



The Paperbark Tree Committee

KARYS MCEWEN

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 8+

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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.



Credit: Adrian Craddock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karys McEwen is a school librarian, a bookseller, vice president of the Victorian branch of the Children's Book Council of Australia, and an education advisor for the Melbourne Writers Festival. She is passionate about the role libraries and books can play in the wellbeing of young people, and she writes the substack 'I Read A Lot'.

SYNOPSIS

Twelve-year-old Art has just moved to Melbourne from a small town in Queensland. It's his first year of high school, but his younger brother and best friend, Hilary, is still in primary school. Back home, the two brothers would hold meetings in a fig tree to sort out their problems. In Melbourne, they start the Paperbark Tree Committee, but Art's not sure he wants to be part of it. Things feel different now that he's getting older, and he's not sure where he fits in this new city.

At school, Art makes friends and joins the writing and running clubs. But he keeps getting hassled by school bully Jack, and he's not sure what to do about it. His dad is too busy working on a new novel to help, and his mum lives across the ocean in Hong Kong. Art's stepmum Sally is always happy to talk, but Art is worried she'll leave them, like his mum did.

Then one day Jack pulls Art's pants down in the school playground in front of everyone. Art is embarrassed, and furious. He wants to know why Jack did it, but when he confronts the bully, Jack has no answer.

Art has two major problems to solve. He wants revenge on Jack, and he wants his dad to marry Sally so she won't leave them. Art's friend Lexi agrees to help him get back at Jack, and they start hatching a plan. But when Art tells Hilary his idea to trick their dad and stepmum into getting married, Hilary thinks it's the worst idea Art's ever had, and refuses to help. Art is on his own.

As Art prepares to put Plan Revenge and Plan Proposal into action, he starts having second thoughts. Has he gone too far? Will his plans really help him get what he wants, or will he just keep making the same mistakes?



The Paperbark Tree Committee is an inspiring story for middle-grade readers about identity, friendship and the joys and challenges of growing up.

BEFORE READING

1. This novel mentions two types of trees: a fig tree and a paperbark. What kind of trees grow where you live? Are any of them good for climbing and sitting in? Research the types of trees in your area. Can you find out where they come from, their scientific names, and other interesting facts? You might also like to go and look at one in real life and try sketching it.
2. A committee is a group of people that meets to do a specific job. Your school might have a gardening committee, or an arts committee. What sort of committee would you like to join? Where would you meet? What kind of plans would you make?
3. At the start of this novel Art and his brother Hilary have just moved to Melbourne from Queensland. Have you ever had to move states, or schools? What was it like? Have you ever had a new student in your class who has moved from far away? What did you / could you do to help them settle in?
4. Look at the cover and the picture on the first page. What clues do they give you about the story?

WHILE READING

1. Art and his brother Hilary are both named after famous writers: Arthur Conan Doyle and Hilary Mantel. What kinds of books did these authors write? What kinds of books does Art's dad write? What kinds of books do you like to read? If you wrote a book, what kind of book would it be?
2. What secrets does Art keep from Hilary?
3. What club does Art go to with Micah? Do you go to any lunchtime clubs at school?
4. 'I don't think I could ever talk to a grown-up like that.' (p. 33) How do you think kids should talk to grown ups?
5. What are Dad's writing stages? Why do you think Dad is 'grumpier than usual'? (p. 47)
6. What book does Maggie suggest Art read for his English assignment?
7. What movies do Art, Micah and Hilary watch? What movies would you want to share with

your friends? Why are these movies special to you?

8. Chapter Nine is called 'The Sweet Spot'. What is 'the sweet spot'? Art gets it from running, dancing, and laughing with his brother. Have you ever experienced 'the sweet spot'? What were you doing?
9. 'In the second quarter, something makes me turn around to Jack again. I can't explain it. I think I feel a bit sorry for him.' (p. 88) Why do you think Art feels sorry for Jack?
10. 'It must suck to be you.' (p. 99) Why does Art say this to Jack? Do you think it was okay for him to say this? What would you do in this situation?
11. What is the secret code to call a Paperbark Tree Committee meeting? If you were going to create your own secret meeting code, what would it be?
12. Why does Art tell Hilary that Sally will leave if their dad doesn't propose to her? Is it true?
13. Whose secrets does Art want to know? What does he want to do with that knowledge?
14. What news does Sally have after the phone call from Nana Hana?
15. What does Hilary think should change about the Paperbark Tree Committee? Why doesn't Art like this idea?
16. How does Art feel when he realises Sally believes in the proposal he set up?
17. What do you think Micah talks to Maggie about between the library shelves?
18. What does Frankie suggest Art writes about for the literary salon?
19. What is Art's poem about? What is the secret he reveals about himself?
20. What happens to the Paperbark Tree Committee at the end of the story?

AFTER READING CHARACTER

1. 'Lucky for Hilary, it wouldn't matter where we went. He could make friends with the Grinch.' (p. 11) Read this page again. What else does it tell you about Hilary?
2. The title of Chapter Five is 'Sansevieria', a type of plant 'that will grow anywhere'. (p. 36) How is Art's stepmum Sally similar to sansevieria? Are there any other characters in this novel that share similarities with this plant? If you had to



compare yourself to a plant, what plant would it be?

- There are a lot of interesting and very different characters in this novel: Art, Hilary, Dad, Sally, Micah, Lexi, Jack, Frankie. Choose your favourite character and create a character profile for them.
- What are your first impressions of Jack? Do those impressions change as you learn more about him?
- Instead of talking to Art himself, his dad suggests seeing a counsellor, or reading a book. Why do you think he does this? Is it just because he's busy writing?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- '[T]he plughole in our bath that must be about a hundred years old and sounds like a possessed goat when the water drains out of it.' (p. 50) This is a great use of simile to help the reader really understand what the bath sounds like! Think of some fun and interesting similes to describe sounds in your own life.
- Each chapter in *The Paperbark Tree Committee* has a title. What do the titles tell you about what's happening in the story? Choose a chapter to re-read, and then give it an alternative title.
- How many Paperbark Tree Committee meetings are there in the novel? At what point in the story does each one happen? Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel in this way?

THEMES

Identity

- 'I like being alone but also knowing there are other people close by.' (p. 15) Would you describe Art as more of an introvert or an extrovert? What about Hilary? What about yourself? Why? Are there situations when you feel more introverted and others when you feel more extroverted? What are they?
- Art's stepmum, Sally, says she doesn't want to be a 'horrible helicopter parent', (p. 39) meaning she doesn't want to be constantly hovering over her kids. Art's dad, on the other hand, is hardly ever around when Art needs advice. How involved do you think parents should be in their kids' lives? How can parents best support their kids to become their own people as they get older?
- 'I know your dad's work. I'm sure you're a

brilliant writer too.' (p. 65-6) A lot of people expect Art to like writing because of his dad. Do you ever feel like other people expect you to be good at or like a certain thing because of your family?

- 'Being a teenager is all about swimming along with only your fin showing, trying to look like a shark when really you're just some average fish.' (p. 34) What does Art mean by this? Do you ever feel like you have to hide who you really are?
- Sally describes Art as a 'champion writer, runner, mathematician and all-round superstar!' (p. 186) Our identities are made up of lots of different things, rather than just one. List some things that make you who you are.

Friendship and family

- 'Making friends is hard,' I offer. And it's true.' (p. 34) Do you agree with Art? Why?
- 'I've been wondering what makes someone start bullying someone else.' (p. 79) Art is being bullied by Jack. Why do you think some people bully others?
- 'I'm starting to think that one of the most important things you need are people who listen to you and trust what you have to say.' (p. 102-3) Why does Art start to think this? Who are the people in his life that listen to him? Who are the people that don't? Who are the people in your life who listen to you and trust your ideas?
- Sally says 'Something that took me a long time to realise is that the people in your life don't need to be everything all at once.' (p. 140) Do you agree? Do you have people in your life that give you different things at different times?
- Sally says that she and Art are 'chosen family'. (p. 157) What does she mean? Do you have any people in your life that are 'chosen family'?

Growing up

- Micah says 'I suppose now we're in high school we have to stop mucking around so much . . . We all have to grow up, right?' (p. 61) Do you agree with Micah? Do you know any teenagers or adults who still 'muck around'?
- Art has to write about the different ways someone can 'come of age' for English class. (p. 116) What does it mean to 'come of age'? Think of some examples of books or movies where this happens. How does it happen? Do you think you've 'come of age'?



3. 'I'm stuck between wishing things stayed the same and wanting to hurry up and grow up. I have no idea what I'm doing.' (p. 147) Have you ever felt like this? What are you sad to leave behind from childhood? What are you looking forward to about growing up?
4. When Micah's mum comes to pick him up from the sleepover, she says 'That was his first time staying at a friend's house!' (p. 62) Why is Micah embarrassed about this? Do you remember how old you were when you had your first sleepover? Is there a right or wrong age to have these sorts of 'growing up' experiences?
5. How does Art change from the beginning of the novel to the end? In what ways has he grown up? In what ways has he not? In what ways have you grown up? What sort of growing up do you still have to do?

RESPONDING

1. Art's friend Micah is interested in onomastics: the study of names. He tells Art that Hilary's name means cheerful. Do some research to find out what the names of other characters in *The Paperbark Tree Committee* mean. What does your name mean? Art and Hilary are both named after famous writers. Do you know why your name was chosen for you?
2. Art loves to dance to old music, like Elvis and Fleetwood Mac. What kind of music do you like to dance to? Is there any music you like that feels a bit 'cringe'? What do you like about it? Make a playlist of your favourite music and share it with your friends. Maybe you could even have a classroom dance party!
3. Art's dad has 'strong opinions on what kids should be reading', (p. 21) and Art thinks having to read *Moby Dick* for school made him hate reading more than ever. What kinds of books do you think kids should read? Are there any books you think kids should have to read?
4. In writers club, Art's friend Frankie suggests he writes about someone he saw that he wants to know more about. Art chooses a man he saw in an ice cream shop. Try writing a poem about an interesting person you've noticed.
5. Art's stepmum Sally was born in Australia, but her family is from South Korea. Use the internet to research South Korea. See if you can find out the following information: location, capital city, popular foods, wildlife, language, currency, history, cultural traditions, and popular culture.

CREATIVE WRITING

Imagine you've discovered a bag in the street. It could be a handbag, backpack, suitcase, or anything else. Open it. What's inside? Use your imagination and think outside the box. Be creative!

Write a list of at least six items you find in there. List some common items alongside some really unusual ones to mix things up.

Imagine the character who has lost this bag. Who are they? What's their story? Write a paragraph from their perspective, shortly after realising they have lost their bag. Perhaps you could also include something about them finding it again, and their reaction.

You may like to start with one of these opening lines:

- *My heart stopped the moment I realised the bag was gone.*
- *It was just here a second ago... and now it had vanished.*
- *Losing an ordinary bag is one thing. Losing this bag was a disaster.*
- *I didn't know what was more terrifying—the fact that I'd lost the bag, or what was inside it.*

After finishing your paragraph, you may like to reflect on the following questions:

- Why was this bag so important to the character?
- Why were they carrying around these objects?
- How did the loss make them feel?
- What do these objects say about your character?
- What items in your bag give a hint to the kind of person they are?