



Metal Fish, Falling Snow

CATH MOORE

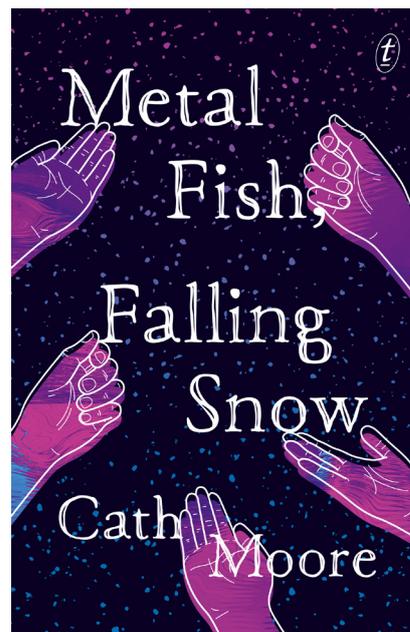
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Fiction

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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

'Breathtaking...one of the most moving books I've read in ages.' VIKKI WAKEFIELD

When Dylan's mother is killed in a freak accident, fourteen-year-old Dylan travels across the Australian outback with her mum's grieving boyfriend, Pat.

Dylan's grief and guilt make her unable and unwilling to acknowledge where they're going. She blames herself for her mum's death and struggles to accept her blackness, which she sees as a legacy handed down by her absent, abusive father. Pat struggles to navigate his grief, his own demons, and the sudden responsibility of caring for a teen. They don't want to rely on each other, but by the time their journey is over, Pat and Dylan are family.

When Dylan realises that Pat is leaving her with her paternal grandfather, it is the ultimate betrayal. Left alone with a family she has never met, Dylan is forced to reckon with her grief, her identity, and her blackness. At first, she is desperate to leave. But, slowly, laboriously, she starts to belong. When a freak storm almost takes away one of the people who has become most important to her, Dylan realises that she has finally found home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Guyana, Cath Moore is of Irish/Afro-Caribbean heritage. Though raised in Australia she has also lived in Scotland and Belgium. Cath is also an award-winning screenwriter, teacher and filmmaker. She holds an MA in screenwriting and a PhD in Danish screenwriting practices. *Metal Fish, Falling Snow* is Cath's first novel. She lives in Melbourne.

BEFORE READING

1. *Metal Fish, Falling Snow* deals with challenging themes of death, grief, and family violence. Have a conversation in class around ways to create a safe space for dealing with these issues. This might involve suggesting some boundaries around the way you talk about things, or the types of questions you ask. Make a list of your ideas and boundaries, and include any resources that people can turn to for help if they are struggling with these issues in their own lives.
2. Read the blurb of the book. Why do you think Dylan longs for a place where she might belong. Talk about the ways that people of colour face racism in Australia on a daily basis. Invite people in your class to share their experiences, and do your own research online to develop your knowledge about this issue.
3. The book is an own-voices story. What does this mean? [Click here](#) for a useful article on this movement. Read the author's biography and talk about the kind of experiences she might bring to this story. Why are own-voices narratives so important?

WHILE READING

1. 'Water is where this story begins and ends' (p. 6). What is it about water that motivates Dylan through-



out the story? How does Dylan think about water at the beginning and the end of the book?

- Dylan has the ability to see into the thoughts and dreams of those around her. Do you think these moments are real or imagined? What insight does her ability give her into other people's behaviour? Does it help her?
- 'I know they think that brown skin is always 'somewhere else' on a map,' says Dylan (p. 13). What makes her say this? Why is it racist to assume that someone is from somewhere else because of their skin colour?
- How does Dylan describe the way her mother's death has changed her? What experiences and moments has she lost with her mum?
- How do you think Pat would describe Dylan? Rewrite either one of the following scenes from his perspective: the swimming scene (pp. 119–22), or the scene where he and Dylan say goodbye (pp. 248–50).
- What kind of town is Beyen? What makes you think this? Think of a place that is local to you and describe it as you would to a stranger. What would you say about it if you were speaking to a friend?
- What do the things Dylan chooses to take with her (p. 27) tell you about her? Imagine that you are in her position and make a list of five items that you would take, describing what each means to you.
- What do the symbols of water and the hoatzin bird mean? Do they stand for the same thing throughout the book? What other physical objects symbolise something about the characters or the story?
- Consider the final line of the book. What does it mean? Is the ending of the story a happy one? Is it satisfying?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

- Language and dialogue can help us to create unique voices for characters in our stories. For example, in the book Pat is a person who uses a lot of abbreviations and short sentences such as 'Siddown', which shows that he is a man without a lot of 'hairs and graces' (p. 1). What other examples can you find where the speech of a character shows us something about who they are? Write three phrases, words, or pet names that someone in your family uses that you might use if you were writing a piece of dialogue for them.
- What does Dylan's refusal to eat eggs when the yolk is running south (p. 1) tell you about her?
- Dylan's sense of who she is is often formed from what other people say or do. 'I wanted my skin to grow back white so I could be beautiful like Mum. So when we sailed back to France no one would look at us funny and I could blend in like white

people do all the time' (p. 14). What other examples can you find of this? What experiences have you had of being told how you should feel about yourself by someone else?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- The book is structured around Dylan's journey, both emotional and physical. Map out the physical points of her journey and write a short accompanying paragraph that summarises her emotional state in each place. How does Dylan's emotional journey continue to progress even when she reaches her physical destination? Where do the two finally come together again?
- Dramatic irony refers to moments in a narrative where the reader realises something about the story that the character does not. How does the writer use dramatic irony to build tension around the destination of Pat and Dylan's journey. When did you realise that Pat was taking her to live with someone else? How does Dylan's not knowing make you feel? What other examples of dramatic irony can you think of in books or films?
- Cath Moore doesn't shy away from writing about challenging topics or difficult scenes. How do you feel about this? Read pages 34 and 35 aloud in groups. How does Moore handle writing death? What does she include and leave out? Why do you think she chooses not to use metaphors in this scene? Do you think we should read and write about things that are uncomfortable, or should we avoid them? Why?

THEMES

Identity

- Dylan calls her mum's skin the 'safe kind' (p. 10). What does the word 'safe' mean here? What might she have seen and experienced in Beyen that make her think this?
- Dylan conflates the blackness of her skin with an emotional blackness—'one shade lighter than my dad's and two shades lighter than William Freeman's, it's still dark enough to bring me trouble. Back gate banging in the wind. Black like a wolf running through the night panting with hunger' (p. 12). Why do you think these things are connected for her? What happens that helps her to see herself differently?
- Where do the themes of family and identity intersect in the story? How does Dylan's sense of self change when her mother dies? Why do you think she questions whether or not she is 'real'? Dylan is grounded when she finds her family, but she also changes the lives of those around her. How does her presence offer redemption to William and to Pat? How does she offer them a chance to be better?

Grief



1. The author intersperses Dylan's memories of the time before her mother died with the present to show her feelings of grief and loss. One example is when she describes Hutchins Road at the beginning of chapter 2. 'I'd only ever passed by Hutchins Road on the school bus. Every other day it's just where the police hide at the bend hoping to nab someone for speeding. But on the day of the funeral, Hutchins Road was a punch in the guts and a ten-car procession.'

How does this passage demonstrate the upheaval of Dylan's 'normal'? Find three other examples of this in the book. What does this juxtaposition of before and after tell you about grief?

2. Here are some of the ways that Dylan describes her grief:
 - 'Now everything is sliding and I want to throw up.' (p. 21).
 - 'A bit of my heart catches on Mrs Devlin's splintered fence at the end of Baker Street, trying to hold on even though nothing can ever be the same again.' (p. 30).

Some are physical, some emotional, and some use metaphor to capture the enormity of the emotion. Have you ever experienced grief? How would you describe it in each of these ways? (If you haven't, perhaps ask someone close to you who has if they would be comfortable sharing their experiences with you.) How do metaphors allow us to share feelings that are difficult to describe?

3. Dylan hides in the wardrobe. What other coping mechanisms does she have? Although her grief is the focus of the book, Pat's grief also shapes the story. How does he cope with his grief? Who does grief belong to? How is grief an experience that unites us in some ways (eg. Margie and Dylan) and divides us in others (eg. Pat and Dylan)?

Family

1. 'This is a family trip and you and me are not that,' Dylan tells Pat (p. 8). Why does she say this? What does Dylan think family means? What other kinds of families are there? Make a list of moments in the story that make Dylan change the way she sees Pat.
2. Absent fathers play a big role in the lives of the characters in the book. Describe the ways that Pat, Dylan, and Dylan's dad are changed because of their fathers' absences. What regrets do you think William has about his relationship with his son? What does he say that tells you this?
3. Dylan's relationship with Joni finally allows her to move through her guilt and start to process it. What elements of herself does she see in him? Why does she feel such a responsibility to take care of him? Make a note of the moment where her attitude towards him shifts.

RESPONDING

1. Dylan carries her father's letters with her until she gives them to William. Why do you think she holds onto them? How is the boy in the letters different to the man she knew? Why does she blame William for this? Imagine that you are Dylan writing a letter to her father. What might she choose to write about? What might she say?
2. *Metal Fish, Falling Snow* invites us to talk about topics that might be hard or uncomfortable, highlighting the power of connection and compassion. Think of someone that you see regularly but don't know well. Write a short paragraph that describes the way you see them and what your interactions with them are like. Now imagine a conversation with them. Take time, and be open minded in your dialogue. What new information do you learn? Write another paragraph reflecting on your interaction with this person. Do you see them any differently?
3. Are we the product of the place we live or our upbringing, or do we hold the power to shape our own lives? Write about a situation where you felt powerless. Is there anything you might have done differently? What would you say to others involved if you saw them again now?
4. How important is it to see ourselves represented in stories? When you look around you at the books, films and TV shows that are popular, do you see aspects of your own life reflected back at you? What kinds of stories are common, and what stories are left out or ignored? Choose a book, TV show, or film and discuss the kinds of lives represented in it. Does it rely on cliché or stereotype, or does it ask the reader/viewer to see the world differently? How might it be improved?