

THE ICARUS SHOW

SALLY CHRISTIE

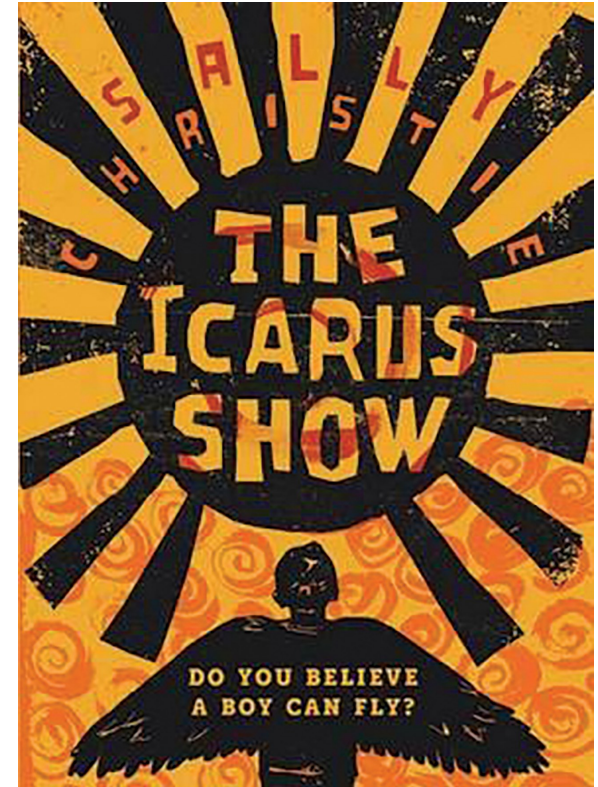
Alex has worked out a foolproof way to avoid being picked on at school. *Don't React*. It's so simple, it's brilliant.

David *does* react and becomes an outcast, nicknamed Bogsy. He's branded a weirdo and Alex is determined to avoid him to avoid the same fate.

But one day, Alex gets a note in his bag that forces him out of his safe little world.

Who sent the note? And is it true — will a boy really fly?

A powerful story about friendship, loneliness and a strange kind of genius.



About the author: Sally Christie's first job, nearly thirty years ago, was with a publisher of children's books. While she was there, she had a go at writing a story herself and (cunningly calling herself Syd Carter) sent it to an editor in her own office. It was accepted. She has grown up a lot since Syd: when, more recently, she completed a breathtaking story called **The Icarus Show**, she felt able to send it to David Fickling Books under her own name.

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NOTE: The Icarus Show deals with themes of bullying and suicide. Educators are advised to be aware of students' sensitivities when embarking on this unit of study.

STUDY NOTES

- Research the Classical Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. What are some of the themes of this myth? What might Icarus be a metaphor for? Why do you think David chooses Icarus as his avatar and how might he relate to Icarus on a personal level? Consider, for example, his relationship with his father, in comparison to Icarus's relationship with Daedalus.
- Divide the class into small groups and have each group choose another tale from Classical Greek mythology to investigate. Put together an interactive presentation (eg an animation, Powerpoint presentation or short play) telling the story to the class. Then, as a class, discuss some of the common tropes found in Greek mythology (eg hubris, irresistible fate, trickery). How do these tropes appear in **The Icarus Show**?
- Alex spends most of his time at school carefully working out what behaviour is expected of him. To what extent is 'Alex' at school a performance, only a version of who Alex Meadows really is? Who is watching this performance, and why does Alex feel the pressure to perform for them?
- **The Icarus Show** is written in first person past tense, mostly in Alex's perspective, with the narrator occasionally breaking the fourth wall to address the reader directly. As a class, discuss the following:
 - ◇ How does the first person past tense affect how you read the story?



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- ◇ Is Alex a reliable narrator? What makes him un/reliable?
- ◇ Why does the narrator address the reader from time to time? Does this technique give the reader a vested interest in what happens to the characters in the story?
- List the literary techniques that Alex mentions in **The Icarus Show** and define them yourself. Do you agree, for example, with Mr Smith that clichés are 'always bad'? Can you think of an instance where someone might use too many similes?
- What is the relationship between clichés, proverbs and facts? Do facts become clichés? Do clichés become proverbs?
- What is the cycle of abuse? How do people who are abused (in the case of **The Icarus Show**, bullied) sometimes then re-enact that abuse onto others? Consider this in light of how Alex initially contemptuously thinks of David, calling him 'Bogsy' and trying to avoid any association with him.
- 'It's odd how you end up acting the same, no matter if you're a spider or a fly.' (p 26) What does this observation say about the social structure Alex believes in?
- '[Alan] commanded his Battalion: gave us our ranks, our places, our orders. That was the way it was meant to be and we knew where we were. Alan commanded Alan's Battalion, but he wasn't directing the Icarus Show.' (p 132) How is the power configuration established by Alan and his 'Battalion' rendered powerless by the unknown 'Icarus'? What does this suggest about the important relationship between knowledge and power?
- What is conscientious objection? Research the history of conscientious objection. What is the point

of it? What do conscientious objectors achieve (or seek to achieve)? With this in mind, why do you think it is so important to David to remain unbowed by Alan and his gang, even when he is physically threatened and abused? Compare and contrast this to how Alex feels every time he upholds the status quo by 'grassing' on David or standing by as David is beaten.

- 'With Alan, you didn't do things for fun; you did them because he had leadership qualities.' (p 30) Does Alan really have leadership qualities, or is he just a powerful bully who people fear? Conduct a class debate around the following statement, using Alan as your central case study: 'Fear is a better motivator than love'.
- In Chapter 5, Alex divides the world into two groups: Reactors and Non-reactors. Read his description of these two groups on pp 43-44. Do you agree with his belief that non-reactors are the smarter of the two groups? Why/why not? In what context might non-reaction be a positive thing? In what context would it be a negative?
- 'I realized I didn't know anyone, not really. How could you tell what a person was like, inside? By being their friend, I supposed ...' (p 56) How important is friendship in **The Icarus Show**? Is the central narrative in the book actually Alex's journey to discovering what real friendship is? Was his relationship with Phil truly a friendship? At what point do you think Alex and David truly become friends?
- David isolates himself from his classmates and says that they're 'stupid'. How does his spyscope into Alex's shed reveal his loneliness? Can you consider the whole Icarus project as David's cry for help in his isolation? Why/why not?



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- Discuss the difference between psychological and physiological illnesses. How do we as a society deal with them? Do you think attitudes might be shifting when it comes to physical and mental illness? Do you agree with Alex's mum that 'When someone's got something *physically* wrong, then there's more of a chance you can help' (p 85)? How is this statement proven true or false in Alex and David's friendship?
- 'We both had this strange kind of freedom to go about our business unnoticed. How did Boggy manage to get his notes and feathers in everyone's bags? Nobody saw because nobody looked. He was like the invisible man.' (p 104) How do we see the world without really *seeing* it? Alex looks at David every day but until his discovery that David is Icarus, he doesn't really see him. What changes Alex's perspective? How can we train ourselves to look past our expectations of what the world around is like to see what the world is *really* like?
- Alex thinks that his discovery of the identity of Icarus is just a series of random chances. Do you agree with this estimation? Is the ability to really see the world around you and identify patterns like Alex does a kind of cleverness? Do you think, for example, that Alan or one of the other school students would have necessarily drawn the same conclusions as Alex?
- Although Alex discovers Icarus's identity through logical deduction, he reveals *his* identity to David by pure chance. Later, he deduces David's suicidal intentions, but he prevents David from leaping by chance. What does **The Icarus Show** suggest about the way chance and deliberation interact in our lives? Consider this particularly in relation to the third-person interjections that begin on p 233, where we see David's father at the pub. Is it chance or deliberation that brings Colin to the scene of the Icarus Show just in time to save his son's life? Explain your answer.



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- Why does Alex want to be part of David's Icarus project? What satisfaction can he have by knowing that he was somehow involved?
- 'Mr Smith had explained to us how things in books could symbolize things. Perhaps they could in real life.' (p 147) How is this passage layered as a nod to the reader?
- 'I had to admit, I wanted to taste — just *taste* — what properly being in Alan's Battalion was like.' (p 208) Alex spends most of the book being ignored by Alan at best and mocked by him at worst. Why does the prospect of being part of the 'in' crowd lure him in? Alan has created a false economy with his clique, but Alex still buys into it. Do you judge him harshly during this chapter? Why/why not?
- Suicide rates are relatively lower amongst teenagers and young adults than in higher age groups, but 75% of all suicides are male. What drives David to take on the Icarus project? How is his invisibility both a blessing and a curse? How might his personal circumstances (eg his gender, his lack of friends, lack of motivation in school, isolation, absent father) have converged to make him decide that the only option was to end his life? Why do you think he decides to create a spectacle of his suicide with the Icarus project?
- 'When people leave, they don't *just* leave, they leave problems to be got round.' (p 172) Alex observes this in relation to David's father, but how can it be applied to other absences in **The Icarus Show**? Consider, for example, the flow-on effects of Don's death, or what might have happened if David had successfully leapt to his death.
- Discuss the way the text in Chapter 27 is laid out on the page and how it brings together the

Icarus myth and the novel's narrative.

- Read pp 202-203, where David starts cleaning out the shed. What do you think provokes this frenzy in him?
- Read **The Railway Children** by Edith Nesbit, paying particular attention to the final scene. What is the power of shuttering the narrative against the reader's gaze? To what effect does Sally Christie use this technique in **The Icarus Show**? Is Chapter 29 a fitting epilogue to the novel? Why/why not?
- As a class, play a few rounds of Just a Minute, following the rules outlines on pp 35-36.



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