



TEACHERS NOTES

You can't bury the truth forever.

**DREAMLAND
BURNING**

A NOVEL

JENNIFER LATHAM

DREAMLAND BURNING

BY JENNIFER LATHAM

TEACHERS' NOTES BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

'It was probably quieter a hundred years ago, but that doesn't necessarily mean better. I understand now that history only moves forward in a straight line when we learn from it. Otherwise it loops past the same mistakes over and over again.' (p 4)

'The dead always have stories to tell. They just need the living to listen.' (p 4)

Seventeen-year-old Rowan Chase discovers a skeleton on her family's property which leads her to discover a century-old murder and to painful discoveries about the past, the present and herself. Her friend James Galvez is her 'soulmate', her mother Isis is an attorney descended from a black maid, her dad Tim's family have been wealthy oilmen and landholders in Maple Ridge for generations, and Rowan sometimes feels conflicted by her mixed heritage.

Nearly a century earlier, seventeen-year-old William Tillman and his friend Cletus Hayes are in a speakeasy called the Two-Knock when Adeline Dobbs, the girl William is 'sweet on', arrives and is joined by a handsome Negro, Clarence Banks. Will's jealousy rises, fuelled by alcohol and prejudice: 'I wanted him dead.' (p 12) He throws a punch from which Banks defends himself, and Will falls and hurts his wrist. His friend Clete fetches the police who do nothing except to take another bribe from the speakeasy owner who happens to be black, but they have unleashed a terrible lie with dreadful consequences.

Links between past and present begin to emerge in these two parallel stories. Will's dad runs the Victoria Vitrola Shop; Rowan's great-uncle Chotch had a Vitrola which is still in the former servants' quarters where the body was discovered; a gun marked Maybelle is found with the body and Vernon Fish's gun was the same; an invoice signed William Tillman for Joseph Goodhope is discovered by Rowan; the peach pie at Arvin's funeral leads Rowan to Ruby Goodhope's daughter Opal Johnson. Each parallel incident cements the idea that history is never dead.

This is a novel about racism and prejudice. At its core is the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 in which many African-Americans were killed, but it's also about the racism shown to Native Americans, to Catholics and Jews, and to Hispanic immigrants who can't get work permits or papers, are forced to

work illegally and are often treated poorly by employers in the present day. It's about racism then and now. As James tells Rowan:

'The crime's different but the problem's the same. It's about power and prejudice and shit rooted so deep that people don't see it anymore. You know we're six times as likely to go to jail as white people, right?' (p 72)

This is a significant cross-genre work written in two riveting alternating first person voices which bring past and present into a collision of fact and fiction which is both extremely moving, and powerfully thought-provoking.

BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the novel, read about Jennifer Latham in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

THEMES AND CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society & History, Science and English Language & Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT (SOSE)

- **RACISM & AFRICAN-AMERICANS**

‘ “Black men and women are dying today for the same reasons they did in 1921. And we have to call that out, Rowan. Every single time.” ’ (p 191)

ACTIVITY: Research the questions raised in this book using references in the Bibliography and in the Author’s Note (pp 367–371).

DISCUSSION POINT: Tulsa, Oklahoma – both past and present – is a place where racism is far from dead. In the opening scenes the sound of a police siren frightens a black girl like Rowan:

‘Then again, it wasn’t like there was a shortage of news stories about bad cops assuming the worst when it came to brown-skinned kids like me.’ (p 18)

Later Officer Cooper is clearly taken aback to have been called to a wealthy home by Isis Chase, a black American and her daughter. Rowan fails to stop to speak to Arvin when she drives through an unfamiliar black part of town, despite the fact that she herself is black. These scenes cement the idea that the Tulsa Riot of 1921 isn’t ancient history at all; that prejudice is alive and well in Tulsa in 2017.

DISCUSSION POINT: Despite the growing affluence of the black population in 1921 Tulsa there were many examples of institutionalised racial prejudice: ‘Of course, Jim Crow laws kept Negroes from shopping in white stores unless they were fetching orders’ (p 46)

OR:

‘But anti-miscegenation laws in Oklahoma made it illegal for blacks to marry whites all the way up to 1967, which meant there were a lot fewer mixed-

race kids in the 1920s than there are now.' (p 186)

Racism not only led to personal abuse but seriously affected the course of people's lives in these and many other ways. Research such laws and whether there are still laws preventing black people's access to the same rights as white people in the US.

DISCUSSION POINT: Will learns from Addie (pp 52–3) that Clarence has been whipped and beaten and may die; this is far from uncommon treatment delivered by white 'lynch mobs' to black men and women, and highlights the state of tension existing in Oklahoma at the time. Vernon Fish's bragging about how he killed three Negroes with his gun, Maybelle, is sickening (pp 148–9) but so audacious that it's clear that this sort of behaviour was tolerated. His words and actions when he and Clete demand to be let in to Stanley Tillman's shop by William are truly frightening and give some insight into just how powerful such lynch mobs could become.

DISCUSSION POINT: Stanley Tillman is invited to join the Ku Klux Klan by Vernon Fish a neighbouring store-owner (p 63) who later unleashes a diatribe of prejudice against Catholics and Jews (pp 64–5). Research the origins of this movement and how it has evolved.

DISCUSSION POINT: After the Race Riot, black people were rounded up and held until a white person 'vouched' for them and then released with a green card pinned to them indicating that one was 'a good Negro' (p 70). This has been compared to the yellow stars which Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany. How must this have felt?

DISCUSSION POINT: William gradually learns to respect black people; his clumsy apology to Addie (pp 77–8) is a far cry from his defence of Ruby (pp 121–6) which is instinctive and honest. What was the turning point in this change of attitude?

DISCUSSION POINT: Addie's guilt over taking Clarence to the speakeasy is another thread in the complex tale being told here. She has grown up with him as the son of their maid in a liberal household where they were playmates and friends, and then realises that her determination to meet him in such a public place has brought about his demise.

DISCUSSION POINT: Words are powerful and can be deceptive. Isis explains to Rowan that the history of the riot has been 'messy':

' "We don't know how many people died, or even if we should call it a race riot. Race is convenient, and it's what most people use. But it isn't right." ' (p 189)

Discuss the use of certain very 'loaded' words in relation to political events eg riot, massacre, terrorism, refugees, insurrection.

DISCUSSION POINT: Major events are often sparked by one human action or event which sets alight simmering tensions, for example: WWI (1914): The shooting of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo; Tulsa Race Riot (1921): Sarah Page's allegation that a black boy named Dick Rowland had assaulted her; WWII: Germany's invasion of Poland (September 1939). Might the Tulsa Riot have been avoided and if so, how?

DISCUSSION POINT: Arvin's death, although not deliberate, comes about as a result of racism. Discuss the behaviour of the pickup driver (pp 213–15) towards Rowan and Arvin in this scene.

DISCUSSION POINT: The dangerous game William is playing in trying to rescue Joseph and Ruby is brought to a head when Klan members take Joseph from William's family car with plans to whip him (p 300) and to involve William in the torture.

Happily, his cunning scheme averts a terrible act of cruelty, but often innocent people like William were forced to commit acts that they hadn't planned to, as a result of the general hysteria at the time.

DISCUSSION POINT: Compare this novel to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), a great American classic novel about racial prejudice and coming of age. Compare it to other novels about racism in both the US and Australia. [See Bibliography for examples.]

- **RACISM & NATIVE AMERICANS**

DISCUSSION POINT: William reveals his mother's Osage history and the laws of ownership (p 35) which meant that the funds gifted to her as

recompense for tribal lands were then denied by a law insisting that she have a 'guardian' in her husband to administer those funds. This is a law which might be researched and discussed.

DISCUSSION POINT: Vernon Fish is rude to Will whom he refers to as 'half-breed' and his prejudiced comments about Mrs Tillman's Osage origins are extremely offensive and yet her husband Stanley makes no response (pp 62–3). Why?

DISCUSSION POINT: When William's mother instructs him to take the truck to bring their housemaid's black family to stay with them it is her Native American heritage speaking. She knows first hand of prejudice and tries to protect those she can from it.

- **HISPANIC IMMIGRATION & IMMIGRANTS**

DISCUSSION POINT: The workers who discovered the body may have been 'undocumented' (p 41) which means they may be illegal immigrants. Such people are often deported or jailed in the US where President Trump has threatened to build a wall between Mexico and the US. Research US immigration laws.

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Illegals' are those without the necessary papers allowing them to work and live in a country. Research international conventions on refugees and what rights people actually have.

- **FAMILY SECRETS, LOSS & GRIEF**

DISCUSSION POINT: The cover includes the words: 'History isn't over yet.' How does this statement relate to the central characters in this novel and to their family's history?

DISCUSSION POINT: Family secrets are often kept because of a vow made to an elder like the one made by Opal Johnson and Joseph Tillman to Ruby Goodhope and William Tillman. Should such secrets be kept or does one have a duty to the living to share such information?

- **CLASS PREJUDICE**

DISCUSSION POINT: Rowan is very aware that she is privileged as the daughter of a man whose family has been wealthy for generations:

'Dad's big and engaging and almost never doubts himself. It's an old-money thing.' (pp 43–4)

'Which, roughly translated, meant that since Dad—the guy whose family name was on a building downtown—had asked them to lay off, they would.

Funny how that worked.' (p 55)

Should wealth entitle one to special privilege from law enforcement officers?

DISCUSSION POINT: What other examples of class prejudice were evident in this novel?

- **COMING OF AGE & RITE OF PASSAGE**

DISCUSSION POINT: Rowan learns to face her own innate prejudices; William overcomes his naïve ignorance to feel remorse for what he did to Clarence and to help Joseph and Ruby; Addie faces the fact that her foolish pride was partly responsible for Clarence's death. Each of these young people grows up in this narrative.

DISCUSSION POINT: Clete is not an admirable character in this novel but do his parting words suggest a change in him?

- **FRIENDSHIP**

DISCUSSION POINT: William is gradually aware that Clete 'wasn't really a friend anymore' (p 183) and that Ruby despite her age and colour, has become one. When William finds Ruby again it is a moment of pure joy (p 321). How difficult would it have been for them to maintain this friendship in the 1920s?

DISCUSSION POINT: Rowan and James have a very close friendship. What are the bonds which hold them together?

- **PURPOSE, MEANING & INTEGRITY IN LIFE**

DISCUSSION POINT: 'And maybe all that pondering I did on the things that had happened since the Two-Knock would have been enough to make a righteous man out of me after all. But in the end, I never did have a chance to find out.' (p 183)
What does this suggest about William's attitudes and values in his later life?

DISCUSSION POINT: What does Rowan discover about her purpose in life, in this novel?

- **HISTORICAL ACCURACY**

DISCUSSION POINT: This is a novel about history and how uncomfortable or contentious events are often erased or concealed by historians and history books. And yet, we now know that on that night white people looted and burned Greenwood, a thriving African-American community; that 35 blocks and nearly 1,300 homes and businesses were destroyed; 8,000 black Tulsans lost everything they owned; and at least 300 people died. Discuss the reasons for the history of the Tulsa Riot being hidden for so long, and research how it has been uncovered in recent years.

DISCUSSION POINT: What other events in history have you read about which are not widely known? Research this topic as well.

SCIENCE

- **FORENSIC SCIENCE**

ACTIVITY: Forensic criminology is a popular university subject, possibly fuelled by shows such as CSI which is mentioned in this novel in reference to the work done by Geneva Roop. Invite students to research some of the scientific techniques used to identify the body here. eg Skull morphology is discussed (pp 184–5).

ACTIVITY: Read about 'cold cases' and how forensic science has assisted police in discovering culprits.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

- **NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE**

DISCUSSION POINT: This narrative is told in two alternating first person, past tense voices of Rowan Chase and William Tillman. They are a century apart and so their voices convey their personalities and the attitudes of their times. In what ways are they different and the same?

- **SYMBOLISM**

DISCUSSION POINT: Dreamland Burning is a symbolic title. The black district of Greenwood in Tulsa did burn in 1921. But this title refers to far more than that. What else might it suggest?

DISCUSSION POINT: What other examples of symbolism did you notice in this novel?

- LITERARY DEVICES**

ACTIVITY: Find quotes as examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify them.

SIMILIE	
IRONY	
EXAGGERATION	
OTHER	

- HUMOUR**

ACTIVITY: Will describes himself scathingly as having, 'all the wisdom and moral rectitude of a turnip' (p 77). Identify other techniques by which humour is provoked. Add quotes to the following table:

SARCASM	'Racists it turned out, were into diversity after all.' (p 304)
IRONY	
EXAGGERATION	
BLACK HUMOUR	
OTHER	

- STRUCTURE**

The structure of this story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:

Beginning: 'In a way everything that came next was my own doing.' (p 93)

Ending: 'The receipt was mine.' (p 118)

Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

b) *Suspense* is the key to any narrative's structure: What contributes to

suspense in this novel?

c) *Using a 'framing story or idea'* makes a narrative more cohesive: There are two parts in the novel. Part One begins with Rowan finding the body (p 7), and Part Two begins with William on the day the Tulsa Riot broke out (1921) which led to the death of the body found in Part One. The body is the link between all the characters and the catalyst for the novel's action.

d) *Mirroring in parallel plots/characters* also cements the structure, themes and plot of a narrative:

Both Will and Rowan confront racism and learn to question their own attitudes as much as those of other people. Discuss the parallels between their two stories.

- **SETTING**

DISCUSSION POINT: Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices. Tulsa is described (pp 87–8) as three cities. OR: When Will visits Addie to confirm that Clarence has died, the room is described via sound and smell: 'The mantel clock...awful of it.' (p 153) This is a beautifully crafted piece which does what a good description should – it evokes a scene and then the emotion it elicits.

ACTIVITY: Choose a passage that describes the locale vividly for you. Discuss the passage with the class.

- **CHARACTERS**

Major Characters: Present: Rowan Chase and her parents Isis and Tim; James Galvez. **Past:** William Tillman and his parents Stanley and Kathryn; Joseph and Ruby Goodhope; Cletus Hayes (Clete).

Minor Characters: Present: Gladys, the housekeeper; Officer Cooper; Truman Atwell; Arvin Brightwater; Dr Marguerite Doniece Woods; Geneva Roop; Opal Johnson; Joseph Tillman; Mama Ray; Detective Bennet; Detective Bland. **Past:** Addie Dobbs; Clarence Baker; Marie Baker, mother of Clarence, and maid to the Dobbs; Vernon Fish; Della Goodhope; Claire; the Tylers; Eunice.

ACTIVITY: Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events that demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

QUESTION: Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

- **GENRE**

DISCUSSION POINT: This is an historical fiction, a mystery/detective story and a rite of passage. Examine the work from the conventions of each of these genres. eg mystery/detective stories contain clues (such as the addresses James discovers for the Tillmans (p 210) and the title deed (pp 254–5)); and suspense (such as the fates of William Tillman and Joseph Goodhope); and twists in the tale (such as Vernon's heritage).

- **WRITING TASKS**

ACTIVITY: Write a diary entry by Ruby Goodhope about meeting William Tillman.

ACTIVITY: Write a letter as if it was written by Joseph to William from university.

- **VISUAL LITERACY**

ACTIVITY: Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. [See **Bibliography.**]

ACTIVITY: Design a new cover for this book.

ACTIVITY: Create a book trailer for this novel. [See **Bibliography.**]

FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. ' "You understand, don't you, Will," he said, "that righteous men take care of their own?" ' (p 76)
2. Read the three Isis Chase quotes (p 84) and discuss.
3. 'And I wondered how it was that a girl most of the world thought so little of could carry herself so proud.' (p 126)
4. 'I was beginning to suspect that being righteous had less to do with whipping straps and beating Negroes than it did with keeping your word.' (p 127)
5. 'I walked out knowing there would never be such a thing as a good good-bye for Addie and me. Not then. Not ever.' (p 158)
6. ' "Well, if 'exciting' means drama and people dying and doctors and nurses rushing around like in the movies, then no, it wasn't. But if it means doing something that seems small now but can make a big difference in the long run, then it was." ' (p 165)
7. 'For the first time in a long time, I thought I knew where I was going. Like maybe there was something useful I could do with my life after all. I liked it. I wanted more.' (p 165)
8. 'And I did what I was told because he was my father. And because it hadn't yet occurred to me that I had any other choice.' (p 227)
9. 'And suddenly I understood why he never kept his meth-wrecked smile hidden. It showed where he'd been. What he'd gone through. It was proof he'd chosen to survive.' (p 236)
10. 'I've tried to put the worst of it behind me. Problem is, history has a way of sneaking back around.' (p 361)

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Write a **review** of this book. To give you some guidance, read other reviews such as:

Dreamland Burning Jennifer Latham [Review] *Kirkus Review*

<<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jennifer-latham/dreamland-burning/>>

2. The **title of this book** refers to the theatre where black people gathered in Tulsa in 1921. What other title might the book have had?

3. **Design a poster** to advertise this book.

4. **Debate any of the topics** covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.

5. Locate and study **poetry about racism in the US** by, for example, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Yusef Komunyakaa, Jacqueline Woodson, and Quraysh Ali Lansana.

CONCLUSION

Dreamland Burning is a brilliant historical novel which unearths a significant historical event in US history which is still not widely documented one hundred years later. It is also a brilliant character novel and a gripping mystery/detective fiction. Latham has written a work which will be read by young adults and adults with equal relish. Jennifer Latham's second novel is quite simply, a literary tour de force.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Latham was an army brat and has a soft spot for kids, books, and poorly behaved dogs. Formerly a school psychologist and a middle school teacher, Jennifer Latham currently lives with her husband and two daughters in Tulsa, Oklahoma. *Scarlett Undercover* was her debut novel, and *Dreamland Burning* is her second.

Read an interview with Jennifer Latham at:

Watts, James D Jr. 'Evocative mystery thriller 'Dreamland Burning' set in 1921 Tulsa, modern day' *Tulsa World* February 22, 2017

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award.