



# A Constant Hum

## ALICE BISHOP

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Fiction

**RECOMMENDED YEAR LEVELS: Years 9 to 12**

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### CURRICULUM GUIDE

*The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.*

*The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.*

### SYNOPSIS

Set in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, *A Constant Hum* is a series of vignettes focusing on a community irrevocably changed by disaster.

Although each story sits independently, with no repeating characters, there are echoes of shared experience, not just in the fire itself, but in everyday moments—the hopes of a mother for her child; the microscopic breakdowns in relationships; the desperation to be seen and recognised. It is a complex chorus of voices, held together by the constant presence of the fire, which is felt across multiple layers of every story.

*A Constant Hum* is not a singular narrative with a neat resolution, but neither is a bushfire. From the first story to the last, there is a feeling of isolation that haunts the narratives, as the characters excavate their individual experiences for the precious, painful, glistening memories they're left with.

Despite this, the book feels powerfully unifying, as the layered chorus evokes a sense of shared hope.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Bishop grew up in Christmas Hills, Victoria. Her writing has been published by *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Australian Book Review*, *Lip Magazine* and the Wheeler Centre. Her debut book, a short-story collection, is *A Constant Hum*.

### TEACHERS PRAISE A CONSTANT HUM

'It's not often that students are able to engage so deeply and personally with the text that are set for them. *A Constant Hum* has provided students with the opportunity to examine writing style and voice, while exploring the experiences of people from their context. The short story format allows students to access the text at a number of levels, meaning students who struggle are able to participate alongside students who can see the nuance and depth in the stories.'

**Jess Timmers, Head of English, Lilydale High**

'I have used *A Constant Hum* in my classes as a powerful resource for students to gain a better understanding of rich characterisation, to integrate sensory description in their writing, to draw close attention to detail in life, and in the lives, around them, and to always reflect on the messages about fragility and strength; all our possibilities alone and in community with one another.'

**Moya Richardson, Teacher, Viewbank High School**

'Bishop's stories provide a wealth of opportunities for students to approach an emotionally and historically rich event from a multiplicity of perspectives. The varied lengths of the stories and the range of stylistic approaches on offer provide access points for students with a range of literacy needs. Likewise, their complex subtexts permit students to extend on their interpretive skills while also facilitating engagement with an increasingly relevant social and political issue.'

**Sean Watson, Teacher of English, Liberal Arts Coordinator**



## BEFORE READING

1. *A Constant Hum* tells the story of the Black Saturday fires, although these are certainly not the only memories readers will have of bushfires in Australia. Invite your class to share their experiences of bushfires. Do readers remember where they were when the Black Saturday fires broke out? What are their family's memories of where they were? Use the [2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report](#) to fill in any gaps in understanding around the fires.
2. A vignette is 'a small impressionistic scene, an illustration, a descriptive passage, a short essay, a fiction or nonfiction work focusing on one particular moment; or giving an impression about an idea, character, setting, mood, aspect, or object.' Discuss how and why vignettes might be used to tell a story such as this. What kinds of stories do you expect to find in the book?
3. What do you think the 'constant hum' of the title refers to? Make a list of ideas and add to it as you read the book. How do each of the characters connect to this ongoing thread of the story?

## WHILE READING

1. The second story in the book, 'Just a Spark', captures a mother's grief, and her complicated responses to the man (Jake Holden) responsible for the fire that killed her family. How does this piece set up your expectations for the book overall? What kind of resolution does this piece provide?
2. Fire is the one constant in the collection, which weaves together the stories of multiple characters. How is fire first introduced? How does it appear in each story? How does Alice Bishop embed it into the pieces where it is not physically present?
3. 'List three things you would save from your burning house...' (p. 61) instructs Ms Belay in the story 'Soft News'. If you had time to save three things from a bushfire, what would they be? Why does this question make the narrator of the story so angry? How do you think the narrators of some of the other pieces in the book might respond?
4. Who do people in the stories blame for the fire? How does blame manifest in each of the stories, and cause tension between the characters? How do people respond differently to the fire and to the person who started it?
5. Max tells Rose in 'Porch Light' that 'there's nothing left for you there' (p. 40), but returning to the bush is obviously important to her. Why do you think people feel this way? Why might some find it hard to leave, just as others find it impossible to go back? Write a letter from Max to Rose (or vice versa) trying to make the other understand their position.
6. Most of the pieces in the book are told from the perspective of women. Why do you think this is?

How would the stories differ if this were not the case?

7. The *Sydney Morning Herald* praises *A Constant Hum* for having 'none of the sensationalism of tabloid journalism.' Why might sensationalism be a poor way to tell a story such as this? What damage might that kind of storytelling do? How does Bishop manage to avoid this, and how would you describe her storytelling style?

## AFTER READING

### CHARACTER

1. Think of the fire itself as a character. How present is it in the book? Is it separate to the person who started the fire? What do we expect of a character (think about things like motivations, feelings and emotions)? Does a character need to be human? Discuss the ways in which the fire is like and unlike a character.
2. 'Not everyone had known each other before the fire, but they all felt they had something in common now—the day in all its blues, at least; burning eucalypt gas and, especially, the soft grey-white of the morning after's ash' (p. 36). There is a huge spread of 'types' of characters in the book—they are different ages, classes and cultural backgrounds — all levelled by the fire. How might community be forged in this kind of space? Which characters seem alike to you and why? What details does the author include to create characters that are recognisable but not stereotypes?
3. Return to one of the characters that resonated with you in the book. Why do you feel drawn to them? What do you think they might have been like before the fire? Write a scene imagining their life in the days before the fire hit.

### STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. How would you describe the book to someone who hasn't read it? What does the book achieve by collecting multiple scenes and stories rather than just following one or two? What does it lose?
2. Not all of the pieces have named narrators. Some, like 'Before the Wind Changed' (p. 22) are anonymous. Does it matter? Choose one of these anonymous stories and see if you can work out who the subject of the piece is. What do you learn about the narrator through the piece? Do you feel as if you know them, even though you don't know their name?
3. The stories are collected under three subheadings: Prevailing, Southerly and Northerly. Why do you think this is? Can you identify any particular themes or perspectives that specifically connect the stories in these groups?



## THEMES

## Australian bush

1. The setting of the novel evokes an at times overwhelming sense of despair and deep loss, but there is also great freedom and joy. As Hazel's dad says in the book's titular story, 'the real everything's out here' (p. 28). Is he right? What does he mean by this? Where do you see echoes of this sentiment in some of the other pieces?
2. Read the quote at the beginning of the book. Are we 'repeating the mistakes of the past'? How does storytelling help us remember our past, and connect with the stories of the land?
3. Alice Bishop uses colour to capture and evoke the setting of the bush, even when she isn't referring to it directly. Find examples of these indirect references to the colours of the bush and of bushfire. How is colour also used to set the emotional tone of each story?

## Grief and loss

1. Each of the characters in the book experiences their grief differently—it is one of the things which isolates them. How do some of the characters describe their grief? How does it change the way they view themselves?
2. Alice Bishop captures the microscopic, often mundane moments of grief. Theo, in 'Clearing', asks: 'how can I stop remembering the little things?' (p. 67) What other tiny moments can you find where grief is captured through some mundane object or routine? Does this reflect your own experience of grief if you've experienced it? How does it deepen our understanding of the characters and their stories beyond the general?

## Isolation

1. Although the book spans a huge number of individual stories, there is a sense of isolation and loneliness. What is it that makes the characters feel as if they are alone? How does the author use the setting to reinforce this feeling?
2. In some cases, isolation becomes the shared experience that leads to solidarity. In 'Highway Lines', Sylvie feels disconnected from her life and her partner. When she picks up a hitchhiker, the woman tells her that 'sometimes it's important to see things go bad' (p. 175). How does this shared connection unite the two women? What do you think might become of Sylvie following this encounter? What other similar moments can you find in the book?
3. The isolation in the book reinforces (and is reinforced by) the barren landscape. It is defined as much by what is missing as by what is present. In 'Local Hero', Eman 'misses the usual comforting sounds of dusk' (p. 122). How might these missing sounds and things increase feelings of loneliness? Are there any signs of life returning?

## RESPONDING

1. One of the things the book highlights is how difficult it is to be prepared for something as devastating as a bushfire. In 'Local Hero', a DHS worker admonishes Eman for running to the bath — 'Could've easily boiled up, bud' (p. 120). As a group, share your thoughts about what to do in a fire. Make a classroom resource that you can share with people in your local area about what to do and how to respond to a fire.
2. In an interview with Ellen Cregan for *Kill Your Darlings*, Alice Bishop says, 'as a white person I don't have the same level of connection as Indigenous people have to the land, of having tens of thousands of years of, of history, but I still...it's not comparable, but I still feel like I wanted to write about seeing the landscape go, and, and that loss I felt seeing the bush be reduced to ash so suddenly.'

Indigenous connection to Country is widely written about, with notable writers such as Claire G. Coleman, Ellen van Neervan, Bruce Pascoe, Tony Birch, Alison Whittaker, Evelyn Araluen and Nayuka Gorrie (among others) offering extraordinary fiction and non-fiction narratives of place. Choose one of these writers and explore some of their writing. How do they write about place and land that is unique? What connection do they or their characters have to Country in the book, essay, poem or story? Make a list of notable elements of their writing, and use this to inform a short piece of your own (it might be fiction, non-fiction or poetry) that explores your connection to place and the land you live on.

3. At the end of the book, Alice Bishop credits the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report as a source of research for the stories in the book. How else might you research the bushfires as a writer? Interviewing those around you about their memories might be a good place to start. In class, make a list of questions that you might ask (remembering that it might be a difficult topic for some people to remember or talk about). Choose someone to interview (ask them if they're happy to be interviewed and recorded first!). Sit down and record your interview with this person. Make sure you give them the chance to respond, even if they answer your questions in unexpected ways. Ask thoughtful follow-up questions about their responses. Bring your interviews to class and, using editing software such as GarageBand, compile your interviews into a series of podcast episodes to share with your school community. A series of podcasts isn't unlike a collection of vignettes, as found in the book. Discuss the benefits of telling a story in each of these forms, and what might be gained or lost in each.