

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Children aged 9 to 13; years 4 to 7

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English; History
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Personal and Social Capability; Critical and Creative Thinking
- **Other units:** Celebrations and commemorations – Christmas; World War II

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Exploring language and creative writing
- Learning what life was like after World War II
- Reading an uplifting story about the importance of family and community

## THEMES

- Belonging and the meaning of 'home'
- The importance of family
- Using your imagination and creativity to 'make do'
- What does it mean to be a 'grown-up'?
- The construction of gender
- Christmas, community and compassion
- World War II
- Reptiles

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## The Kensington Reptilium

N. J. Gemmell

## PLOT SUMMARY

*'Could we possibly live here for good? This city makes me feel very small and lost. I'm a child of the bush, its strong, hurting light is deep in my bones, along with its quiet that's so alive it hums.'* (p. 140)

**The Caddy kids are home alone and they're having the best time ever. Until a stranger arrives with news . . .**

This is the story of how four loud, grubby urchins from the Australian outback find themselves in London for the first peacetime Christmas after years of war.

But their new guardian hates children. He prefers the company of the hundreds of snakes in his house – the Kensington Reptilium.

Fate lends Kick, Scruff, Bert and Pin a helping hand when outraged citizens call for the Reptilium to be shut down. With the police about to descend, can the Caddy kids warm Uncle Basti's heart – and have their Christmas wishes granted – before it's too late?

**A feel-good tale that will have you cheering on these four fearless bush kids as they take on the world.**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**N.J. Gemmell** is the bestselling author of five novels and two works of non-fiction for adults under her full name, Nikki Gemmell. Her work has received international critical acclaim and been translated into many languages. Nikki is currently a columnist for the *Weekend Australian's* Saturday magazine, and a Friday regular on the *Today* programme in Australia. Born in Wollongong, Australia, Nikki lived in London for many years but has now returned to Australia with her family. *The Kensington Reptilium* is her first book for children.

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

N.J. Gemmell says:

*'The Kensington Reptilium* is actually the book closest to my heart, the novel I feel most passionately about – and oh my goodness, I have to say the hardest book I've ever written.

'It began as the seed of an idea when I was living in London and the mother of two young boys who found it extremely difficult to lift their heads from any screen in sight. They just weren't readers. I couldn't believe it. The anguish. The mortification. I put so many books under their noses, night after night, but the flame of reading passion just wouldn't ignite. What had I done wrong as a mother? Novels had been a friend, solace and guide throughout childhood, and I wanted my kids to know that all-consuming deliciousness of losing themselves in a book, too.

'So in despair, I wrote one for them. Put them in it. Surely that'd get them reading? Hence the Caddys, four feral bush kids from deep in the outback who one day find themselves transplanted to a grand house in London's extremely posh Kensington. They take it over – to the horror of the owner, who's utterly appalled at such noisy, bolshy bush ruffians – and they end up saving it.

'It's December 1945, the war has just ended, London's a bomb site and Christmas is fast approaching. Will the mystery of their missing father be solved? Will Bucket, their trusty dingo, find her way to London? Will the Kensington Reptilium be dismantled? Will the kids from the bush ever find their way into their flinty uncle's heart? And will they ever stop talking, let alone have a bath? There's mystery, adventure, even a touch of romance in it. But mainly, it made me cry as well as laugh. I really hope you'll be moved, too.

'The book took the longest out of all my novels to get right – about five years, on and off, and sometimes I just despaired that it would never be finished. But the story, and those Caddy kids, just wouldn't let me go.

'One of the hooks for the book – the lighting of candles for a very special reason, every Christmas Eve, in a grand London square – is actually a true story that's never been written about.

'And the idea for the Reptilium? I found an ad in the back of an old Victorian volume picked up for twenty pence from a second-hand table in, you guessed it, Kensington. The Kensington Reptilium actually existed.

'As for those recalcitrant, screen-obsessed sons of mine? They've now read it. They couldn't put it down (couldn't get one to bed, in fact). Wow, mission accomplished.'

### Activities

1. The author had the idea for writing a book about the 'Kensington Reptilium' after seeing an ad in an old book for a real place with this name. Find an ad for somewhere near you and write a story set in that place, or use the original ad for inspiration – it's included in the Worksheet section.
2. Imagine you and your brothers and sisters and family were living in another time – as the author did when she took inspiration from her own children to write a book set in the 1940s. What period would you choose – 1850s, 1920s, 1970s, or ancient Roman or medieval times? Research the period you have chosen. What might your family have looked like, and worn? Where might you have lived? What jobs would you have had? Would you have gone to school?

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about World War II?
2. What do you think it would be like to live in the Australian outback, far from any towns or other people? What if there were no adults, only kids?
3. Does your family celebrate Christmas? What are the traditions of your family for this celebration or another one?
4. What does 'home' mean to you? Is it a place, or is it the people who live there who make it feel like home? Have you ever had to move house? How did you feel?

## WRITING STYLE AND LANGUAGE

N.J. Gemmell has a distinctive style and a unique voice. Writing in first person as the main character, Kick, she gives the story a fresh and vibrant feel, with writing that is itself full of 'kick'. *The Kensington Reptilium* uses numerous writing techniques that can be explored by students. Some of these are noted below.

The choice of language is **lively, colloquial, direct and often onomatopoeic**: 'eggs . . . land – plop! – in the red dust' (p. 2); 'a flurry of snarl' (p. 14); 'splat' (p. 16) Even the children's names add flavour in an almost onomatopoeic way: Kick, Scruff, Bert and Pin.

Kick almost seems to address the reader directly, and to carry on conversations in her head, with **asides and mannerisms**: 'but excuse me, I'm more than all right now, thank you very much' (p. 5). The reader hears Kick's 'er' hesitations. She addresses others in her head as if they can hear her: 'Don't you dare, mate' (p. 14); 'Er, right. Nup. Not biting, mister' (p. 15).

The author deliberately chose to give the language a vibrant, **modern feel**, rather than to be completely authentic to the 1940s. She wanted children today to find *The Kensington Reptilium* a fast-paced and exciting read. However, there are plenty of **authentic historical** terms and phrases, words we might not use nowadays – for example, 'cripes' (p. 26); 'Chop chop, chaps!' (p. 38); 'hoity toity' (p. 6); 'toodle pip' (p. 49); 'golly galoshes' (p. 63); 'You're swell' (p. 231).

One quirk you might notice in the writing is that the author sometimes makes use of the **passive voice**. Passive voice occurs when the focus of the sentence is on the object or action, not the subject. So for instance, instead of saying 'I grab my attempt at breakfast', Kick will say 'My attempt at breakfast . . . is grabbed' (p. 2). Although it is often taught that active voice is stronger than passive voice, N.J. Gemmell's style in *The Kensington Reptilium* shows that disobeying the 'rules' of writing can sometimes be used to great effect, helping to give the book its unique and unforgettable voice.

*The Kensington Reptilium* features **short, sharp sentences** and **sentence fragments**, to emphasise that it is in Kick's voice and sometimes to give it a breathless, fast pace that increases the tension. For the same reason, often the pronoun is left out, e.g.: 'Can't move. Shocked into stillness like statues' (p. 78).

This style also gives the book a **stream-of-consciousness** effect. For instance, as the police car

first approaches the house, we hear about it as a stream of Kick's thoughts, jumbled and short:

*'A police car. Coming straight at us with its big plume of dust. The worst car possible. Because it means something not very good. Snatchings. Removal. Punishment. Too many questions, too much suspicion. But it slows, then stops a couple of hundred yards away, as if it's scared (as it should be) of what goes on in these parts. Scared of the four of us with our big reputation that's got everyone – including Auntie Ethel – running for the hills.'* (p. 10)

On the other hand, whereas often the sentences are short, sometimes the stream-of-consciousness style also results in **very long sentences**, as if Kick is thinking aloud:

*'Scruff's not paying attention, itching to try his slingshot, just a tiny pebble, soft, right on that city shin – I can read him like a book – and this Horatio Something Something's speaking in a voice we can't get our heads around and oh my goodness we're all suddenly transfixed because a fly's just about to go into his mou–'* (p. 21)

N.J. Gemmell also uses beautiful **poetic language** – in particular, to describe the Caddy kids' love of the land. Here are a few examples:

- *'this place that sings in our blood and our bones'* (p. 17)
- *'ghost gums like shinbones'* (p. 36)
- *'It's a strange, soothing singing wrapped up like a cocoon of loveliness within the very core of the reptilian noise, like a lullaby inside a shell inside an ocean's inky depths.'* (p. 62)
- *"This way," Basti says, and swiftly he leads us through a small building whose smashed skeleton is some columns of bricks and whose flesh is the air, the sky.'* (p. 94)

Perhaps this can be traced back to the author's own background: raised in country New South Wales, N.J. Gemmell lived and worked in the outback of the Northern Territory then lived in the bustling city of London for many years, before returning to Australia. Nikki's love of the bush, and the shock a country person might feel upon first moving to the city, comes through clearly in *The Kensington Reptilium*.

Animals and even objects are **personified** in the story, an effect that adds flavour to the Caddy kids and their personalities. Perhaps because of their isolation and their love of storytelling, the children make stories out of their lives and experiences.

For instance, their car is Matilda, 'our darling, faithful old girl of a ute' (p. 5). Their dog, Bucket, is an important part of the family.

The **similes and metaphors** in *The Kensington Reptilarium* are always within Kick's experience and vocabulary:

- 'My heart's suddenly tight in my chest as if a great fist is squeezing it.' (p. 20)
- 'Paint peels from the walls like giant sunburn, dead vines spill from neglected windowboxes, long smears of dirt run down the façade like the grubbiest of tear-streaked faces' (p. 37)

### Questions and activities

1. What is onomatopoeia? As a class, brainstorm examples that you have heard.
2. Are the children's names onomatopoeic? What words come to you when you think of each name: Kick, Scruff, Bert, Pin? Is Scruff scruffy? What is pin-like about Pin? Why does the name 'Kick' suit our heroine so well?

Let's take this question even further and ask: do certain sounds, like the sharpness of 'k' or the softness of 'b', have an effect on how words develop and what emotional impact they can have on you? There is a famous science experiment called 'The Bouba-Kiki Effect' that you can do in class to help you answer this question! Find out more at [http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/project\\_ideas/HumBeh\\_p026.shtml#summary](http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/project_ideas/HumBeh_p026.shtml#summary)

3. The old ute that belongs to the Caddy family is called Matilda. What would you name your car, and why?
4. Why do writers usually use active voice rather than passive voice? Would a book be confusing if it was all written in passive voice? Complete the worksheet on passive voice.
5. Find terms in the book that are old-fashioned and rarely used today, such as those mentioned on p. 3. What other words can you think of that have gone out of fashion in this way?
6. What other similes and metaphors can you find in the book?
7. The worksheets included in these resources further explore the language and style of the book, including exercises in vocabulary and character description.

## KEY STUDY TOPICS

### Belonging and 'home'

The Caddy children love their home in 'Woop Woop' – in the Australian outback, far from their nearest neighbours. There they have freedom to be themselves, and to explore their environment and do whatever they like (as long as governesses and meddling aunts don't get in the way).

Moving to London in the middle of winter, and seeing the devastating repercussions of the war that largely passed them by, affects the children deeply, shaking their sense of identity. The question of where 'home' will be, intertwined with the question of whether there will be family to love and take care of them, is foremost in their minds.

- 'Usually my world is filled with endless emptiness, space, thrumming silence – and now this. In such a short time. The energetic rush of a mighty metropolis, with its heartbreaking bombing scars of rubble everywhere. It's like the entire city is still suffering from some strange pox; horrible wounds of destruction and hate.' (p. 139)
- 'Could we possibly live here for good? This city makes me feel very small and lost. I'm a child of the bush, its strong, hurting light is deep in my bones, along with its quiet that's so alive it hums. And now such vast . . . difference. The air tastes sour like it's filled up with dirt and cars and smoke. Even walking on London's hardness feels odd after a lifetime of sand, and mainly in bare feet.' (p. 140)

### Questions and activities

1. Compare the descriptions of the bush in the first few chapters with the descriptions of London on pp. 36–38. Make a mind map for each location with colours and descriptions. Draw or paint each place as Kick sees it.
2. What other books have you read about a child or children moving to a new place? Why do you think this is a recurring theme in children's books?

### The importance of family

*The Kensington Reptilarium* contrasts loneliness against companionship; a child's desire to be independent against the need for adult supervision and support. The Caddy kids are quite happy to be alone at home with no adult – but Kick makes it clear to the reader that this is only because they know their father will be returning.

The fact that families don't always get along but can love each other anyway is also clear – we see Bert's glaring defiance against Kick in the first few chapters, when Kick is trying to act as a parental figure to her siblings, yet when they are thrust into a scary new environment Bert willingly holds Kick's hand and places her trust in Kick to make things better.

A strong theme of the book is the children bringing the idea of love and family back to Uncle Basti, who has been traumatised by his experiences in the war and has withdrawn from the world.

- *'We usually love being alone, love a place all to ourselves; as long as we know a parent and love and jolliness and warmth is still somehow attached to it.'* (p. 44)
- *'We thought we were getting a family. A new home. Some stability in our life. We loved being on the station by ourselves but that was because we knew there was always someone who . . . who . . . loved us.'* (p. 77)
- *'I smile back. Because this crazy posse around me is the start of a brand new family. A brand new life. Jumbly and ragtag and reluctant and impossible and scruffy and contradictory as it is, it's family, yes.'* (pp. 95–6)

#### Questions and activities

1. Discuss what family means to each of the characters – does it mean the same thing for Kick as it does for Pin, for instance?
2. Does Kick feel most responsible because she is the eldest child? Would Bert or Scruff act differently if they were the eldest?

#### Using your imagination and creativity to 'make do'

The Caddy kids are always improvising and 'making do' to create their own fun, even when times are tough. Some examples of their imaginative uses of objects are:

- A picnic basket full of rotten eggs becomes a weapon to throw at invaders (p. 13)
- The crow's nest on the roof is Mum's old laundry basket (p. 13)
- Their clothes at the beginning of the book are *'rag clothes held on with twine'* but the children have added *'ochre smears like wild Indian paint'* (p. 17); on the journey to England, Kick dresses them in *'a crazy collection of army shorts and string*

*vests and sarongs and military jackets that were found anywhere and everywhere along the way'* (p. 43)

- The children then get to create outfits for themselves from old abandoned costumes, and they do so with relish, wearing an extravagant mishmash of outlandish pieces (pp. 146–147)

Christmas, too, is about 'making do' creatively this year – both because it is the end of World War II and food rationing is still in effect for Londoners, but also for the Caddy kids because they have to make their own Christmas in this new and unwelcome place:

- *'Because it's obvious that the London right outside this house is going all out to have the biggest Christmas celebration in a generation, even if that Christmas is about recycling and ration books and patching things together and making do. But there's a lot to celebrate out there.'* (p. 194)
- *'Family presents? Obvious. Hundreds of glorious things just waiting in the attic. Wrapping paper? Old newspaper. Up there too. Decorations? Paper chains. Cut-out snowflakes. Ribbons from the shop dummies' clothes.'* (p. 240)

#### Questions and activities

1. Have a costume day for your class– but make a rule that costumes have to be made from old clothes or found objects!
2. Research food rationing in World War II. Which foods were in short supply? Why did the government ration food?

#### What does it mean to be a 'grown-up'?

Kick is thirteen and part of her journey in the book is to come to terms with growing up. She already feels grown-up in that she has taken on the heavy burden of caring for her brothers and sister, and that responsibility is stopping her from enjoying life – although she will rarely admit it.

Kick tries hard to maintain a façade of strength and togetherness. It is only at certain moments that we see a fragility to her:

- *'But I've got a reputation to maintain here, the fiercest one of the lot, no one can see me like this.'* (p. 19)
- *"I'm almost a grown-up!" I exclaim.'* (p. 177)
- *'I'm happy the way I am and far too busy to be something as silly as a girl. Too busy rescuing*

uncles. Hmm, yes, that's right. And finding shelter for my little brothers and sister and keeping our family together and –' (p. 99)

- 'I want independence, yes of course, want to be the chief pirate and the general and the bossy boss, but I want someone to put their arm around me sometimes, too – achingly – and to tell me I'm all right; chin up. I shake my head and laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. I'm just as mixed up as Basti in this place.' (p. 141)
- 'These three are extremely lucky to have you, you know. I'm the eldest of four, just like you. And sometimes you might think that no one ever notices you holding things together, making everything right, watching over everyone and never letting them go. But believe me, they do. Oh they do. We're extremely grateful to have you around, Miss Kick.' (p. 236)
- 'Your mother must be very proud . . . All that you do for everyone. I bet you're just like her; endlessly looking out for everyone but yourself. Little Pin here is extremely worried about you, that you're not smiling enough right now. He wants his old Kick back.' (p. 172)

Kick feels strongly the absence of her mother, and now her father:

- 'The voice is suddenly low and motherly and it's been so long since anything like that, for any of us.' (p. 48)

However, the question of what it means to be a grown-up is a gnarly one – Kick finds it difficult to trust adults, and those she meets often have kid-like qualities or are even irresponsible:

- 'Because he's got the air of someone who's completely hopeless around kids – but possibly, inside, is one himself. A very big one. Which was what Dad was like a lot, especially when he was making slingshots.' (p. 27)
- 'Because Dad's always saying that, about himself, when another letter arrives from the bank; or from Auntie Ethel, instructing him to just grow up and sort his children's lives out.' (p. 117–118)

### Questions and activities

1. What does it mean to be a 'grown-up'? Is it only age, or are there other factors? Does Kick's dad act like a grown-up, with his adventuring and exploring? What about Basti, with his eccentric outfits and curious ideas?

### The construction of gender

For Kick, growing up is also bound up in notions of becoming a woman. Kick is aware that things are changing but determined not to let them; she knows at least some of the social expectations of being a girl in the 1940s – and the limitations – but she doesn't agree with or want to be bound by them.

She wants to be known for her fierceness, her determination. She wants to grow up to be 'An aviatrix, possibly? An explorer, an adventurer?' (p. 156), but she doesn't know if this is possible.

- 'Dad organised for Auntie Ethel to stay with us during this latest absence – something about me "becoming a woman and needing some help", which he couldn't talk about, and he would blush whenever I tried to ask, but excuse me, I'm more than all right now, thank you very much. I've got his war pistol and his whip, his car key and a stash of books – what more does a girl need?' (p. 5)
- 'There's only one crack shot better than Scruff in this place and it's a girl, yes a girl, not that he'd ever admit it.' (p. 14)
- 'Too much to lose here . . . the right to wear trousers and cuss . . .' (p. 15)
- 'I drop my hand. What's wrong with it? Too grubby? Stinky from the bush? Not girly enough? I suddenly feel completely, utterly, horribly . . . unwelcome. What's a lady meant to be like? Dirt's under my nails in little moons and the cracks of my palms are like river lines on a map.' (p. 67)
- "'Ignore her, mate,'" Scruff says companionably. "She's just the embarrassing big sister going through . . . whatever girls go through.'" (p. 72)
- 'He gets me. No one else does. Ever. Especially the horrified succession of governesses and aunts who invariably give up. Not even Dad, who was always scratching his whiskers in bewilderment at the blunt cut hair and trench whistles and cut-off trousers for shorts. "Gee, Kicketty," he'd murmured more than once, "I didn't know young ladies were meant to turn out like this.'" (p. 144)

Kick hates the idea of being ladylike particularly because she remembers her mother as being a lady, and in her mind she can never compare.

- 'I turn brusquely away, scowling, hurting; not changing for anyone, not even Dad and didn't he try. I liked looking like him. He didn't get it. "Your mum was such a lady," he'd sigh. Well, I'm not.' (p. 99)

- ‘Mum was so impossibly dainty and stylish and glamorous that I could never be like that, ever; and Dad doesn’t need reminding of the loss of the love of his life, which is why I am, ferociously, what I am. Totally different to the way Mum looked, deliberately, in every way.’ (p. 172)

Gradually, however, Kick comes to terms with her identity, and finds that she can still be herself even if she wears a dress – occasionally. It is Basti who helps her with this realisation, when he says, ‘Madam, I command you to dress like no one else. That is an order. Surprise me. I don’t care how. You see, I not only admire the courage to be different – I celebrate it. My creed has always been that one must be their own man, no matter what – er, woman . . . person.’ (p. 144)

### Christmas, community and compassion

For the Caddy kids, the fact that they have been displaced from their home and have learned about the probable loss of their dad comes at the worst time possible: right before Christmas, an occasion they know should be about family and celebration.

- ‘And now we’re all imagining the Christmas ahead: an uncle who doesn’t want us one bit, no proper presents, no laughter, no cuddles and most of all, no Dad . . . No bedtime stories of Santas arriving on camels and wombats and crocs, and no camping expeditions to sacred sites . . . No slingshots carefully whittled, four of them, in descending size, with names carefully engraved in cursive script and lined up as obedient as soldiers on the mantelpiece. Nope, absolutely none of it. Just four tiny white candles. Our only gifts in a new Christmas of vast bleakness.’ (pp. 106–107)

However, their plight is also contrasted against that of the Londoners, many of whom have also lost homes and family members in the war. There is a feeling in the air that this Christmas is going to be a special one – one that is still about ‘making do’ and rationing, but also a time to heal from the scars of the war, to forgive, and to move on into a peaceful future.

- ‘Surrounding us, as the afternoon light softens completely away, are real Christmas trees, paper snowflakes and little presents in the glowing windows of every single house – except this one. Oh, it’s all handmade – paper and silver fabric and kids’ cutouts – but everything is so sparkly and magical and alive, with love and delight and celebration and warmth. It feels like we’ve landed in the middle of a neighbourhood that’s busily, joyously, making do, with gratitude and giggles,

after years of austerity and sacrifice and going-without. It feels so welcoming. Caring. Fun.’ (p. 52)

- ‘They’ve just been through six long years of war, they’re jittery and suspicious and tired and they don’t want any scary new surprises in their lives; they just want a quiet, unthreatening Christmas this time around, it’s all they can bear.’ (p. 85)

The book features a beautiful tradition based on a true story – that in a particular square in London, every year candles are lit in every window. The tradition highlights compassion and community: its original purpose was to conceal the location of a refuge for Jewish people that had been subject to attacks.

The true horrors of the death camps and the systematic persecution of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany were just coming to light in England at the time the book is set, and this makes the lighting of the candles all the more important. The windows have been hidden with blackout curtains for the long six years of war, but the tradition has not been forgotten.

- ‘This is our ritual, remember, and you haven’t done it since 1919. Oh yes, I’ve been taking note. And every year I’ve prayed for . . . a miracle. That you’d somehow change . . . And the rest of us of course haven’t lit the candles for six endless years, blackouts and all that. But we need to now. Urgently. More than ever . . . After Europe, after everything that’s gone on . . . The camps. Have you seen the pictures? We need the lights in the windows, Sebastian, this year of all years. Please.’ (p. 102)
- ‘And let’s never forget the first time that the people of Campden Hill Square had done this. The reason why. The big hearts, the fierce sense of justice, the tolerance. Way back when the trail was blazed: the lights of kindness and community, no matter who you were or where you’d come from.’ (p. 289)
- Read pp. 119–120 for more about the tradition.

### Questions and activities

1. In groups, choose a country or culture and research that country or culture’s Christmas or other tradition or celebration. Write a report and present it to the class. What makes it different to other celebrations? What similarities are there between the traditions?
2. Explore the symbolism of candles in different traditions.

## MORE ACTIVITIES

- Read the descriptions of Basti's study (p. 64), Bert's new bedroom (pp. 159–162), and the library Kick loves (p. 157). What would *your dream room* look like? What would it contain?
- Split into groups to research some of the **reptiles** mentioned in the book: for example, ambilobe panther chameleon (p. 205), komodo dragon, fire-belly newt, glowworm, taipan, bearded dragon, King Brown snake, green tree python and frill-necked lizard.
- What references to **real historical people and events** can you find in the book? Choose one of these to research and write a report: Madame Pompadour, Amelia Earhart, David Livingstone, Ernest Shackleton and Robert Falcon Scott.
- Read some of the other **books** mentioned in the story: Charles Dickens (author of *A Christmas Carol*); J.M. Barrie (author of *Peter Pan*); *Sherlock Holmes*; *The Jungle Book*.
- Look up the **song** '(Bound for) Botany Bay' – do you know how to sing it? What other Australian songs might the Caddy kids like to sing to remember their Australian home? What songs remind you of home, or of Australia?

## WORKSHEET ANSWERS

### Passive voice

1. I lower the pistol.
2. Dinda briskly ejects Bert from her leg and coat.
3. Basti arches his eyebrows wildly in shock.
4. Basti clips the hat onto his head.
5. 'What?' Dinda spits.
6. I have been practising karate in anticipation.
7. I whisk Dad's slingshot with my name on it from my pocket.
8. Quickly Charlie Boo leads us through the back garden.
9. Basti slams the door of the polar bear room.

### Missing words

1. We are stunned. We can't move. We are shocked into stillness like statues.
2. Suddenly, there is a great screech of traffic noise.
3. Basti relaxes. He uncurls his cobra.
4. Basti snaps up his glasses. His eyes widen in surprise. He snaps them down again.
5. There is a lone figure, dead ahead of us.
6. I push past my brother. I don't want to do this. I have to. I peek through.
7. The front door is locked. There is no way to open it from the inside – except with a key – which Basti's got around his neck. We are stuck.
8. Dinda pulls out another curl from under my ear. She smiles.
9. Dad could be anywhere. He could be trapped, needing our help.
10. The front door is firmly shut. The scullery window is locked. Our uncle has vanished.

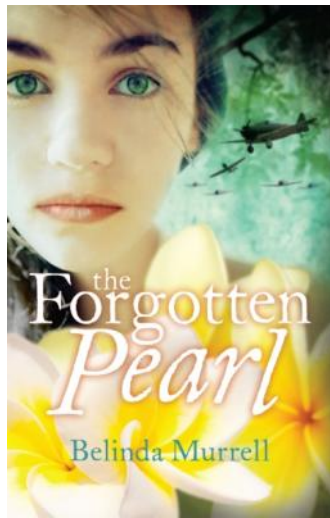
## FURTHER READING



### *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serraillier

**Why this story?** A classic adventure story set during World War II.

Having lost their parents in the chaos of war, Ruth, Edek and Bronia are left alone to fend for themselves and hide from the Nazis amid the rubble and ruins of their city. They meet a ragged orphan boy, Jan, who treasures a paperknife – a silver sword – which was entrusted to him by an escaped prisoner of war. The three children realise that the escapee was their father, the silver sword a message that he is alive and searching for them. Together with Jan they begin a dangerous journey across the battlefields of Europe to find their parents.



### *The Forgotten Pearl* by Belinda Murrell

**Why this story?** Like the Caddy kids, Poppy also survives World War II while living in the Northern Territory.

In 1941, Poppy lives in Darwin, a peaceful paradise far from the war. But when Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, then Australia, everything Poppy holds dear is threatened – her family, her neighbours, her friends and her beloved pets. Her brother Edward is taken prisoner-of-war. Her home town becomes a war zone, as the Japanese raid over and over again. Terrified for their lives, Poppy and her mother flee to Sydney, only to find that the danger follows them there.

*Teachers' resources available.*



### *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

**Why this story?** Just like Uncle Basti, Mr Scrooge also needs to learn that Christmas is about compassion, community and family.

Mr Scrooge is a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, miserable old man. Nobody stops him in the street to say a cheery hello; nobody would dare ask him for a favour. And I hope you'd never be so foolish as to wish him a 'Merry Christmas!' Scrooge doesn't believe in Christmas, charity, kindness – or ghosts.

But one cold Christmas Eve, Scrooge receives some unusual visitors who show him just how very mistaken he's been . . .

## WORKSHEET: Passive voice vs active voice

Passive voice occurs when the focus of a sentence is on the object or action, not the subject. The author sometimes uses passive voice in *The Kensington Reptilium*. For instance, instead of saying, 'I grab my attempt at breakfast', Kick will say '*My attempt at breakfast . . . is grabbed*' (p. 2). In this sentence, the subject is Kick and the object is breakfast.

In this exercise, first go to the page to work out who the subject of the sentence is – who is doing the action? Is it Kick, or one or more of the other characters?

Then rewrite the sentence in the active voice. If it is Kick or someone speaking about themselves, use first-person 'I'. If it is another character, use their name.

Examples of passive voice	Page	Who is the subject?	Rewrite the sentence using active voice
<i>Four sets of ears press to the wood.</i>	63	<i>All four children</i>	<i>We press our ears to the wood.</i>
The pistol is lowered.	16		
Bert is briskly ejected from leg and coat.	49		
The eyebrows arch wildly in shock.	66		
The hat is clipped onto its rightful head.	74		
'What?' It is spat.	104		
Karate has been practised in anticipation.	188		
Dad's slingshot with my name on it is whisked from my pocket.	198		
Quickly we're led through the back garden.	220		
The door of the polar bear room is slammed.	279		

## WORKSHEET: Missing words

Sometimes the author of *The Kensington Reptilarium* leaves out words because the book is in Kick's voice and that's what she would do.

But YOU know what's missing, don't you? Fill in the missing words below. You'll need to look up the page to see who's speaking and what's going on.

Quote	Page	Heading
<i>Blood, pounding in my ears. Hands, trembling.</i>	56	<i>Blood <u>is</u> pounding in my ears. <u>My</u> hands <u>are</u> trembling.</i>
We are stunned. Can't move. Shocked into stillness like statues.	78	We are stunned. ___ can't move. ___ ___ shocked into stillness like statues.
Suddenly, a great screech of traffic noise.	83	Suddenly, _____ ___ a great screech of traffic noise.
Relaxes. Uncurls his cobra.	91	_____ relaxes. _____ uncurls his cobra.
Basti snaps up his glasses. Eyes widen in surprise. Snaps them down again.	100	Basti snaps up his glasses. _____ eyes widen in surprise. _____ snaps them down again.
A lone figure, dead ahead of us.	109	_____ ___ a lone figure, dead ahead of us.
I push past my brother. Don't want to do this. Have to. Peek through.	145	I push past my brother. ___ don't want to do this. ___ have to. ___ peek through.
The front door: locked. No way to open it from the inside – except with a key – which Basti's got around his neck. Stuck.	166	The front door ___ locked. _____ ___ no way to open it from the inside – except with a key – which Basti's got around his neck. _____ stuck.
Dinda pulls out another curl from under my ear. Smiles.	177	Dinda pulls out another curl from under my ear. _____ smiles.
Dad could be anywhere. Trapped, needing our help.	214	Dad could be anywhere. _____ ___ trapped, needing our help.
Front door: firmly shut. Scullery window: locked. Uncle: vanished.	243	_____ front door ___ firmly shut. _____ scullery window ___ locked. _____ uncle _____ vanished.

## WORKSHEET: Vocabulary

Do you know what these words mean? Look them up in the dictionary if you don't.

Word	Page	What does it mean?
malarkey	14	
gravitate	20	
curmudgeonly	37	
façade	37	
chaperone	40	
witheringly	47	
austerity	52	
admonishing	79	
transfixed	88	
dilapidated	95	
pointedly	101	
methodically	245	
crestfallen	257	

## WORKSHEET: Story starter

Did you know that the Kensington Reptilium was a real place? The author found an advertisement for it in a very old book that she bought at a jumble sale.

Write your own story using the advertisement for inspiration. For instance, your story might be about one of the reptiles, insects or other animals mentioned in the ad. Where is the animal from? How did they get to the Reptilium? Who will buy them?

Or your story might be inspired by the story of how the author found the book itself – what else might someone find in an antique shop that could be the basis for an exciting tale?

**E. SUMNER'S**  
Naturalists' Stores.

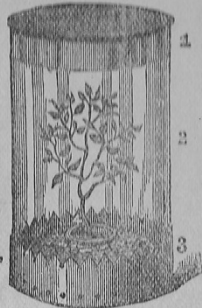
The Largest and Cheapest Establishment in the World for every description of Natural History Apparatus, etc.

Ornithological Department.	British and Foreign Birds, Eggs, and Nests; Aviaries, Cages, and Parrot Stands for the Drawing Room, Conservatory, or Garden; Wirework of every description.
Entomological Department.	Larvæ and Pupæ of Lepidoptera; Scientific Insect Cabinets, Cases, Setting Boards, Cork, Killing Bottles, Spinning Wheels, Silkworms, Butterflies and Moths. <b>KENSINGTON INSECTARIUM, 2/6, 3/6, 4/6.</b>
Piscatorial Department.	Gold Fish, Carp, Roach, Tench, Dace, Golden Orfe, Minnows, Snails, Beetles and Water Plants; Aquariums, Globes, Fountains, Rocks, Cork Models, Swiss Chalets, Running Wind-mills, Nets and Syphons. Sumner's Fish Food, 3d. pkt. Ants' Eggs, 6d. pt.
Reptilian Department.	Snakes, Slowworms, Lizards, Chameleons, Land and Water Tortoises, etc., in great variety from all parts of the globe. <b>KENSINGTON REPTILIUM, 2/-, 2/6, 3/6, 5/6.</b>
Amphibian Department.	Green Tree Frogs, Fire Frogs, Common and Edible Frogs, Toads, Salamanders, Newts, etc. Mexican Axoloti of every description.

Experienced Workmen in all branches kept on the premises for special orders, etc.

BOOKS AND EVERY REQUISITE FOR ALL BRANCHES OF NATURAL HISTORY.

**E. SUMNER,**  
Naturalists' Stores,  
135 OXFORD ST., LONDON, W.

The Kensington Insectarium.  The Kensington Reptilium.

PATENTED.

THIS most ingenious invention is designed for the rearing of all living objects of Natural History, and is of the greatest assistance in the scientific study (under the most favourable conditions) of the wonderful economy and transformation of nature, and so constructed as to enable the specimen to develop to the fullest perfection.

No. 1, as illustrated, is a Ventilated Lid or Cover, with deep rim (which fits inside of glass case, No. 2), deep enough to prevent larvæ from spinning on the glass, thus allowing the cover, with cocoons and pupæ attached, to be removed for inspection, or stored away in large cages until they emerge.

No. 2, Glass Case, which permits the full power of light to freely enter on all parts of the specimens from every point of view.

No. 3, The Base (which the Case No. 2 fits into) is made to contain earth for the growing of plants, or for the use of those insects who bury during pupa state. The bottom of the base is perforated to allow the air to pass through the case, thus preventing over-heating, steaming, or mildew of the specimens, earth, or plants, which is very difficult to prevent in other forms of cases.

No. 4, Is a small movable Pot to contain water in which the stems of food plants may be placed that cannot be grown in the case, such as the cuttings of trees, etc., which last for a considerable time in this case.

The Pot has a perforated india-rubber cover to prevent the larvæ from entering the water.

Height.	Diameter.	Price.	Height.	Diameter.	Price.
6 in. ...	2½ in. ...	2/-	9 in. ...	4½ in. ...	3/6
7 in. ...	3¼ in. ...	2/6	10 in. ...	4¾ in. ...	5/6
8 in. ...	3½ in. ...	3/-	11 in. ...	5¼ in. ...	7/6

NOTE.—The various parts are supplied separately.

**E. SUMNER, 135 Oxford Street, London, W.**

## WORKSHEET: What's your species?

*'Species: lawyer,' the policeman helpfully explains. 'Habitat: Pall Mall, London. Food: pheasant, I'm guessing, from the looks of him, and treacle and, er . . .'*

*'Fly!' Horatio declares. (p. 27)*

*'I know that [the species] Childus Australis Desertus has not only shoe phobias –' (glaring at Scruff's feet) '– and kleptomania, especially when it comes to clothes, which are then customised most bizarrely –' (Bert) '– but also turns every meal into a battlefield –' (wincing at Pin) '– and can never be still or contained or quiet –' (Scruff) '– and bangs on any available pot like they're creating an orchestral symphony –' (Pin again) '– and battles policemen and frankly anyone in authority –' (all of us) '– and is quite wilfully the opposite of whatever a lady is meant to be –' (me in particular) '– with the most terrifyingly hotheaded temper and is far too outspoken and loud and stroppy for their own good –' (definitely me) '– and is quite despairingly wild, stubborn, obnoxious, exhausting and disobedient –' (all of us) '– until your reputation has become so blighted that no one, absolutely no one, wants to go near you, I'm afraid. Especially, most especially . . . me.' (p. 75)*

Make up your own funny and friendly description of yourself, or a friend or someone in your family, as if they are an animal species and you're writing a label for their cage at the zoo.

**SPECIES:**

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**NATURAL HABITAT:**

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**FOOD:**

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# WORKSHEET: Describing characters

Write down five words that describe each of the main characters. Use the list of adjectives and descriptions at the bottom for ideas, as well as thinking up your own words to describe them. There are no right or wrong answers!

KICK




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BASTI




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SCRUFF




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BERT




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PIN

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- fierce funny fragile bold youngest oldest
- worried cuddly chocoholic mysterious murky
- cantankerous angry stubborn wild fearless
- determined practical fierce intelligent explorer
- contradictory dramatic bossy adventurer
- dreamer wanderer likes wearing black cranky
- motherly sleepy hungry tough bewildered
- grubby freckly cheerful fashion-loving wilful
- orderly serious sad curious excitable
- affectionate caring friendly excitable