

Teacher Notes

Grace Beside Me written by Sue McPherson

Magabala Books

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SYNOPSIS

Fuzzy Mac is a teenage girl living with her Nan and Pop in rural New South Wales. *Grace Beside Me* gives an insight into Fuzzy's world as she grapples with the challenges of adolescence. Told through a series of anecdotes and stories, the narrative addresses the key themes of perseverance, acceptance of self and others and learning how to 'sit a while' to find peace and to move forward.

Nan and Pop play a significant role in shaping Fuzzy's character. Embedded in this is Nan's Koorie culture and Pop's Islander heritage. Interwoven in *Grace Beside Me* is the way in which Fuzzy comfortably straddles both her cultural heritage and the community in which she lives.

THEMES

Grace and peace

- Connecting to Country and learning how to 'sit a while' to process problems and find peace is a key theme.
- Grace is akin to a sense of calm and peace. Your mob helps you to find this grace.

Relationships and community

- Fuzzy has an open, warm and beautiful relationship with Nan, Pop and her dad
- Fuzzy does not know her mother. She died of a drug overdose when Fuzzy was a baby. Fuzzy feels bitter about this.
- The community of Laurel Dale is very close knit. The people are strongly linked through Nan and Pop who play an important role in the community.
- The community bonds through major annual events such as Anzac Day, Christmas and New Year.

Courage and perseverance

- Fuzzy is taught to persevere when problems arise and never to surrender to worry.

Indigenous and Islander culture

- Nan is a Koorie. She imparts much of her knowledge and culture onto Fuzzy.
- Pop is from Islander heritage. His grandparents were kidnapped and brought to the sugar cane farms in Queensland. His ways and traditions are more subtly handed down to Fuzzy.

Identity and acceptance of self and others

- Fuzzy learns to accept what happened to her mother.
- Nan and Pop have taught Fuzzy to accept people regardless of their ways.
- Fuzzy identifies strongly with her Koorie and Islander heritage. She knows who she is and whose she is.

WRITING STYLE

Written in first person, past tense, *Grace Beside Me* is a story told from the heart of teenager Fuzzy. The text provides an authentic depiction of Indigenous family life, in particular the importance of a connection with people and Country. The language is honest and genuine, making it easy for the reader to identify with the key characters, in particular Fuzzy, Nan and Pop.

Chapters are accessible and fast-paced. The dialogue is believable and realistic. Many of the issues covered are topical and would allow for interesting discussion within the classroom setting.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In the first chapter, Fuzzy Mac tells us how she came to get her nickname. We also learn how a lot of other characters get nicknames throughout the text. Discuss the importance of nicknames in Australian culture and in *Grace Beside Me*.
- What can we tell about Fuzzy's character from the first chapter? How has the author conveyed her traits to the reader?
- On p6, Fuzzy talks about the importance of stories. She says that stories link us to our mob, regardless of whether that mob is black or white. Discuss this notion, in particular linking your own family stories to your cultural background.
- Fuzzy gives a very detailed description of Laurel Dale. From her description, sketch a mud map of the town, showing the landmarks of the town as described in the first chapter.
- Laurie is situated close to the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. Find out more about the history of this scheme, focussing on the immigrants who came to work on the scheme in its early days.

- The author uses a lot of figurative language throughout the text. Take note of these examples and discuss the contribution they make to the text. Examples include:
 - P11— lines running like gutters on their sun-hardened faces
 - P11 — relentless dry heat can suck the last breath out of an exhausted budgerigar
 - P13 — like an old stockman's boot, as tough as Pop's Blundstones
 - P14 — can throw bad language around better than a miner in a thunder box
 - P17 — I got a headache that could take out Muhammad Ali and Lionel Rose
 - P29 — her hands dance a jig with needles and wool
 - P42 — he has a voice as smooth as honey on a warm day
 - P209 — Christmas rushes in like a bush turkey after kitchen scraps
- A key theme throughout the text is that of learning from your mistakes and learning how to persevere when problems arise. Write a reflection of a time you were faced with a problem. How did you learn from this problem? How did you overcome this problem? What did you learn from this experience?
- Chapter 2 is entitled *Generation Gap*. Discuss what this term means and give examples from Chapter 2 that show the generation gap between Fuzzy and Nan and Pop. Talk about your personal experiences of the Generation Gap.
- The 'Populate or Perish' Migration policy is mentioned on p25. Research this policy and discuss its implications on a town like Laurie.
- Migrants often have professional qualifications that they can't use in their new homelands. Instead, they often work in jobs that have less pay and less skills required. Why is this the case? Is this just? Discuss as a class.
- Nan was brought up in a mission home and taught about Christianity from an early age. We later discover that she was part of the Stolen Generation. Discuss how Nan's Christian beliefs have prevailed even though these were a legacy of her removal from her family.
- Using a mind map, describe the type of relationship that Fuzzy has with Nan and Pop. Include in your mind map examples from the text that illustrate the mentorship Nan and Pop provide for Fuzzy.
- Fuzzy did not know her mother who died from an overdose when she was a baby. How does this impact on Fuzzy's life?
- Fuzzy mentions that the older she gets, the more information she is given about her mother. Why do you think that the older people get, the more truths about the past are divulged?
- Fuzzy's dad knows the Banjo Paterson poem *The Man from Snowy River* off my heart. Read this poem. Try reciting a stanza or two by heart.
- Much of *Grace Beside Me* is about identity — who are you and whose are you. Discuss this theme, giving examples from the book to help explain how this theme works in the text.
- Pop's grandparents were kidnapped and brought to work on Queensland cane farms. Research this period in Australian history. Link this to the chapter towards the end of *Grace Beside Me* when Fuzzy sets free the cane toad. What is the significance of the cane toad in relation to the Islanders brought over to work on the cane fields?
- Fuzzy likes the fact that she can draw like Pop. What gifts and talents have you inherited from family members? Why is it significant to recognise these family legacies?

- Another major theme of the book is the skill Pop teaches Fuzzy to 'sit a while' when worry and problems arise. He talks about asking your mob for help, connecting to Country and culture. He also says that all cultures are connected with Country in their own way. Explore how this theme is dealt with in the text.
- Tui and Pop exchange famous quotes from Ghandi and Churchill (p48). Discuss the importance of these quotes. Locate other famous quotes that could have equally fitted into this conversation.
- Pop loves his dictionary and likes to have a word of the week. Consider having a word of the week from the dictionary for the duration of this unit.
- The chapter entitled 'Sorry Day' reflects on the day Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generation. It also is highly critical of the Liberal leader Brendan Nelson's address that same day. Watch recordings of both Kevin Rudd's and Brendan Nelson's speeches from that day in light of this chapter. Are the comments being made by the author justified? Debate this in class.
- Re-read p72. Why was Kevin Rudd's Apology so important to people like Nan? How did it help her to heal?
- Nan has very 'black and white' views on social and political issues such as boat people, Bin Laden and Ned Kelly. Pop approaches such issues with a more rounded outlook. Compare the way these two characters think about such topics. How do their approaches influence Fuzzy and her opinions on such matters?
- Pop teaches Fuzzy much about how to treat others. Keep a journal of his teachings such as, giving examples of how Nan and Pop put these principals into practice:
 - Treat people with respect — eg accepting people such as Yar
 - Treat others kindly — eg visiting people in jail
 - Helping others to strengthen their spirits — eg helping Lefty
 - Believe in yourself and love who you are — eg playing the bagpipes on Anzac Day
- Nan tells Fuzzy the sad story of Ruby, explaining that stories can be good or bad. Reread p106 and write a reflection about Nan's philosophy that stories help us to have empathy, tolerance and love.
- What can we learn about the way in which Yar lives his life? What characteristics does he have that Fuzzy admires?
- Fuzzy describes how Anzac Day is commemorated in Laurie. This chapter starting on p129 mentions some facts about Indigenous members of the Army Corps that are often unknown. Find out more about these things such as:
 - Indigenous or Islander soldiers having to lie about their background in order to enlist
 - Having to be of 'substantial European descent' to enlist
 - Black soldiers being left out of the 'soldier settlement scheme'
- Pop says to Nan that it is her fear that prevents her from understanding the plight of boat people. Discuss Pop's idea.
- After the mayor propositions Fuzzy, she is faced with an anger and hurt that can only be helped by connecting with Country and going to 'sit a while'. Discuss how this helps her to heal and how this motif has been woven throughout *Grace Beside Me*. What is this scene's significance to the text?
- What sort of relationship do you have with your grandparents? Have they imparted wisdom and knowledge that you will always cherish? Discuss.

- Why didn't Fuzzy live with her dad? Why do you think she was quite happy to live with Nan and Pop instead?
- Predict what you think Fuzzy's future will be like? Support your ideas with examples from the book.
- Create a list of values that Nan and Pop have taught Fuzzy.
- *Grace Beside Me* uses a series of anecdotes and episodes to help convey a sense of what Nan and Pop's household is like to live in and what Laurie itself is like as a town. How different or similar to your own home town or suburb is Laurie? Compare Fuzzy's home life with your own. What aspects are you glad are different about your own situation? What parts of Fuzzy's life do you admire?
- On p107, Fuzzy says that everyone has a story. This theme is on the final page too. In fact, Fuzzy challenges us to tell our story. Write your own story, showing how events and circumstances from the past have helped to shape your present and future.