

Marsh and Me

MARTINE MURRAY

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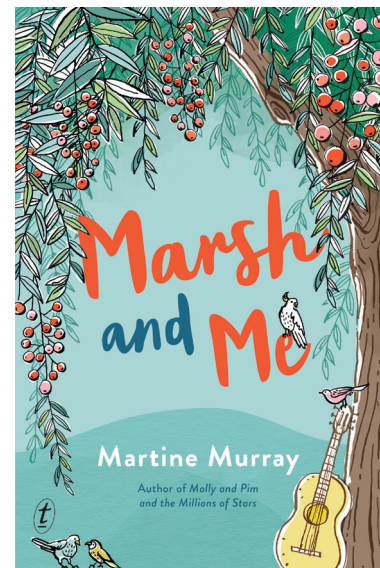
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 9–13

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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

There's a hill out the back of Joey's house. Hardly anyone goes there—it's not a beautiful place, just a covered-over old rubbish tip. But Joey likes it up there. It's his hill—somewhere he likes to go to wonder about life. He longs to be the best at something, to be a famous astronaut, or mountain climber, to stand out.

When Joey discovers a treehouse in an old peppercorn tree on the hill, he is annoyed that someone has invaded his special place. But he is also curious about who the intruder could be. But making contact isn't easy. The treehouse girl is wild and hostile and full of secrets—Joey needs to work out a way to win her over. And as he does, he finds a way to shine.

Marsh and Me is a story about friendship and trust and learning to believe in yourself and what makes you special. Martine Murray's beautifully rounded characters, with all their self-doubts, yearnings and wise insights, will delight young readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martine Murray was born in Melbourne, and now lives in Castlemaine. Her most recent novel, *Molly and Pim and the Millions of Stars*, was shortlisted for the 2016 CBCA Award for Younger Readers.

BEFORE READING

1. Watch the 2007 film, *Bridge to Terabithia*. This film adaptation of Katherine Paterson's 1977 novel, shares a number of similarities with *Marsh and Me*. After watching the film, ask students to consider why the characters prefer to be in the fantasy land of Terabithia rather than their reality. Ask students to brainstorm any other films or books where children venture to fantasy worlds.
2. Get students to research Serbian culture and present their findings. This should include a map of the country, traditional foods, traditional music, traditional clothing and the languages spoken.
3. Ask students to reflect on a talent they have. When did they realise they had this talent? How did it make them feel? Why is it important to feel we each have something we can offer the world? Students may present their work on a poster that can be displayed in the classroom.

WHILE READING

1. 'Not everyone is ready to be introduced. Names are private. You give yours too fast.' (p. 51) Do you agree with Marsh's opinion? Why can names sometimes be private or sensitive?
2. 'I don't want to tell anyone about Marsh yet. I sort of like the secret. It makes me feel like I've got something special going on that needs privacy and tenderness to grow in any way.' (p. 60) Why might

the friendship between Marsh and Joey require privacy and tenderness to grow? How could other people affect developing friendship?

3. 'I don't like to wonder about where we all fit. It's like imagining yourself in a big race with every kid you know, and no matter which way you picture it, you aren't winning, you aren't even running.' (p. 63) What does Joey mean by this comment? In what ways do people 'fit' in the world?
4. Who do the characters in the fairytale of the Plains of Khazar represent in Marsh's life? Why does she transform these real people into characters of a fairytale?
5. Consider the physical landscape of Joey's hill. 'What I like about the hill is how it gives perspective, how it gives a sense of smallness of self in the largeness of the world.' (p. 98) Why is it significant that Joey does most of his thinking atop a hill? What is the symbolism of this landscape?
6. Why do you think Max suggests that Joey and Marsh name their band Dark Horse? What does the phrase Dark Horse mean?
7. 'Marsh is funny about names. It's as if she ripped up her own name and tore it into tiny little pieces. I don't know why she doesn't want anyone to know she has a name, an age, a house, or a family.' (p. 164) Unlike Joey, Marsh reveals parts of her self slowly. Why is she so secretive about her identity? What holds her back from telling Joey her story?
8. On pages 197–98, Joey's Dad tells him how proud he is of his son. Why does this come as a surprise to Joey? What did Joey initially believe he would need to do to make his dad proud?
9. Why does Marsh bury Mumja at the end of the novel? What does this suggest about her grief? What does this action also suggest about coping with grief or sadness?
10. Joey has an Australian heritage while Marsh has a Serbian heritage. Australia is a multicultural society. What types of cultures make up your identity and that of your local community?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. 'Nowhere do I see first man with sensitivities.' (p. 11) Joey reflects on various male individuals who are remembered for being the 'first'. He notes that none of these people were 'sensitive'. What is Murray suggesting is more important in the story of Joey and Marsh? Being sensitive or being the first?
2. 'How can a dad be proud of a kid who never stands out.' (p. 31) Does a child need to stand out in order for their parent to be proud of them? In what other ways can a parent be proud of their child? Use examples from the story in your answer.
3. 'Already I am second-in-command here.' (p. 81) Are Marsh and Joey equals? How do they make each other stronger through the different strengths they each have?
4. Joey describes Marsh 'like an ocean wave, always coming forwards.' (p. 87) What does Joey mean with this simile? How does this connect to her personality?

STRUCTURE

1. Murray uses the literary technique of a frame story in her novel. While the main story follows the friendship of Marsh and Joey, it is also used to tell the fairytale story of the Plains of Khazaar. What is the significance of having two stories and how do these two stories reflect each other?

THEMES

Music

1. 'Sometimes songs appear inside you, even when you don't summon them.' (p. 140) Where do songs come from? What inspires someone to write music or lyrics? Refer to the text to guide your response.
2. 'He whispers to me, "You have time to learn. You are young. You have your whole life, all ahead of you. It is your job now to make the songs of your life. My songs have grown old with me, old and sad and stale as bread. They are just memories now."' (p. 182) Marsh and Joey choose to sing two songs at the Battle of the Bands. How do these songs reflect their current hopes, dreams and fears?
3. 'Either he is breathing life back into that old guitar or that old guitar is singing the life back into him.' (p. 188) What power does music have in restoring happiness in Joey and Marsh and her father?

Friendship

1. 'I figure the more I can show of myself, the more Marsh might reveal some of her secrets too.' (p. 117) Do you agree with Joey's perception of how friendships are built? Is this the most successful way to grow closer to someone?
2. "He who seeks a friend without faults dies along." (p. 113) How do Joey and Marsh accept each other's flaws? Is this essential for all relationships?
3. "I think Marsh and her dad need some help to bear this sadness, and there are places you can go to get that sort of help. But first of all, they need some friends, and that's one reason why what you two did today was so great. It brought us all together. We can make it a team effort." (p. 199) What role do friendships play when someone is grieving? What does Murray suggest this role might entail?

Cultural Differences

1. "There is a saying in Serbia. You are not being honest if you burn your tongue on the soup and don't tell everyone else that the soup is hot." (p. 113). What does Marsh mean by this saying?

Do you think this is a saying that applies just to Serbian people or do you think it would resonate with people from other cultures too?

2. On page 168, Marsh translates her father's Serbian poem into English. Marsh informs Joey that it doesn't make sense in English. Why does the poem make perfect sense in Serbian but not in English? Why can't some things be perfectly translated?

what ways does sadness carry the characters in the text?

9. 'I built that cloud platform to be closer to Mama.' (p. 161) How can our imagination and creativity help us cope with grief? How does it help Marsh cope with her grief?

RESPONDING

1. 'Maybe it is my path to fight for the oppressed, the downgraded, the invaded, the rejected...' (p. 41) Joey is able to realise his 'talent' by the end of the novel. What do you think this talent might be? Is this talent his ability to play the guitar or the way he is able to help others? Is it both? Write an extended paragraph with textual evidence supporting your interpretation.
2. A particularly poignant feature of Marsh's cloud platform is the wind telephone. What kinds of conversations do you think Marsh would have on the wind telephone? Write a creative story that includes a conversation that Marsh has had or might have on the wind telephone.
3. 'I would like to say, we won the Battle of the Bands, but we didn't. We came second.' (p. 195) Why is it significant that Joey and Marsh only came second? How does this connect with some of the earlier passages in the text? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
4. While mostly being a story of friendship, Marsh and Me is also a depiction of a father and daughter grieving. Using the characters of Marsh and her father, Murray puts forth a number of strategies for managing grief. What are some of these strategies? Do you think they would help someone process their grief?
5. 'I guess it doesn't matter that it could take a hundred years for our tree to grow. What matters is that in that hole we put the secret parts of ourselves. You couldn't write a song if you didn't have something deep and raw and personal and only yours unfurling within you, wanting to come out, to say 'this is me.' (p. 203) How does music transform Marsh's pain and Joey's insecurities? What does their performance at the Battle of the Bands reveal about the power of music?
6. How important is it to be a winner? What does Murray suggest in the novel, is perhaps more important? Use evidence to support your thinking.
7. Organise your own Battle of the Bands competition. Like Marsh and Joey, students can write and perform a song that they feel tells their unique story.
8. "You know, sometimes things happen that are unbearable. Like someone you love dying. That sort of sadness is too much to carry and so it carries you instead." (p. 198) Do you agree with Joey's dad? In