



Growing Up in Flames

ZACH JONES

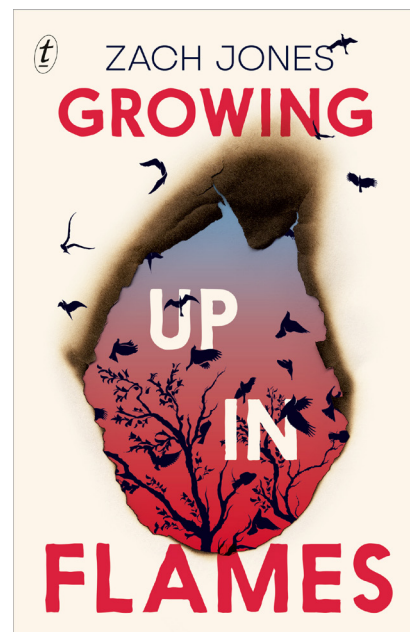
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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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

Fire took Kenna's mum. Now it's followed her to Kimba, the town her mum grew up in. An act of arson sets Kenna on a course to collide with secrets buried long ago. There's a reason her mother never came back to Kimba. Will uncovering her mum's secrets help Kenna deal with her own?

Ava is the best thing in James' life. She's too good for him, he knows that. She's like one of the birds he catches, beautiful and graceful and only with him because she's caged. What happens when you hold too tight?

For Noah, life is about getting by. To everyone in Kimba, he's a lowlife—the deadbeat son of an absent father and a crazy mother. All Noah has is The Plan. If he can stick to it, he can get out. It starts with arson and sets off a series of events that will put everything he's worked for on the line. How much will he risk to help someone else who needs saving?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zach Jones has been an acrobat and a psychologist, and has taught Shakespeare in prisons, but his wife Aneeka is the best thing that ever happened to him. He spends his time running around after their six children and making up stories in his head. He completed his doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and now lives on the North Coast of NSW. This is his first novel.

BEFORE READING

1. Fire is a significant theme of *Growing Up in Flames*, and connects to significant experiences for a large number of Australians. Research the 2019-2020 'Black Summer' bushfires. Discuss as a class your experiences of these fires. Did you experience these as news clips, as stories from friends, or were you personally impacted?
2. The experiences that we have impact us in profound ways, both positively and negatively. Reflect on the experiences that are significant for you. Consider: injuries, relationships, travel etc. How have these experiences changed you?
3. Research the term 'trauma'. What kinds of experiences might be traumatic for people? In what ways are people impacted by trauma?

WHILE READING

1. Why do you think Kenna reacts to Noah so drastically in the first chapter? What is making her so angry?
2. What do the text messages between Kenna and her mother (pp. 18-21) reveal about their relationship? If someone was reading your recent messages with your parents/carers, what would they assume about your relationship?



3. 'They've been stalking me online again too. And on the phone. I've been thinking about time—how do we know it's a Wednesday, really? Are we just trusting that someone kept count since the first day?' (p. 25). What does Jeannie's dialogue reveal about her character?
4. 'She starts to say something but I kiss her mouth again and pull her under me. After a few moments, she stops resisting. She's ready.' (p. 49). How do you feel about this scene? What questions does it raise about consent?
5. 'Why did she leave? She's not here to ask' (p. 63). Kenna, throughout the novel, comes to realise that she knows very little about her mum's teenage years. How much do you know about your parents/carers as children? What questions could you ask them to find out more?
6. 'Laugh, kookaburra, laugh' (p. 75). What is the significance of this reference to the song 'Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree' given the events Noah has just experienced?
7. What is the significance of the tale about the fallen star that Kenna tells to Iggy (pp. 248-250)? How does the development of this tale throughout the novel reflect Kenna's growing understanding of her mum's past?
8. Consider the life Noah might be living 6 months after the events of the novel. Write a short story exploring his new life. Has he resolved his demons, or are they still following him?

AFTER READING

CHARACTERS

1. Compare the characters of Noah and James. In what ways are they similar? How do their choices make them different from each other?
2. Why do you think the writer develops the relationship between James and birds? What does this say about James' character?
3. How does Kenna draw meaning from what she learns about Ava's life and experiences in Kimba?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Epistolary Devices

Epistolary fiction, in its inception, consisted of novels written in the form of letters. This could take the form of an exchange between two or more correspondents, a single letter, or letters that remain unsent. Novels not comprised solely of letters may be considered epistolary, but the plot must be advanced by the letters. The genre, whilst the epistolary devices included are fictional, maintains a 'documentary feel' that increases verisimilitude (the sense of being real). Diary entries, private correspondence and media extracts reflect something of the fullness of everyday life and create a

multiplicity of points of view and a polyphony of voices in the text.

1. What epistolary devices are used in *Growing Up in Flames*?
2. How do these devices give us access to voices and perspectives other than the three narrators?
3. How does the Instagram comment thread on pages 15 and 16 explore public perception of Noah? Is this realistic?

Bildungsroman

Young adult novels are used by readers as a tool for vicariously experiencing unknown situations and scenarios, working through complex issues in a fictional context to arrive at beliefs about themselves and their world. A Bildungsroman is a novel dealing with the formative years of a young protagonist's life. It is a 'coming of age' story. *Growing Up in Flames* is written as a contemporary Bildungsroman, with a journey of identity formation undertaken by each of the three protagonists. The character of James explores what may happen when the task of identity construction is not completed. For this character, the past is never fully dealt with, and the turbulence and amorality of the Bildungsroman's 'formative journey' continues into adulthood, with disastrous consequences.

1. Kenna and Noah are both working to overcome a particular problem and construct an identity for themselves. Who are they trying to grow into?
2. How are Noah and Kenna different from James in the way they identify what has influenced them and how they make decisions as a result? What drives James to act the way that he does?
3. Write a creative response exploring what James' life might have looked like if he had made healthier decisions about the person he wanted to become.

Trauma Fiction

Trauma fiction has evolved as a genre over centuries, mirroring developments in the psychological and social understanding of the effect of traumatic experiences upon individuals. The genre not only thematically addresses the issue of trauma, but also textually 'performs' its psychological impact through devices such as fragmentation, memory impairment, unreliable narration, isolation and violence.

1. How are intrusive memories 'performed' through Noah's narration?
2. How does Kenna experience memory impairment? If you could not trust your memories, how would this impact your sense of self?
3. How is James' aggression an expression of the trauma he has experienced? To what extent is he responsible for his actions?

Character Names

1. Jeannie states on page 56; 'I'm a firm believer in the meaning of names—I think they make a person who



they are.' What does her own name mean, and what does the fact that she thinks another name suits her suggest about her character?

2. The name Kenna means 'born from fire', whereas 'Noah' is biblically associated with the Great Flood. What do these name meanings suggest about the relationship between these characters?
3. The name Ava means 'bird' in Latin, whereas the name Faulkner stems from 'falconer' (a person who trains and commands birds). How do these names parallel these characters' journeys?

THEMES

Fire

An extended metaphor of fire is woven throughout the text, representing the cyclical, contagious and destructive nature of trauma. The narrative is set against a background of 'cane-fires', the burning of sugarcane fields as a part of the harvesting process. Literal fires occur repeatedly in the story as aspects of the characters' traumas and their actions, connecting the events of the artefact clearly to the symbolism. Like fire, trauma is often informed by predisposition – genetic, socio-economic or cultural. These factors function like dry wood, rendering individuals more susceptible to experiencing trauma. Also, like fire, trauma can spread through contact, with secondary traumatisation common amongst families and peer groups. This conceptualisation also recognises the way trauma consumes people like tinder, only stopping when it is extinguished, or when there is nothing left to burn.

1. Research the role of fire as a tool in Indigenous Australian landcare practices. Is fire represented as a tool in *Growing Up in Flames*, or is it destructive and dangerous? Provide examples to support your thoughts.
2. Research images of bush regrowth after a bushfire. Notice how new growth pushes through charred bark. How do Noah and Kenna's final chapters in the book reflect this idea?
3. Fire holds a special significance for Noah. Why do you think he chooses to use fire to deal with James on page 254?

Rural Australia

The fictional rural setting of Kimba was heavily based upon the geography and landscape of the Northern Rivers region of NSW. However, at times convenient locations and events were contrived in order to facilitate a compression of time and place in the narrative. Sites from a number of small rural towns were brought together to create the setting in which the narrative unfolds, allowing for characters to easily travel between locations that highlighted rural geography – cane fields, rivers and abandoned towns. This compression is one of the reasons the setting was fictionalised, avoiding the need to authentically reflect the geography of a single location.

A key component of Kimba, separate to the geography, is the intergenerational history of the town. This social intimacy is a key aspect of the novel, informing Kenna's ability to investigate her mother's past. This 'small-town feel' highlights how inescapable his mother's reputation and presence is for Noah within this community, just as Kenna is unable to avoid the ghosts of her mothers' past.

1. Do you think the relationships and links between characters in Kimba are believable? Consider the types of communities you have lived in and how this might influence your perspective.
2. How would *Growing Up in Flames* be different in a metropolitan setting? Could this type of story happen in Sydney or Melbourne?
3. Rural Australia is at times represented in YA fiction through parochial towns, disconnected from the outside world, or barren and wild settings where the bush is untamed and dangerous. What kind of rural space is represented in *Growing Up in Flames*?

Identity

Identity does not develop in isolation. Relationships with others are significant in both the development and expression of identity. Although adolescents tend to move towards independence and relationships with peer groups as they develop an identity, relationships with parents and family remain significant. During this phase of development individual decisions may be influenced by parents, but not determined by them. Adolescents place parental advice within the context of a broader network of relationships, including relationships with friends, community and culture.

1. James has a recurring fear of being unable to stop himself from saying something he does not wish to say. How might this have been developed through his experiences with his parents?
2. Noah consistently works towards independence throughout the novel. In what ways has his identity been impacted by his mother's illness and his father's abandonment of the family?
3. Kenna struggles through much of the novel to accept Rob, Abbey and Iggy as a new family. How does this change through the end of the novel? How is her changed relationship with Iggy explored through the scene on pages 247-250?

RESPONDING

Intertextuality and Ayn Rand's *Anthem*

Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1937) is referenced at several points in *Growing Up in Flames*. *Anthem* tells the story of Equality 7-2521, a youth living in a dystopian society in a future where humanity has rejected technology and individuality. Equality 7-2521 is naturally curious, and is drawn to solitude which violates the laws of his society. Eventually, after conducting experiments, he discovers electricity and builds a lightbulb, which he believes can benefit his world. Instead, he is tortured and rejected, and flees society to become an individual, eventually



discovering the word 'I' and its meaning, which had been lost to society long ago.

Anthem is, in many ways, a retelling of the Prometheus tale from Greek mythology (at the end of Rand's novella, *Equality 7-2521* actually renames himself Prometheus). The Greek poet Aeschylus told that Prometheus, a member of the Titans and trickster, convinced Zeus to accept the bones and fat from animal sacrifices rather than the meat. In response Zeus hides fire from mortals. Prometheus, however, steals fire and returns it to humanity. In vengeance for Prometheus' theft, Zeus has him chained to a mountain and sends an eagle to eat his liver each day, which constantly replenishes itself. In this tale, Prometheus brings fire to humanity as a gift. He is ultimately rejected from society and punished for his crime with an eternal torture.

1. On page 13, Kenna finds Noah's Facebook page. What is the significance of the profile picture she describes? What might Noah be saying about himself?
2. Consider the following quote from *Anthem*: 'The word "We" is as lime poured over men, which sets and hardens to stone, and crushes all beneath it, and that which is white and that which is black are lost equally in the grey of it. It is the word by which the depraved steal the virtue of the good, by which the weak steal the might of the strong, by which the fools steal the wisdom of the sages'. In light of this quote, what is the significance of Noah's Facebook banner described on page 13?
3. Consider this quote from page 253 'Whatever I choose to do, I'll do it alone. No more 'we'.' How does Noah's journey mirror that of Prometheus and *Equality 7-2521*? How is it different?

Trauma

1. Shameful memories are significant factors in trauma, with many sufferers of trauma experiencing a sense of shame over their inability to act, their sense of powerlessness, or their subsequent reactions of violence, distress, or panic. In what ways do each of the three narrators struggle with shame, and how does this drive their actions?
2. Noah and Kenna both work throughout the novel to resolve their pain and shame around their relationships with their parents. Does James find resolution in his feelings towards his parents? How does this impact his actions and relationships?
3. Intergenerational trauma refers to trauma that is transmitted from one individual to another within families and through generations. How is this concept explored in the novel? How do the final chapters suggest that this cycle can be ended?