself feel important?
- What sorts of things do you think Kyla lies about? How can lying get you into trouble?

*Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-17) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.*

## Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-17)

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- What is the cause of Nora's death? Why does Kyla find her death so hard to believe?
- Who collects Kyla from the hospital? What does Kyla remember when she enters Nora's kitchen?

- Who is Caroline? Why doesn't Kyla think that she should be told about Nora's death?
- Why is Kyla so determined to return home? Why doesn't Emily want her to leave her place?
- Who comes and visits Kyla in the afternoon after her grandmother's death? Why does Kyla feel like she is a 'prize'?
- Why do you think Emily gives Kyla a strange look when she says she is going to live with Maggie?

### Discussion

- How does Kyla feel about Nora's death? How does her grandmother's death impact on her life?
- Why do you think Caroline screamed at Nora? What does Emily mean when she says 'she'll feel terrible now because she didn't resolve things with her'?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

*Students read Chapters 3-13 (pp. 19-106) independently before the next shared session.*

### Comprehension Chapters 3-13 (pp. 19-106)

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- How do Caroline's wishes about what to do with Nora's body differ from Kyla's? Why does Kyla become so upset with Caroline?
- What does Emily suggest that Kyla take with her when she visits Nora's body?
- How does Kyla feel about Caroline sorting through Nora's things? Why does she feel like this? What does Kyla decide to take of Nora's to remember her by?
- Why does Caroline think that Kyla should come and live with her? How does Kyla react to this suggestion?
- Describe Nora's funeral. Why is it important to have funerals for your loved ones? How does Nora's funeral differ from Kyla's mother's funeral?
- Who are the executors of Nora's will? What is their role?
- What advice does Emily give Kyla at the wake?
- How does Caroline react when Kyla suggests that they live in Auckland?
- What deal does George make with Kyla before she leaves for Wellington?
- How do Kyla's friends try and make her feel better about leaving? What present does Paula's mum give Kyla before she leaves? Why does this make Kyla so happy?

- What does Caroline apologise to Kyla for on the plane? What do you think Caroline means when she says 'your head has been filled with ...'?
- Describe Caroline's apartment. How does Kyla feel about her new home?
- What do we learn about Kyla's mother from her dream? What kind of life do you think that Kyla would have had with her mum?
- Why was Caroline angry with Nora? Why did she think that her parents indulged her sister? What do you think she means when she says that Kyla has 'grown up on a pack of lies'? What does Caroline tell Kyla about her father?
- How does Kyla feel when she begins her new school? Who does Miss Churchill ask to show her around? What does Kyla say to the girl that annoys her? How do the other students treat Kyla?
- How does living with Caroline differ from living with Nora? What does Kyla miss about her old home?
- What present does Caroline give Kyla?
- Why does Kyla feel like Caroline is blaming her when she says that she hates school?
- Who is Steve? Why do Caroline and Kyla argue at dinner? How does Steve try and make the peace?
- Who does Kyla call when she gets home from dinner? How does she feel after the phone call?
- How much money does Caroline give Kyla for an allowance?
- What does Caroline say about Kyla when she leaves with Steve? How do you think this comment makes Kyla feel?
- What lies does Kyla tell the girls at school about her family? Why do you think she does this? How does the girls' attitude towards Kyla change after her conversation with them? Why do you think this is?
- Why does Kyla feel happier after she and Caroline visit the supermarket?
- Why does Kyla need to look in the phone book?
- What additional lies does Kyla tell the girls when she goes to Sara's house? Which of Kyla's lies do you think is the most far-fetched and why? Where does Kyla ask Sara's dad to drop her off?
- What does Paula tell Kyla in her letter? How does Kyla feel after she reads it?
- What sign does Nora give Kyla? What does Kyla do with it? What words does Kyla hear Nora say to her?
- Why does Kyla ring Caroline and ask her to come home? How does Caroline react to her request?
- Why do you think Caroline doesn't want to help Kyla find her father?

**Discussion**

- Describe Caroline's character. Are Kyla's feelings towards her aunt justified? Why/why not? What evidence is there in the novel to suggest that Caroline *did* care about her mother? What aspects of having Kyla living with her would be difficult for Caroline?
- How would you feel if you were in Kyla's position? Should she be allowed more of a say in her future? Why/why not?
- Caroline tells Kyla that Nora thought that she was 'protecting' Kyla by keeping secrets about the family from her. Is it fair to keep secrets from people about their past? Why/why not? What might motivate a family member to tell lies or keep information from someone? What secrets do you think that Nora was keeping?
- In what ways does Caroline make an effort to welcome Kyla into her life and house? What changes does she make?
- What lies does Kyla tell the girls at school? Why does she do this? What complications could these lies create in her life? What do you think the girls will do if they find out that they have been lied to?
- Do you believe that it is possible for the dead to give signs to the living? Why/why not? Have you ever had an experience like Kyla's? If so, describe it.
- Why do you think Kyla is so interested in finding her father?
- Why doesn't Caroline believe Kyla about the 'sign'?

*Students read Chapters 14-26 (pp. 107-191) independently before the next shared session.*

**Comprehension Chapters 14-26 (pp. 107-191)**

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- Why do Kyla and Caroline have a fight in the morning? Is Kyla being fair to her aunt? Why/why not?
- What do the girls ask Kyla when she arrives at school? How does Kyla respond to their request? Why does she think she is getting in way too deep?
- What questions does Kyla ask Andrea? What is she trying to find out? What does Kyla overhear Andrea and Caroline talking about? Why does she have mixed feelings about what she overhears?
- What does Kyla tell Sara and Briony about her brothers and sisters? Do they believe what she is telling them? How do you know?
- Why do Sara and Briony confront Kyla at lunchtime? How do they embarrass her in front of the other students?

- What decision does Kyla make after she runs away from school?
- What problems does Kyla face when she tries to buy a train ticket?
- Who picks Kyla up and offers her a ride to Waikanae? Why do you think that the lady is reluctant to let her hitchhike? What lies does Kyla tell the couple about herself? Why does Kyla begin to regret her decision to run away as she sits in the car?
- What does Kyla 'say' to her 'mother' on the phone?
- What does Ruth offer to do for Kyla in the morning?
- Why is Kyla so upset when she wakes at 8am? Why do you think Kyla tells Ruth the truth? What does Ruth try to convince Kyla is the right thing to do?
- How does Ruth get Caroline's number? Why does Kyla decide to run away when she realises that Ruth has spoken to her aunt?
- How does Kyla get injured? Where does she seek shelter? Who wakes her up? How do the couple treat her? Why do you think Kyla decides to tell the couple the truth about herself?
- Describe Rory. Why does he make Kyla feel so uncomfortable?
- What does Dave call Kyla when he drops her off at Ruth and Eugene's house? Why does this comment get Kyla thinking?
- Why does Kyla start questioning her decision to go and live with Emily while she is waiting for Ruth and Eugene to come home?
- What does Nora say to Kyla that comforts her?
- How does Caroline react when she finds Kyla on the porch?
- How does Ruth act as an intermediary between Caroline and Kyla?
- Why is Ruth shocked when she learns that Kyla has been at Reena and Dave's place? What rumours has she heard about them?
- Why didn't Kyla tell her aunt that she was so unhappy? What concession does Caroline make when Kyla tells her why she was scared to talk to her?
- What does Kyla tell her aunt on the way home in the car? How does Caroline react to this confession? How does her reaction differ from how she has reacted in the past? Why does Caroline apologise to Kyla?
- How does Kyla react when Caroline tells her that Nora's house has been sold? What does she plan to do with the money?
- Why is Kyla so surprised when Caroline tells her that she talks to Nora?
- Why is it so important that Kyla knows Caroline really wants her to live with her?
- What shocking information does Caroline tell Kyla about her father? What does Kyla learn about her mother from her aunt? Why does Caroline hold Nora partially responsible for her sister's failings?
- What does Kyla tell her aunt about Angela that makes Caroline better understand her sister's state of mind? How did Angela die? How does Kyla

feel when she hears this news? Why does it help her empathise with her aunt?

- How does Kyla feel when Caroline tells her not to go house hunting with her? What is Caroline's real reason for wanting Kyla to remain behind?
- Why do Briony and Sara apologise to Kyla? What information has Caroline given the girls about Kyla's situation? What else does Kyla tell them?
- How is school different for Kyla when she returns?
- How does Kyla react when Caroline tells her that she entered her photographs in the competition? Why does Caroline think that she might have done the wrong thing?
- Where does Caroline buy a house? How does Kyla feel about her new home?
- What does Caroline get Kyla for her birthday? What other surprise arrives for Kyla?

### Discussion

- How do you think Caroline feels when she comes home and reads Kyla's note? Why is it so important to communicate with people?
- Kyla is extremely lucky and is helped by two friendly couples when she runs away. What potential danger does she put herself in when she decides to run away from home and hitchhike?
- What do you think Kyla learns about herself during her journey?
- Kyla feels better after she learns the truth about her mother and father, even though it is painful. What was Nora's motivation for keeping this from Kyla? Is it always better to know the truth? Why/why not?
- Identify a main theme from the story and explain how it is developed by the author.

### Activities

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**Monologue** - Create a monologue for Kyla in an important part of the novel. What is she thinking and feeling in that moment? Why?

**Epilogue** - Write an epilogue for the story. What is Kyla doing now? How is her relationship with her aunt and friends?

**Movie Pitch** - Write a one-page 'pitch' to a producer explaining why the story would make a great movie.

**Static Image** - Design a static image that illustrates a theme from the novel. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your idea.

**Roundtable** - Have a discussion with a group about what intrigues, bothers, interests or confuses you about the novel.

**Writing**- Imagine that you are Kyla. Write a letter to Paula describing your thoughts and feelings about your situation as you struggle to adapt to life in Wellington.

**Poem** - Imagine that you are Kyla. Write a poem for Nora that you will put into her coffin with her. Remember to use figurative language to create imagery.

**Conflict** - Kyla is constantly in conflict with Aunt Caroline during the story. Write a paragraph explaining why this conflict occurs and why it is important to the story.

**Character** - Draw a picture of Kyla on a large sheet of paper. Divide the picture in half. On one side list all of Kyla's positive characteristics, on the other, all of her negative characteristics. Use examples and quotes from the story to illustrate your ideas.

**Book Review** - Write a book review for *Kyla*. Include a brief plot summary, describe the setting and explain why it is important. Describe the characters and explain how they develop and change as the story progresses. Identify major themes and ideas in the story. Remember to give your personal opinion about the book.

**Character** - Imagine that you are Kyla and have been asked to give a speech about yourself to your class on the first day of school. Write the speech and present it to the class in role. Include information about yourself and your background, where you come from, things you enjoy doing and what kind of person you consider yourself to be.

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*Notes written by Vicki Ladd*