

# Secrets of Eromanga

## Sheryl Gwyther

Ellie regards herself as an amateur palaeontologist. Dinosaurs and fossils fascinate her. When Tom Hart from Dinosaur Club at the Museum invites her to a real fossil dig on a sheep station in outback Queensland she's thrilled. This will be the best holiday ever! What Ellie hasn't bargained on was fourteen year old Peta who is sophisticated, snobbish and only interested in lip gloss. Why can't Tom see how horrible she is? But when Peta and Ellie find themselves in the clutches of fossil thieves they'll need to work together to save themselves, and the future of the fossils.

Intertwined within this story is a tale from ninety-five million years ago, of an ornithopod trying to survive as a plant eater in a land of carnivores. Like Ellie, the ornithopod will need to run for her life.

Sheryl Gwyther's brilliant first novel is entertaining and exciting, while also being educational. Dinosaur fossils have been found in the area around Winton and Lark Quarry, where evidence of a dinosaur stampede really does exist. Sheryl has used meticulous research to ensure the dinosaur descriptions and the information about the fossil digs are as accurate as possible.

This junior fiction novel would be most suitable for readers aged around 8 – 12. *Secrets of Eromanga* involves themes of friendship, trust, moral and ethical issues, and the importance of looking after the environment. The adventure scenes are very exciting, and the ornithopod scenes will lead to class discussion about what the world used to be like millions of years ago. Themes from this book may also relate to History, Geography or SOSE classes on evolution and changes to the earth, as well as Science classes on Geology.

### Writing Style

Why are the chapters featuring the dinosaur italicised?

Is the writing technique different from the chapters set in the present?

### Illustrations

Notice the illustrations starting each dinosaur chapter. How are they different? Why have these different images been used? What impact does this have?

### From the Book

#### Chapter 1

Why does the location of the fossil dig need to be kept secret? (pp 18 – 20)  
*To protect the dinosaur fossils from tourists and fossil collectors.*

Why do you think this is a problem? Why does it need to be protected?

#### New Life

As you read this passage think about:

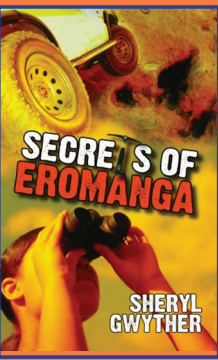
- What type of animal do you think this is?
- What time period is it?
- Is this part of the same storyline as the previous chapter?

#### Chapter 2

What do you think the men are talking about? (p. 30)

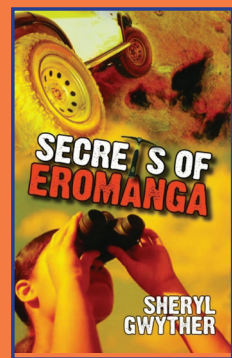
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## SECRETS OF EROMANGA TEACHERS' GUIDE



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What is special about this Cretaceous sauropod? (p. 40)

*It's unique to Australia*

## The Clan

What happens to the colour of the dinosaur's skin as it grows older?

*It changes from grey to green, brown and ochre (p.49)*

Why does the mother need to move her family?

*If they stay in the forest the family will starve (p. 50)*

## Chapter 3

What do the palaeontologists use to dig up the hard ground?

*A front-end loader (pp 58 – 59)*

## Into the Unknown

'But she sensed rather than saw the reason why they were moving as fast as safely possible' (p.70)

What do you think this means? What could she have sensed?

## Chapter 4

What is a stampede?

What is special about Lark Quarry Stampede?

*It is the only place where fossil evidence in the rock tells the story of a mob of frightened, stampeding dinosaurs.*

## The Night Watch

How does the dinosaur sense what is happening on the flatlands?

*The sound of pain coming from the flatlands area, and the scent which indicates an animal had been killed (p.83)*

## Chapter 5

Martin and Ellie 'jacket' the fossil (pp.94-5). Why do you think they need to do this?

## The Theropods Strike

Why do the ornithopods aim to travel with the sauropods?

*They will be protected from the carnivorous theropods*

## Chapter 6

Why was the Conservation Centre built?

*To preserve the stampede footprints against erosion and the impact from animals and humans (p.106)*

'There was no mistaking what creature had made these tracks' (p.108)

From what you've read so far, what sort of creature do you think made these large tracks?

## In the Footsteps of the Giants

Why do you think the dinosaurs had to mark their territory and practice mock territory-defending games? (p. 117)

## Chapter 7

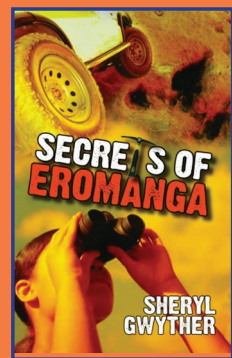
What do you think Peta means by 'Grow up, Ellie'? (pp. 120-1)

Ellie remembers the men from the pub at Winton (p.122). Go back and reread the scene on pages 30-33. Why do you think the men are here?

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## Death of the Matriarch

The matriarch is very old, and has an arthritic shoulder and hip joints (p. 126).

Does this sound similar to anything else you've read about?

Refer to page 93 for Katherine's examination of a bone.

Why is it important for the dinosaurs to leave the river area? (pp 128-129)

## Chapter 8

What do you think the label 'LOSIVES' means? (p.130)

How does Peta act in this chapter? How is this different from the way she has acted previously in this book? What does this tell you about the way Peta is feeling?

## Leader of the Clan

Why do you think a dinosaur herd needs to have a leader? (p.142)

Why do you think the male ornithopods need to fight for the right to mate?

Who were they fighting against? What do they have to prove? (p.142)

## Chapter 9

Refer back to the stories Martin told around the campfire (p 111-113). What relevance do these stories have to the collapse of the side of the hill onto the truck?

## Layers of Time

This chapter gives two reasons why dinosaurs travelled in herds. What are they?

*The theropod relied on his herd for hunting food; the ornithopods needed the protection of the rest of the herd from enemies.*

## Chapter 10

Why do you think the two men turned on their boss?

## The Fossil Triangle

This part of the story is factual, and Ellie's adventures are based around these facts. Do you think it is important for stories to use a real background or facts?

Why are many of Australia's dinosaur fossils found in the Fossil Triangle in outback Queensland?

*Because these animals lived in and around the edges of the Eromanga Sea.*

Try looking at: [www.heritage.gov.au/dinosaur/formation.html](http://www.heritage.gov.au/dinosaur/formation.html)

## Chapter 11

The fossilised femur indicates it was gripped by large teeth. What do we know about the death of the ornithopod?

What have Ellie and Peta recognised about each other? Do you think they can remain friends?

## Research Activities

### The Eromanga Sea

Use the internet to discover where the Eromanga Sea might have been about 95 million years ago. Now draw it on a map of Australia.

Try looking at: [www.qm.qld.gov.au/features/dinosaurs/elliott/geology.asp](http://www.qm.qld.gov.au/features/dinosaurs/elliott/geology.asp)

### Opals

What is an opal? What do they look like? How do opals form? Where can opals be found? What is the difference between an opal and a boulder opal?

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(Note: The Lark Quarry area only had boulder opals – interesting difference, and it’s easy to research this fact).

### **Bones**

As you’re reading make a note of the dinosaur bones and fossils named. Trace or copy one of the dinosaur pictures from the chapter headings, then label the bones mentioned within *Secrets of Eromanga* eg femur and scapula.

### **Lark Quarry Dinosaur Stampede**

This is a real place, which people can visit to observe the dinosaur footprints from the stampede. Find out what you can about this area. What can the footprints tell us?

Try looking at: [www.dinosaurtrackways.com.au](http://www.dinosaurtrackways.com.au)

### **Local History**

Pages 162–164 tell us what happened to the area around the Eromanga Sea, after the ornithopod’s death to present day.

Find out what you can about the history of your local area. What do you think was happening on the land one hundred, one thousand, or many millions of years ago?

### **About the author**

Sheryl Gwyther is an experienced early-childhood teacher, adult literacy teacher and artist. In 2000 she began to write children’s fiction and non-fiction full time. In 2002, she received an Australian Society of Authors’ Mentorship and worked with author Sue Gough on the genesis of *Secrets of Eromanga*, her first novel. She has had several articles published and was also awarded a prize in an Arts Network East Gippsland short-story-writing competition.

Sheryl maintains her contact with young people by working with teenagers at the local high school’s Writers’ Group. She lives in Brisbane with her husband and son.

*Notes written by Anna Dalziel*