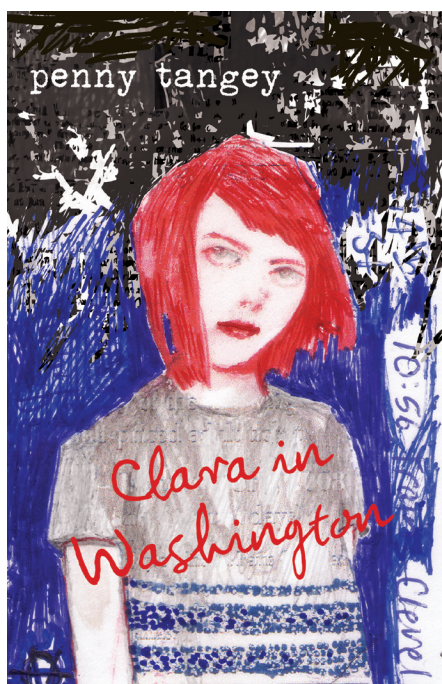


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CLARA IN WASHINGTON

by Penny Tangey



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian
in context with the Australian Curriculum (English)

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Overview	2
Synopsis	2
Author Motivation	2
Themes	3
Suggested Activities	5

OVERVIEW:

The book is written for readers aged 14 and above and centres around a character who has just finished high school. Students are given the opportunity to engage with a wide range of ideas from the personal to the political, from the local to the global. From social issues to Facebook status updates, students will find Clara a wonderfully engaging, textured character whose fears and insecurities will ring true to them all.

The book would be appropriate for reading for pleasure or as the basis of a book study/analysis. The tone and humour of the novel would make it a great choice for read aloud programs for older students.

SYNOPSIS:

Clara has just finished Year 12 and is waiting to hear if she will be offered a place to study law at university. When her mother accepts a posting with the World Bank in Washington D.C., Clara decides to go with her. She has her reasons to want to get out of Melbourne for the summer.

Unfortunately, living in D.C. is not the exciting overseas adventure that Clara imagined. Her mother is at work all day and Clara is scared of going out on her own. In fact, Clara is scared of everything – terrorists, muggers and the Post Office ladies.

Trying to overcome her fears and boredom Clara volunteers: she serves breakfasts at a Women's Centre and she also goes to Reading Beyond Bars, a group dedicated to sending books to prisoners. It's there that she meets Campbell, a charismatic anarchist who introduces her to the idea that society would be better off without governments. Clara falls in love with Campbell and wants to explore the idea of anarchy. This is a difficult concept for Clara, who loves rules and enjoys filling out forms.

Clara is hesitantly drawn into the D.C. Anarchist Collective's plans to protest President Barack Obama's inauguration. Her own future is put on hold as she decides not to check her exam results until she's made up her mind about whether to study law next year or not. At some point Clara is going to have to make some decisions and they might be the toughest ones she has ever had to make.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION:

Clara in Washington includes some personal experiences from my trip to D.C. where I was unemployed for nine months. I filled my time by visiting museums and writing a book. However, I didn't want Clara to write a book. That would be boring as my days went something like this:

8.00 Ate Cheerios for breakfast. Disgusting.

9.00 Did washing, cleaned up kitchen while watching *The Golden Girls*. Song a painful reminder that I have no friends to thank for being a friend.

10.00 Sat down, wrote. (Well, played minesweeper actually. But the document is on my computer now and that's an important step.)

10.30 Go to deli for a doughnut.

11.00 Turned on television. *Full House* on. Incredible. Why? For what purpose? Who actually watches this show? Watched *Full House* in amazement.

11.30 Wrote.

12.30 Hungry. Ate bagel. Everything I've eaten today has a hole in it. Is this a metaphor?

So instead of mimicking my Washington routine, I decided Clara would join the D.C. Anarchist Collective. Becoming an anarchist is very hard for Clara as she enjoys obeying authority figures and filling in forms. When I started writing *Clara in Washington* I had only a vague understanding of anarchism, some of which turned out to be wrong. I read texts giving an overview of anarchism. Particularly useful were *An Anarchist FAQ*, and *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* by Peter Marshall. I also read anarchist sites and forums discussing Obama's election.

THEMES:

Ideology, Anarchism, Politics

- Clara explores ideas of anarchism, democracy and what it means to adopt a strong world view. She considers the role of government, the power of the individual, developing a personal identity and 'labels' we give ourselves and each other.
- Clara questions her own labelling and stereotyping of others as terrorists or potential attackers due to their colour or ethnicity, making assumptions about particular groups in society: homeless women, the various volunteers she works with, her mother's friend Tony.
- The book is set in the aftermath of Obama's election and spans the day of his inauguration. Clara considers what his election means for society and also whether or not one person has the power to forge real change.
- Clara is interested in the concept of anarchism but is never really confident with it. At one point she struggles with a decision to be involved in an anti-Obama protest on the day of his inauguration.

Parent/Child Relationships and Adult Relationships

- Clara's family structure leads to quite different relationships with her mother and her father. The book examines in detail her relationship with her mother and how it changes as she makes the transition from school student to adult.
- When Clara's mother begins a relationship with Tony, a married man, Clara is quick to judge and takes a very black-and-white view of such relationships.
- Her relationship with Campbell causes Clara to consider aspects of her relationship with Liam, her friend from Australia, and consider what it is that she wants from a boyfriend. Campbell and her mother both challenge her opinions.

Self-Awareness and Identity

- Despite her intelligence, Clara struggles with her self-image and worries about what people think of her. She is pessimistic about her abilities and quick to imagine people think the worst of her.
- Throughout the novel a number of people challenge Clara on this view of herself she comes across and her experiences build her confidence and self-awareness.
- Clara deals with personal safety issues and perceptions – both in relation to her fear of terrorist attacks and her mugging near the end of the novel.

Social Issues – homelessness, rehabilitation of prisoners and ownership of property

- At her mother’s suggestion Clara becomes a volunteer with two organisations: a homeless womens’ shelter where she serves food and Reading Beyond Bars.
- In contrast to the homeless women who have no choice or resources, Campbell and his friends actively choose and feel entirely justified to live in a property without the permission of the owner.

Travel and exposure to new experiences and ideas

- Clara drags herself away from the television and confronts her personal safety fears by taking the subway to explore Washington. She visits museums, galleries and landmarks and experiences many reactions and emotions. The reader is left in no doubt that Clara’s experiences in Washington have changed her, reflecting the value of travel and breaking with routine.

Sexuality

- Clara has her first sexual experience with Campbell. Her mother tries to discuss safe sex with her but Clara is confident in the physical, if not the emotional, aspect of sex. The reader experiences her nervousness, indecisiveness and eventual decision to ‘get it over and done with and out of the way’. This passage of the book, and Campbell’s treatment of Clara from that point forward, presents an opportunity to discuss of teenage sexuality and healthy relationships.
- Campbell’s explanation of his relationship with Eric and the sudden ending of the relationship between Clara’s mother and Tony introduces another opportunity to discuss the complexity of sexual relationships.

Study, impact of Year 12 results on life choices and university entrance

- Although Clara is confident of her results and has applied to study law, during her time in Washington D.C. she questions why she has chosen this course of study. She avoids checking her results despite persistent encouragement to do so and only relents when she is once again happy with her career choice.
- Clara’s experiences in Washington clarify for her why she decided she wanted to become a lawyer in the first place.

Friendship, Social Media and Connectivity

- Clara has interesting expectations of and reactions to her friends from Melbourne during her time in Washington D.C.. Their contact is largely through Facebook and shows that impersonal communication can be interpreted in many ways.
- Clara decides she has to get out of the apartment – not only to explore Washington D.C. but to beat loneliness and feel some connection to others. This is a basic and universal human need and the prisoners who send and receive letters and the women who stay at the homeless shelter are no different in this way.
- Clara makes friends in Washington and readers can be invited to explore why people seek out the company of others. The genuine extension of friendship from someone such as Emily can be contrasted with that of the Anarchists, who see Clara as a possible recruit to their ideology.



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SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

- Students start a blog before reading the book. At the beginning of each chapter ask them to respond to the quotation that starts the chapter and/or at the end of each chapter ask them to add a comment to the blog or answer a reflection question.
- A shorter version of the above activity would be to ask students to write a Facebook status update for Clara at the end of each chapter.
- Engagement with the ideas in the book can be enhanced through peer discussion. Use a wiki to create a class discussion at particular points throughout the book. Students can add to these at any time from home or at school as they work through the book.
- Allocate each student/group of students an event from the book and ask them to respond in role as Clara either through:
 - filming a video diary or
 - writing a diary entry or
 - writing an email to a friend at home in Melbourne

These responses should clearly identify Clara’s feelings and thoughts about the event and should attempt to position the reader to feel sympathy or agreement with her.

- Students are asked to put themselves in Clara’s shoes regarding boarding a plane to the US and travelling around in Washington D.C.. Considering their previous life experiences and what they know about the US, would they hold the same concerns as Clara about terrorism and their personal safety? Why or why not?
- Students consider Clara’s mixed feelings about being involved in the protest (or any other issue she feels torn about – sleeping with Campbell, going to New York, checking her results, contacting her friends in Melbourne) What would they have done under such circumstances? Is she making decisions for the right reasons? Why or why not? What advice would they give Clara if she asked them to help her to make a decision? Students must give arguments to support their advice.
- Clara is an interesting character with clear strengths and flaws. Ask students to undertake an analysis of Clara’s character and argue whether she is ultimately a positive, negative or neutral role model for young adult readers. They should support their view with examples from the book. They may like to record their thoughts in a table:

Characteristic or aspect of Clara’s personality	Positive/Negative/Neutral	Example/s from book

- Invite students to consider whether the author is ultimately attempting to give a balanced view of anarchy vs democracy or attempting to persuade the reader for or against the concept of anarchy. Students must give examples from the book that demonstrate how they are being positioned or educated as readers.

- Students view Obama's 'Yes We Can' speech at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe751kMBwms and consider why that speech struck a chord prior to the US election and what hopes it may have raised in voters. Has Obama lived up to the expectations and excitement that surrounded his election victory? How does this speech represent the zeitgeist? Can students think of any such speech in Australian history?
- Have a map of Washington D.C. on the wall in the classroom and task students with marking the places Clara visits. This helps students to visualise her movements and gain a better understanding of the number of places of significance she visits in her travels.
- Make computers or iPads available in the classroom for students to explore further places or concepts as they arise in the novel. For example, students may want to see the places Clara visits or explore particular concepts or look at Australian versions of volunteer groups, landmarks in Canberra etc.
- For further discussion of anarchy ask students to read and discuss non-fiction excerpts about the topic or consider excerpts from a novel such as *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding.
- Alternatively, the book could be studied alongside another coming-of-age novel featuring a central male character of a similar age and set in a completely different landscape e.g. *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey.
- For extended study there are numerous books and films set in Washington:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Films_set_in_Washington,_D.C.
www.gwu.edu/gelman/spec/researchguides/bibliographies/dc-fiction.pdf
- There are a range of professional readings about development of identity in young adolescent fiction available online or through teacher professional associations:
www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ665980&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ665980

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Penny Tangey stepped into the stand-up comedy scene after winning the Victorian final of Triple J's Raw Comedy Competition in 2001. Since then she has performed regularly in Melbourne and been involved in many festival shows, including the prestigious Comedy Zone and she has appeared on Stand-up! on ABC TV. Penny was a 2006 recipient of a Brian McCarthy Memorial Award (Moosehead) for her show *Kathy Smith Goes to Maths Camp*.

Loving Richard Feynman was shortlisted in the 2010 CBCA Awards (Book of the Year for Older Readers), 2010 Western Australian Premier's Awards and longlisted in the 2010 Inky Awards.