

The Dream Walker

THE WEIGHT
OF A SECRET
CAN DRAG
YOU UNDER

VICTORIA
CARLESS

TEACHERS NOTES

THE DREAM WALKER BY VICTORIA CARLESS

TEACHERS NOTES BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

'Last night in the liquid place between awake and asleep, I grasped the person's face with the fingers of my mind. But I could not make out their features. They were so strange to me, almost washed away.' (p 7)

'The creek holds our memories. It is where we go to shed tears and to laugh. To sneak out to smoke or to love. I think the creek keeps our secrets. It is awash with the confidences of the whole town.' (p 146)

Sixteen-year-old Lucy Hart lives with her widowed fisherman dad, Steven, and a dog named Glen, in Diggers Landing, a small Queensland fishing village, dominated by the local meatworks. It's home to fifteen families, a posse of mongrel dogs each named for a Country and Western star, and Parkers Corner Store '(no apostrophe and nowhere near a corner)' (p 9). Steven earns a meagre income catching bait, crabs and fish, but lately the catch has been poor, and his behaviour has become increasingly remote. Lucy is isolated in her grief over the death of her unhappy Italian-born mother Elena, except for the support of her paternal grandparents who live on a local grazing property. She and her best friend Polly Sensu have hatched a plan to escape to the city once they finish Year 12. Her other friend Tom Wearne has been sent by his cane-farming parents to a boarding school after the car accident the previous year that injured him and Lucy.

Convinced that the accident has caused her strange and troubling dreams, Lucy discovers instead that her 'dream walking' is inherited from Elena. Her dreams each contain water and focus on several local people – Mr Sheriff, the bus driver; Mrs Parker and her son killed in Vietnam; Lucy's dog, Glen; Polly and Gavin; Syd Lawler and the alphabet; dying fish and a drowning boy; Elena. Each seems to include her mother, and each suggests that Lucy has to help with something. There are dark secrets in Lucy's family and darker secrets in Diggers Landing. What did her dad have to do with Elena's death, and why are some locals so angry with him?

The ghost nets found by Steven are symbolic of the environmental challenges faced by Diggers, with illegal fishing and the detritus left in the sea by large-scale fishing operations having endangered livelihoods. But they are also symbolic here of the forces that are threatening to engulf Lucy with her loss of a mother, her fragmented home life, her desire to escape the confines of Diggers Landing and her two friends being challenged – Polly by her father's insistence that she leave school and join him working at the meatworks and Tom's injuries having left him unable to excel in sports as he once did, caught in the trap of his father's expectations, and desperately searching for some other path in life.

'The whole of Diggers has a pent-up feel, like something big is coming. But the sky refuses to yield, let out whatever it's holding in.' (p 66) This town is in crisis and Lucy and her father make perfect scapegoats; her dream walking is viewed by people like Gavin Lawler as witchery. 'He blames me for other things he can't understand, the things out of his control. Like the creek drying out. Like the fish not biting. Like the dream walking.' (p 200) This is a novel about loss and grief but it's also a mystery. It is a complicated paean to the joys and trials of regional life. For as much as she thinks she hates it, Diggers Landing is home to Lucy no matter how much she tries to escape it.

BEFORE AND 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 Victoria Carless in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

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

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND HISTORY (SOSE)

- **FAMILY SECRETS, LOSS & GRIEF**

DISCUSSION POINT: The cover includes the words: 'The weight of a secret can drag you under'. How does this statement relate to this novel?

DISCUSSION POINT: Both Lucy and her father suffer grief and struggle to express it. How do both begin to deal with their grief?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lucy's mother obviously suffered from some sort of depression caused by or exacerbated by her estrangement from her culture and the life she lived in Italy which led to her suicide. Is this sort of loss another form of grief?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lucy and her father; Tom and his parents; Steven and his father; Polly and her father – all have disagreements. Are families always so conflicted and complicated?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'He's a fridge box of a man. I wonder if she's ever been afraid of him. I wonder if my mother was, the way I am of my father.' (p 111) Steven has fallen out with his father and left their property. But his influence is difficult to escape: 'My grandfather's land borders this side of the creek, all around. There's no getting away from it.' (p 5) How difficult is it for men like Steven and Tom to escape the traditions of their families and their expectations?

DISCUSSION POINT: Mr Wearne's treatment of Tom (p 153) is shocking and yet his wife seems to accept it. His father's expectation that Tom would work with him on the property is steely and his comments about his injury, cutting. Is his anger just about Tom denying his inheritance or is it driven by something else? Later in the novel Polly suggests that Tom had another secret.

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

DISCUSSION POINT: Lucy, Polly and Tom are at a crucial point in their lives. They are concluding high school and will need to make decisions about their future study or work, where they wish to live, and who they love. What are the turning points in each of their journeys?

DISCUSSION POINT: Young adult novels are often about the sort of rite of passage which Lucy undergoes. Discuss Lucy's 'rite of passage' as it is depicted in this novel.

- **REGIONAL SOCIAL & ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE & SMALL COMMUNITIES**

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Kids drop off because they are needed to help bring in dough, or have a bun in the oven, or their families move on to get work elsewhere. It pays not to get too attached.' (p 20) Lucy and Polly are typical of many teenagers in regional areas who yearn to escape the seeming lack of opportunity in small towns, the prejudices and the lack of power. What are the positives in such a community? What does Lucy like about it?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'It's rumoured that we all came from four original families. It's best not to think about that.' (p 24) Is such in-breeding in small communities necessarily a bad thing?

DISCUSSION POINT: Read the passage about the paint manufacturer offering aid to Diggers Landing after the flood: 'What happened ... "our treat".' (p 38) How much are regional areas duped or patronised by those in power?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Everyone was on board with new technology ... or whatever.' (p 60) Australian media often reports the 'black holes' suffered by those in regional areas. What should governments be doing to assist those disadvantaged in this way?

DISCUSSION POINT: Poverty and lack of viable work is one of the issues confronted in this small community. Other social problems suffered by residents of Diggers Landing are violence (Mr Sensu and Mr Wearne), alcoholism (Syd Lawler), child neglect (Sadie Lawler) and bullying (Gavin Lawler). Discuss any one of these problems in relation to characters in this novel.

- **SPIRITUAL PURPOSE & MEANING OF LIFE**

DISCUSSION POINT: In this novel each of the characters is searching for some meaning in their lives.

DISCUSSION POINT: 'They want me to speak in tongues, their language made of mutterings and "yes Lords", all in private commune with God. Well, private in public.' (p 30) Lucy's grandmother's faith is her rock but Lucy finds no comfort there. Why?

DISCUSSION POINT: Tom believes the 'wild man' may offer him some inspiration for his future. Presumably his links with Indigenous culture give Tom the idea that he leads an 'authentic' life, which he wishes to emulate. Does Tom really find any answers?

DISCUSSION POINT: Lucy is fascinated by Polly's family's traditional Torres Strait Islander culture. The Sensus eat turtle, dugong and pipis they collect on the beach, and make dishes such as sop sop in banana leaf. Her mother tells traditional stories such as the Tagai story of stars (p 54) and weaves objects out of leaves. Polly's family believe in Puripuri black magic (although Polly's spell has gone seriously wrong (pp 70–71)). Lucy gains comfort from these traditions and they represent real meaning in Polly's life, particularly after she is forced to work at the meatworks by her father. She and her mother resolve to create artworks out of ghost nets by the end of the novel, which is symbolic of this grasp for meaning.

SCIENCE

- **FISHING, MARINE LIFE & GHOST NETS**

[See Symbolism below under English Language & Literacy below.]

ACTIVITY: Many fishing areas have been depleted by over-fishing and by environmental hazards, just as Diggers Landing is. Research the state of fishing off the Queensland coast and how governments are tackling or contributing to the issue.

ACTIVITY: Research the environmental problems caused by ghost nets. [See Bibliography.]

ACTIVITY: Conduct an excursion to a local beach or creek and discover and collect detritus which is washed up there.

ACTIVITY: Watch some videos about how ghost nets are being converted into artworks and sculptures by Torres Strait artists as a statement about this issue. [See Bibliography.] Then engage students in a similar activity in which they use found objects such as net, rope and shells to create sculptures.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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

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

DISCUSSION POINT: Lucy tells the story in first person, present tense with some explanatory flashbacks to events in the past, written in past tense. How would this novel have worked had it been written in third person?

ACTIVITY: Re-write a section of this narrative in third person and observe the differences.

- **SYMBOLISM**

DISCUSSION POINT: Water, fish and ghost nets are all richly symbolic in this text. Lucy's dreams inevitably feature these motifs or tropes and all are symbolic of drowning or being overwhelmed or in need of saving or assistance. The boarding up of the Harts' house wrapped in nets (pp 159–160) is another symbolic moment. Fish and water also relate to Biblical concepts. eg Christ was a fisher of men and their saviour, and in her dreams Lucy is a saviour as well. Polly tells Lucy that Tom looked at her, 'Like you'd be the one to save him.' (p 221) The symbolism is referred to constantly; for example, when Lucy realises that she has misinterpreted one dream: 'And it hits me then that it is not a boy at all, but the man who is drowning.' (p 245) Lucy later literally saves her father when he nearly drowns in his boat. There is also a sense of redemption or resurrection by the end of the novel – with Polly and her mum making a cross for Glen's grave, and other things to sell made out of parts of ghost net (p 257), and with Lucy choosing to stick around to help her dad: 'When he gets going again, we can see about recovering more ghost net, help with the problem. Maybe get a government contract.' (p 262) Discuss this symbolism and choose key passages to illustrate your discussion.

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

- **LITERARY DEVICES**

Activity: Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

SIMILE	'screeching like drunk lorikeets' (p 19) 'like some kind of geriatric coven' (p 30)
METAPHOR	'Polly is a ship in my night' (p 173) 'She's a rogue oyster clinging to us like we're the ideal host rock' (p 188)
PERSONIFICATION	'to watch the water eat the day' (p 23) 'as though they don't want to get their skirts wet' (p 25)
OTHER	

- **HUMOUR**

ACTIVITY: The novel is littered with wry humour and sarcasm. eg. 'A lot of people listen through their mouths around here.' (p 9) or the description of the annual Fish Ball (p 56). Identify incidents you found humorous.

ACTIVITY: Identify techniques by which humour is provoked. Add quotes to the following table:

SARCASM	'a whole wave would convey too much enthusiasm, apparently' (p 4) 'No one dresses like that around Diggers. You're lucky if they're wearing pants on a Sunday.' (p 32)
IRONY	
EXAGGERATION	
BLACK HUMOUR	
OTHER	

• STRUCTURE

The structure of the 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: Ch 1, p 1: 'People around here say my father killed my mum.'

Ending: Ch 18, p 200 'All I know is I can't stop it. I don't know how.'

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

b) *Suspense* is the key to any narrative's structure. Intriguing references appear early in the novel, for example the opening lines about Lucy's dad having killed his mum; reference to her grandfather's land (p 5); the shouting at Polly's house (p 12); the fight between Mr Hart and Mr Lawler (p 17); the car accident (p 5); mum arriving back with wet hair caked with mud (p 24); Tom having left school after the accident (p 21). How else is suspense created in this text?

c) *Using a 'framing story or idea'* makes a narrative more cohesive. 'Dream walking' is the predominant framing idea here; each dream adds to Lucy's understanding of the people in her community and of her family, and these dreams gradually build towards a climax in the action in which Lucy saves her father. Trace how this framing idea works to create tension and impetus in this novel.

d) *Mirroring in parallel plots/characters* also cements the structure, themes and plot of a narrative. Mrs Parker and Mr Sheriff lock Lucy up in order to save her from the angry mob (p 228) which mirrors what she's heard of her father locking her mother up. When Syd, Sadie and Lucy head out in the tinnie to save her dad it's exactly the time and weather recorded in the tide book by her mother (p 250). What other examples of mirroring in plot or characters did you notice?

• SETTING

DISCUSSION POINT: Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices. Read: 'Out on the cut-glass creek ... the new day.' (pp 1–2) Discuss how the passage works and what devices are employed in it.

DISCUSSION POINT: Read the beautifully lyrical description of fish dying and becoming souls: 'Eyes open ... in dreams.' (p 157). Discuss how the passage works and what devices are employed in it.

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



- **CHARACTERS**

MAJOR CHARACTERS:

Lucy Hart, a sixteen-year-old in her final year at high school; Steven Hart, her father, a widowed fisherman estranged from his father; Elena Hart, who although dead, is still a major character in this novel. 'Looking back, my mother's taste for luxuries seemed to grow rather than diminish, the more years she spent at Diggers. As though despite us all swimming in the same stream, so to speak, she wished to set us apart as an exotic species.' (p 80); Polly Sensu, Lucy's best friend; Tom Wearne, a troubled son of a wealthy cane farming family, whom Lucy loves; Vi and Harry Hart, Lucy's paternal grandparents.

MINOR CHARACTERS:

Sid Lawler, a drunken, out-of-work fisherman, who lives in a caravan; **Gavin Lawler**, Syd's bullying eldest child; **Sadie Lawler**, the youngest of the Lawler children, who is befriended by Lucy; **Talia Lawler**, the middle child, who plays a smaller part than her siblings; **Mrs Parker**, of Parkers Corner Store; **Mr Sheriff**, the bus driver; **Mr and Mrs Sensu**; **Mrs Phillips**, the teacher; **Shirl Lawler**, ex-wife of Syd and barmaid at The Club; **Mr and Mrs Wearne**, Tom's parents.

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?

- **WRITING TASKS**

ACTIVITY: Write an acrostic poem using the letters in 'Dream Walker'.

ACTIVITY: Write a diary entry by Sadie Lawler about her time with the Harts.

ACTIVITY: Read Tom's letter to Lucy at the end of the narrative (pp 259–60). Then write a letter as if it was written by Elena to her daughter Lucy before she died.

- **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. 'I think they figure as long as we Diggers kids can use a fish measure so we don't get booked by the Fisheries Inspectors and count in units respectably, like with pots at The Club, we should be well equipped for life.' (p 20)
2. 'Last year in science we learned about gene pools. I've come to conclude that ours is pretty murky.' (p 24)
3. 'At the end, Mum found it hard to breathe here, too. She would wake in the night and I'd hear her stirring in their room, throwing windows open, as though the thick air was suffocating her, making her gasp like a fish.' (p 95)
4. 'Like I'm under water. But I can breathe in there, you know? I can go anywhere. And I know stuff. Know more. Everything's brighter, warmer, smells better.' (p 107)
5. ' "Can't be living both ways, brother," Polly adds.' (p 117)
6. ' "Know everything," he responds. "When we're born at least. It's all swirling around in there, you know? But then life, learning things, like how to walk and talk properly, the way people expect you to, gets in the way." ' (p 123)
7. 'What is it we've done? Why does someone appear to hate my father?' (p 166)
8. 'When someone you love dies you learn how much you don't know about them.' (p 182)
9. ' "Sad in the blood, that one." ' (p 209) ' "There was so much going on with him," she says, sounding sad. "So much under the surface. Like them bream hiding under the snags in the creek, you know." ' (p 220)
10. 'And I am learning that feeling things is one of the most difficult things of all.' (p 244)

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Compare this novel to other young adult novels which deal with regional towns and their intrigues. [See Bibliography.]
2. Design a poster to advertise this book.
3. The title of this book refers to Lucy's dream walking, which is central to its themes. What other title might the book have had?
4. Debate any of the topics covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.

5. Locate and study poetry which employs water as metaphor or symbol.

eg 'Not Waving but Drowning' by Stevie Smith

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/core-poems/detail/46479>>

'The Wide Ocean' by Pablo Neruda <<https://www.poemhunter.com/poems/ocean/>>

CONCLUSION

This is a stunning debut novel – haunting and lyrical, it canvasses emotional and social questions with grace, intelligence and empathy. It is a moving and eloquent account of how grief can derail a family and of how dreams can offer insights into our most secret thoughts and feelings. It will engage readers from first to last with its immense narrative power and insight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Carless grew up in a small town on the North Queensland coast, and spent weekends on the water in a tinny with her family. She is a published playwright, having written and produced seven plays since 2006. Her Queensland Theatre Company award-winning script, *The Rainbow Dark*, was published in the *Staging Asylum* collection by Currency Press in 2013. She holds a PhD in creative writing and regularly contributes contemporary performance reviews to *Real Time* magazine. She is a graduate of the 2015 QWC/Hachette Manuscript Development Program. *The Dream Walker* is her first novel.

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'Hammond Island Interviews' Indigenous Knowledge Centres SLQ <<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=the+greedy+net+vimeo&&view=detail&mid=3F999138B410473744363F999138B41047374436&FORM=VRDGAR>>

'Making a Ghost-net dinghy in the Torres Strait Islands' National Museum Australia <http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/encounters/encounters_films/videos/making_a_ghost-net_dinghy_in_the_torres_strait_islands>

'Stories Under Tagai' Indigenous Knowledge Centres SLQ <<http://ikc.org.au/stories-under-tagai/>>

'The Greedy Net' <<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=the+greedy+net+vimeo&&view=detail&mid=3F999138B410473744363F999138B41047374436&FORM=VRDGAR>>

'The Unseen Slaughter Under the Sea' GhostNets/Take Part <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkcCpCuT2GY>>

'The Young Man and the Ghost Net: Moa island Torres Strait' Ghost Nest Australia <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnN3t-5nf3g>>

Other Non-Fiction and Website Teaching Resources:

'Book Trailers' Insideadog <<http://www.insideadog.com.au/teachers/book-trailers>>

'Book Trailers for Readers' by Michelle Harclerode <<http://www.booktrailersforreaders>>

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'The Wide Ocean' by Pablo Neruda

<<https://www.poemhunter.com/poems/ocean/>>

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