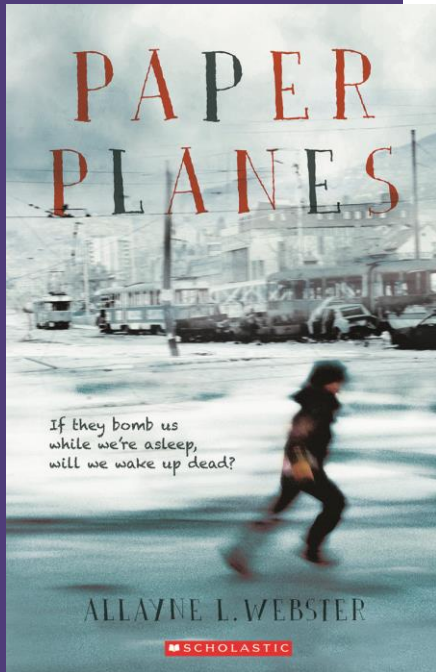


# Teachers' Notes

## Paper Planes

Written by Allayne L. Webster

Teachers' Notes by Rae Carlyle



### OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Junior Fiction
Title	Paper Planes
Author	Allayne L. Webster
Publication Date	August 2014
Format	198 x 128 mm
Extent	192 pp
Binding	Paperback
Printing	Mono
ISBN	978 1 74299 069 9

#### Previous publications

*Stresshead* (Omnibus Books, 2011)  
*Barnesy* (Omnibus Books, 2010)  
*Our Little Secret* (Omnibus Books, 2007)

### Contents

Introduction.....	2
About the Author .....	2
Activities .....	2

## Introduction

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Eleven-year-old Niko is woken one morning when his brother receives a phone call. Heading out on to his apartment's balcony, Niko can see nothing moving except a paper plane floating in the distance. But the peace is an illusion. War is coming to Sarajevo, and the lives of Niko, his family, and his friends, will never be the same.

*Paper Planes* tells the story of living through the siege of Sarajevo, as seen through the eyes of a confused and frightened child. Niko's family remains in their home, hoping that they will be safe, and that the war will soon be over, but the siege drags on and survival becomes increasingly perilous. Eventually, Niko's parents make one of the hardest decisions any parent can ever make. It is not possible for the whole family to leave, but maybe, just maybe, Niko's older brother and sister can use their positions and contacts in the armed forces to somehow smuggle Niko out. Niko's story is one of heartbreak, of hope, and of the power of the human spirit to hold on in the worst situations.

## About the Author

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Allayne L. Webster grew up in the coastal town of Kingston, South Australia. She now lives in Adelaide with her husband and teenage son. She is the proud recipient of two Arts SA grants and the author of three books including two young adult novels, *Our Little Secret* and *Stresshead*, and a younger reader novel, *Barnesy*. *Paper Planes* is based on a true story.

<http://www.allaynewebster.com/>

## Activities

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### English

Niko and Nedim are best friends. They have known each other since they were tiny children, and throughout the course of the siege of Sarajevo they have become even closer and more important to each other. Life in Sarajevo is more dangerous for Nedim and his family than it is for Niko. This is because Nedim's family are Muslim, and the war that has swept over their country involved a lot of ethnic hatred, persecution and killing of Muslim people. Before the war, the fact that the two boys came from families with very different religious and cultural traditions didn't matter within their friendship or daily lives. But now it matters a lot, and it is difficult for Niko to understand why.

As Niko gradually comes to realise the implications that being Muslim in that time and place have for his friend, so too does the reader.

- How does the author introduce and explain the topic to us?
- What language does Niko use when describing his understanding of his friend's religious background and beliefs?
- Look at the dialogue between Niko and the other characters regarding the topic. How many times is it discussed during the story? How long are the passages explaining it? What would have been the impact on the reader if it had been presented in a straight explanatory passage rather than through dialogue and Niko's voice?
- Why do you think the author chose to do it like this instead of simply explaining at the start of the novel?
- Write a short story from Nedim's perspective, where he talks about explaining to Niko how being Muslim affects him and his family during the siege of Sarajevo.

When the two boys realise that Niko will be leaving and Nedim will have to stay, they both find it very difficult and upsetting. They struggle with not knowing how to talk to each other about it, and to have any conversation at all. Then Nedim comes up with the idea of the code word – the special thing that they can have between them, to use any time they write or talk to each other to signal the importance and specialness of their friendship. People use language all the time to signal closeness in relationships, or membership of a group.

- Why do you think that having a code word like this makes the boys feel better about the situation and their friendship? As a class brainstorm and make a list of reasons why having a secret word that only the two of them know is special helps them.
- Language is used to communicate facts, but it can also be used to communicate feelings. Discuss the feelings that are being communicated when they use the code word – what types of things might they really be saying when they use it?
- Think about you and your friends and family and how you talk to each other. Are there any words or phrases that you use that communicate feelings rather than facts/information? (Hint: think about nicknames, joking references to past events, and slang terms that children use and adults don't.) Choose one of these phrases or words and write a paragraph explaining what it means to you, how you feel when it is used, and where it comes from. Illustrate your paragraph with pictures of both the literal meaning of your word or phrase, and the special meaning of it.

## Creative Activities

- Make a paper plane. Research different types of paper planes, and experiment with making them. Which one flies the furthest, and which looks the best?
- Niko and his mother go in search of nettles growing in the neighbourhood because she has heard that you can eat them. What local edible plants grow near where you live? Research online or in the library for edible plants local to you, and then go on a walk and see how many you can locate. You can also include any non-native fruit trees and vegetables that you see in people's gardens on your list.
- As a class make a display of decorated paper planes to hang from the ceiling or in the window. Use coloured paper to make the plane. Cut out shapes and lines from paper of a different colour and glue them on to your plane. Tape a piece of string to the middle of your plane so that it hangs down and looks like it is flying.
- Nedim and Niko both miss being able to go to school. Write an essay talking about all the things that you would miss out on if you weren't able to go to school any more.
- Paint an abstract picture that you think shows the feelings that Niko experiences during the story. Experiment with shapes, colour, and textures. Present your painting to the class and explain what emotions and events the different elements represent.
- Research what Sarajevo is like now. If you were going on a holiday to Sarajevo today, which places would you like to visit and why? Use your research to create a pamphlet about Sarajevo these days. ([sarajevo2014.com/en](http://sarajevo2014.com/en) is a good place to start looking)

## Science and Technology

When the bombing and fighting starts, the electricity in Niko's home is cut off. Later, the water stops coming from the taps, and even later the gas supply used for heating and cooking is cut off.

Having heat, water, and light in our homes is something that most of us take for granted. For many people around the world though, and for much of past history, these things were difficult to get.

- What are the solutions that Niko's family come up with? As a class make a list of the different ways that they light their home, cook their food, and stay warm.
- Which of the three (water, gas, electricity) do you think has the biggest impact on their life when it is cut off? Why do you think so?
- If there was a disaster in your area, and the gas, water, and electricity stopped working, what could you and your family do to survive?
  - As a class discuss the different possible solutions that you might come up with, make a chart listing them all.
  - How many of your solutions rely on having access to existing technology? (e.g. someone might have a generator, someone else a camp stove with gas bottles)
- Niko's family make a stove out of an old can, with a fire in the bottom of it. They put it at the top of the stairwell so that the smoke doesn't fill their homes. Design a camp-stove using materials that you have available either at your home or in the local neighbourhood that you could use to cook on. Make a poster showing both the design of your stove, and include blocks of text justifying your design decisions. Think about things such as fuel, fire danger, smoke, and heat output.

## Health

Niko and Nedim's family are hungry almost all the time, and do not have enough to eat. Everyone is very skinny, but Niko and Nedim have both stopped growing like they used to, and are shorter than they should be. A varied diet of enough healthy food is important for children to grow properly.

- As a class discuss the different food groups that we need to include in our diets. What are some of the consequences (both long and short term) of not having an adequate diet in childhood?

Early on in the story, Niko's mother had a very well stocked pantry, and it was easy for the families to make meals from the food available. As time passed however, food became harder to get, and they had to make do with whatever random food people sent them or they could trade for. Cooking when you don't have a choice of ingredients can be tricky!

- Have every member of the class write down on a piece of paper one item of food that they know they have at home in their pantry or garden. Don't tell anyone else what you are writing, and don't include food that is kept in the fridge or freezer.
- As a class, make a list of all the items that people have written down.

- Brainstorm to see how many different meals you could make from the items on your list.
- Cut out pictures of the foods on your list from shopping catalogues, print them off the internet, or draw them. Make a class wall display of A4 pages of all the different meal possibilities you came up with. In pairs write the name of the meal at the top of the page, the recipe and cooking instructions below, and use the pictures to make a collage to illustrate each meal. Don't forget to mention how many people it would feed and if it is healthy!
- For a challenge, make one of the meals suggested for the class – how much of each ingredient did you need, and how many people thought it tasted good and were happy to eat it?

## Geography

- Niko mentions several different places in the story. Some of them are countries, and some are cities. Make a list of all the places mentioned in the book.
- On a map of Europe, locate all the places that are named (except Australia).
- Individually or in pairs, research the places mentioned in the book. Choose one place and write a short paragraph about its history, natural features, language, people, and industries. Try to find a picture of your chosen place.
- Use the individual research pieces and a large map to make a class wall display. You can place the research pieces around the outside of the map, and use a piece of string or wool to draw a line to the relevant point on the map.