



# The Art of Taxidermy

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 13+

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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 audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

### SYNOPSIS

Lottie lives in a country town with her father, a scientist of German heritage. Lottie is fascinated with death after losing her mother. She collects dead animals and tries to preserve them. She is interested in the ways different cultures mourn and celebrate their dead. Her grieving father accepts her collecting and preserving interests, but her Aunt Hilda tries to turn her attention to more feminine pursuits. It is 1960s Australia, and girls are expected to cook and sew. Lottie's interest in the dead and her German heritage see her alienated from other children. Lottie finds some comfort in her friendship with Jeffrey, an Aboriginal boy fostered to a white family who is another outsider.

This is a lyrical verse novel that evokes the sights and sounds of the Australian bush with all its beauty, dangers and desolation. We enter into Lottie's world where she grieves by trying to preserve the dead to honour them. She emerges from her grief understanding more about life and death and the art of taxidermy. *The Art of Taxidermy* explores the themes of grief and loss, identity and family.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Kernot writes poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals, magazines and anthologies including *Island*, *Mascara Literary Journal*, *Best Australian Poems*, and *Australian Love Stories*.

### BEFORE READING

1. The title of the book is *The Art of Taxidermy*. Find the word origin for taxidermy. In small groups discuss what taxidermy is and what it tries to achieve? Find images of taxidermy. Is it an art?
2. *The Art of Taxidermy* is a verse novel. In class discuss the difference between verse novel and a prose novel. What features might they share and how might they be different in structure and content?
3. In *The Art of Taxidermy* the verse does not always state the obvious; instead the reader must make inferences based on the information, context and evidence given to come to an understanding of what is happening. These inferences may be challenged as the verse novel progresses. As a class, read the opening verse 'Love' aloud and discuss. Complete the chart explaining what is being implied about the character in this verse.

Character	Fact	Inference
The narrator, Lottie	Collected a dead gecko and put it in her dresser when she was eleven	

4. *The Art of Taxidermy* is set in Australia in the 1960s. Conduct an Internet search to identify what it would be like growing up and going to school at that time. Find one image and one fact to develop a visual representation of the period.



As a class cover the following topics:

*gender roles, attitudes to race, attitudes to migrants, the Stolen Generation, education, popular culture*

### WHILE READING

- As a class, read the first 15 poems aloud and discuss. What impression of the narrator do we get in these early poems? What voice does she use to connect to her audience (Hint: intimate, challenging, humorous, academic, serious)?
- Where does Lottie live? Choose three images that evoke a sense of place in the novel.
- Why does Lottie collect dead animals?
- Read 'Father's Study' (pages 19–20). What do we learn of Father in this poem? What is implied?
- Describe Lottie's experiences at school in the 'School' poems (page 21 and page 30).
- Who is Jeffrey? What do we learn about his past and present?
- Read the poem 'Heat' (page 27). What is being implied about Annie and Lottie's relationship in this poem?
- Find the word origin for omen. Read the poems 'Omens' (page 34), 'Oma, Opa and Omens' (page 37) and 'Funeral Birds 1' (page 39). What do the black cockatoos represent to different people in these poems?
- In 'Taxidermy Dreams' (page 49), Lottie describes the 'magic of taxidermy'. What does this poem imply Lottie is trying to achieve with her collection?
- Explain the significance of the fox in Lottie's world (pages 52–4, 64–5, 145, 151, 166, 175)?
- Read 'Clinging' (page 56). What is Lottie clinging too? What does Aunt Hilda want her to let go of?
- In 'Burial' (page 74) and 'Solitude' (page 75) and 'Dark Recesses' (page 76) we read of how Lottie's specimens were destroyed. Why did the destruction of the specimens devastate Lottie so? Find images in these poems that help explain what the specimens represented to Lottie.
- In the poems 'Fire 1' (page 100) to 'The Living Dead' (page 113) we learn more about Lottie's family and the tragedy they endured. What do we learn about Lottie's mother and father in these poems? Why does Lottie describe her father as The Living Dead? Use quotes from the poem to support your view.
- On the visit to Riverland, Lottie learns of her family's history during World War II (pages 115–16). What happened to them and how has this affected the family?
- Why does Aunt Hilda burn the stuffed hare? (pages 140–43). Why was its preservation so important to Lottie?

- In 'Fire Ground' (page 150) we see the land regenerating after the bushfire that destroyed Oma's property. What does regeneration mean? How does Lottie's regeneration begin?
- What do we learn about Annie and Lottie's memory of Annie in 'Spells' (page 178)?
- What message about life and death is expressed in 'Dying Many Deaths' (page 186)?
- What was Aunt Hilda's remedy (page 212)?
- What has changed in Aunt Hilda's and Lottie's relationship in 'Grounded' (page 227)? Explain the title of the poem.

### AFTER READING

#### CHARACTER

- Create a relationship chart plotting in the significant people in Lottie's life. Place Lottie in the centre of the chart and use an arrow to connect them to her.
- Write one sentence explaining the significant part each person played in the verse novel. Include Mother, Annie, Aunt Hilda, Father, Jeffrey and Mr Morris.
- Find a poem to represent one of the major characters in the verse novel. Read the poem aloud and explain why you selected this poem.
- The verse novel is told mainly in Lottie's voice. Choose another character from the novel and write a poem from their perspective. Include that character's perception of Lottie.
- Choose two characters from the verse novel and consider how they change over the course of the novel. Choose quotes or events that reflect the change. How does the author signal change over time through the novel's structure?
- One of the most mysterious characters in the novel is Annie. How is she described and what do we learn about Lottie through her depiction?
- Mother and Annie have both died when the novel begins. But they are presented quite differently in the novel. How are they evoked by the author? What techniques and images are used to portray them?
- Did any of the characters annoy, surprise, anger or disappoint you? Provide a specific example to support your view.
- Consider how Lottie changes from when we first meet her until the end of the novel. Choose quotes or events that reflect change over time.

#### STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- Poetry has its own vocabulary and techniques. The poet uses language to express ways of looking at things beyond the literal meaning. Consider how Sharon Kernot uses birds in the novel to express ideas about grief, resurrection and freedom. The chart below lists some of the literary techniques



used in *The Art of Taxidermy*. Try to find examples from the book.

Literary Technique	Definition	Example from the text	Further examples
Metaphor	A resemblance between one thing and another	The tangled snakes of my hair (page 27). We went to the shed, entering the dark womb of it (page 70).	
Personification	Attributing human characteristics to abstractions	Their branches stretching like children (page 100). Naked street trees (page 40).	
Simile	A figure of speech that compares dissimilar things. The comparison starts with like or as if	Her face as wrinkled as the corpse of an apple (page 34).	
Alliteration	A repetition of the same sound at the beginnings of words	Gun-grey (page 34). We watched worms wriggle (page 68).	
Symbolism	Use of one thing to represent something else	Black cockatoos 'funeral birds' (page 36).	
Onomatopoeia	Words that imitate the sound that they make	Tick-tick, tick-tick (page 118).	

- The plot of a fictional story is the sequence of events and can be divided into five parts.
  - Introduction (character and setting revealed)
  - Rising Action (Conflict or problem revealed)
  - Climax (The highest point or tension)
  - Falling Action (The conflict or problem begins to solve)
  - End (the conflict or problem is resolved)

Map out the plot of *The Art of Taxidermy* on a timeline and see if this novel follows this structure.
- Punctuation aids the readers' interpretation. As a class read 'Mirror Dream' (page 139) and identify the punctuation used. (As you read remember a group of crows is called a murder of crows.) Experiment

with changing the punctuation to see if the meaning of the poem changes.

- Poetry can be performed. Words are like instruments; they can be 'played' to convey meaning. Working in groups practise 'playing' a poem from the novel that you enjoyed. Consider which interpretation of the words and the sounds best conveys meaning.
- As a class or in small groups analyse one of the following poems: 'Museum' (pages 11–12), 'Taxidermy Dreams' (page 49), 'Scent' (page 111) or 'Outsiders' (page 170). Read through the poems aloud and then ask the following questions of each one:
  - What is the poem about?
  - How important is the title?
  - What is its tone?
  - Are there examples of the imagery of symbolism in the poem?
  - How would you decide the rhythm of the poem (fast, slow, medium variable)
  - What does this poem contribute to the story's narrative? What does it tell us about Lottie at this juncture of the story?
  - Which of the poems do you find the most powerful? Why?
- Select three poems from *The Art of Taxidermy*. Write a 150–200 word analysis of each one. In your discussion include your rationale for choosing the poem (why you were drawn to it), evidence supporting your rationale and the effectiveness and impact of this poem.

## THEMES

### Grief and loss

- The novel starts with:
 

*At the age of eleven  
I fell in love  
with death*

This poem 'Love' is written in the past tense. She is looking back at her eleven-year-old self. Provide examples from the novel of how she 'fell in love with death'. Did she really 'fall in love with death'?
- The Macquarie Dictionary's definition of grief is 'keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret.' What imagery does the author use to convey Lottie's physical and mental symptoms of grief?
- We don't know how Annie died until towards the end of the novel (although there are hints; see, for example, the poem 'Heat' [page 27].) Why does Lottie see Annie as an imaginary friend for much of the novel? What does this suggest about Lottie's grief?
- The death rituals and customs of other cultures fascinate Lottie. Find some of the poems that describe these customs and describe how Lottie adapted them in her own collection of specimens.



- Others, aside from Lottie, are shown grieving in the novel, including Aunt Hilda, Mother, Oma, Father and Jeffrey. How do they express their grief in contrast with Lottie? Develop a chart listing the characters, a sentence explaining their loss and an excerpt of poetry showing how they express their grief.
- What roles do the collecting of dead animals and birds, and Lottie's attempts at their preservation play in her grieving process?
- How does the poem 'What of Mother?' (page 185) help explain Lottie's grieving process and her behaviour?
- Discuss whether Lottie ever stops grieving for Annie and her mother? (Hint 'Sunrise' page 200)
- How does Annie see studying the art of taxidermy as a way of honouring the dead? (Hint 'The Taxidermist I', 'The Taxidermist II' and 'The Taxidermist III' (pages 223–25).
- 'Resurrecting Mother' (page 218), 'Empty Tombs' (page 217).
- How has generational trauma affected the family? Hint: 'Dancing with Ghosts' (page 133).
- We never meet Opa. How is his memory evoked through objects and images in the novel?
- Annie is Lottie's older sister and her story is gradually revealed through the novel. Describe Annie, her death and the role she played in Lottie's grieving. How does Lottie's relationship with Annie change through the novel? Hint: 'Annie II' (page 162), 'My Annie' (page 171), 'Annie III' (page 199), 'Cold Grey Streets' (page 203).

### Identity and belonging

- How does the Lottie define her identity by the end of the novel? What roles do science, art and taxidermy play in her understanding of who she is and what she wants to achieve in life?
- Jeffrey is an Aboriginal boy living with a white family in 1960s Australia. It is implied he is part of the Stolen Generation. Find examples from the novel of how his loss of family and culture is affecting him. (Hint: 'Family I', page 167)
- Why were Lottie's male relatives interned during World War II? How did that effect their sense of belonging in Australia?
- To what extent does Lottie fit into the stereotype of the 1960s young woman in Australia?
- How is the family's German identity expressed in the poems? Find specific examples and quotations.
- Explain the significance of the poem 'Outsiders' to the theme of identity in the novel (page 170).

### Family

- As the novels unfold, we are introduced to Lottie's family. Describe the members of Lottie's immediate and extended family and the losses they have suffered and the challenges they face.
- How did Father try to support Lottie as she grieved and how did she respond? (Provide specific examples, such as letting her use the shed as a laboratory.)
- How did Aunt Hilda try to support Lottie as she grieved, and how did Lottie respond? (Provide specific examples, such as giving her the sewing kit and the cat.)
- How does Lottie try to reconnect with her mother while grieving? Hints: 'Mother Memory I' (page 58), 'Fox II' (page 64), 'Mosaic Memories' (page 187),

### ESSAY QUESTIONS

- There is no single, correct way to grieve. Misunderstandings about the grieving experiences can cause difficulties for the bereaved person and others in their life. To what extent does Lottie's grieving cause difficulties for her and her family? Use quotations and specific examples to support your argument.*
- Aunt Hilda is the villain in this novel. Father is the hero. Do you agree? Use quotations and specific example to support your argument.*
- Collecting and preserving the dead is Lottie's way of resurrecting her mother and sisters. Do you agree? Use quotations and specific examples to support your argument.*
- Through taxidermy Lottie comes to terms with her grief. Do you agree? Use quotations and specific examples to support your argument.*
- Are Jeffrey and Lottie's experiences of loss and bereavement similar? Use quotations and specific examples to support your argument.*
- How is verse used in *The Art of Taxidermy* to express a sense of place? Is this effective? Use quotations and specific examples to support your argument.

### CREATIVE RESPONSE

- Write a poem from the point of view of Aunt Hilda or Father in the style of *The Art of Taxidermy* describing Lottie.
- Turn a storyline in *The Art of Taxidermy*—for example, the internment of Opa or the death of Annie—into a short story or verse of 200 words.
- Create an imaginative short story using verse to present a character's struggle with everyday life.
- Select a poem from the novel and turn it into a piece of graphic poetry. (You may want to search examples of graphic poetry online.)