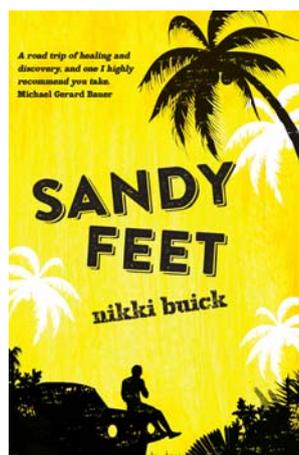


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Sandy Feet

Nikki Buick



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

When Hunter's mum decides to take the family on a road trip to Far North Queensland, he finds it hard to conceal his resentment. No Facebook. No internet. No Xbox. But facing life without his dad is even more unbearable. In a journey that is both confronting and healing, Hunter is about to learn the true value of family, friendship and love.

Sandy Feet by Nikki Buick is a gritty and tangible coming-of-age story about loss, trust and hope.

THEMES

Relationships:

- Hunter is frustrated by his mother's behaviour and resents that he is forced to go on this road trip.
- Hunter misses his father and resents his stepfather.
- Hunter begins to realise that the nature of relationships changes, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Hope:

- Sophie helps Hunter to realise that hope is everywhere and in everything.

Trust:

- Hunter feels he can't trust his mother after finding out the truth about his dad.
- Hunter does not want to trust his stepdad, Step.
- Trust is not to be automatically presumed; it is something to be treasured and earned.

Grief:

- Hunter is dealing with losing his father; the true nature of his loss only becomes apparent late in the text.
- Hunter's mother is grieving the breakdown of her marriage.

Mental health:

- Hunter is the first to discover his mum has attempted suicide. This road trip is her way of processing her emotions and moving forward.

Journeys:

- This is both a personal and a physical journey; Hunter learns much about himself and his family while on the road trip to Far North Queensland

WRITING STYLE

Sandy Feet is written in first person, past tense. It chronicles the road trip that Hunter is forced to endure with his mum, stepdad, younger sister, and baby brother.

The narration is reflective, raw and realistic, as Hunter – removed from social media and the internet – is forced to confront his emotions and 'navel-gaze'. It is suitable for Young Adult readers aged 15+.

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STUDY NOTES

- Hunter's 'voice' is immediate and arresting. After reading the first few chapters, discuss how the author has achieved this. What language features has the author used to create this instant connection?
- How would you describe Hunter's character after having read the first few pages of *Sandy Feet*? In what ways can you relate to him?
- What does Hunter mean when he says, 'Mum used to be normal – not tuckshop normal, but normal enough' (p4)? What has changed his opinion? How does this realisation create tension early in the story?
- Why does Hunter call his stepfather 'Step'? What deeper meaning can be read into Hunter's state of mind from this seemingly innocuous plotline?
- Reread page 5, in which Hunter describes finding his mother foaming at the mouth and blue in the face. What makes this description so powerful?
- Discuss the use of figurative language throughout the text. Examples include:
 - o I absorb inane things ... like other people soak up their hot chips in vinegar (p1).
 - o The dry sand sounded like lobsters dying when I walked over it and the wet sand felt like I was walking in cold cow dung (p3).
 - o In that moment everything rushed at me like a tsunami (p5).
 - o ... some invisible secret curse that she was wearing around her shoulders like a leaden shawl (p6).
 - o ... a rash of itchy red lumps had burst across my chest like mutant measles (p7).
 - o ... the water karate-kicked me off my feet (p12).
 - o I was buffeted about like a sock in a washing machine (p12).
 - o ... the poor little guy was lathered in it, like a fish fillet drowning in batter (p12).
 - o She seemed to have forgotten Dad and had replaced him just as easily as a battery in her DS – slipping off one dad and into another like a t-shirt (p16).
 - o My skate-shoe jiggled like a nervous inmate on death row (p18).
 - o The relentless spread of margarine grasses and blanched tree trunks worked like the swinging pocket watch of a hypnotist (p19) ...
 - o ... his laugh was like the revving of motors before a drag-race (p20).
 - o The milky haze of heat hung over the acres of dried grass as our black Jeep Cherokee cut the dusty road in two (p20).
 - o Her moods lately had been like eggshells – fragile (p26).
 - o The landscape was still as bland and tasteless as a stale bread roll (p40).
 - o I felt a pain in my throat, like a snagged fishbone (p40) ...
 - o The tension between me and the adults had grown ice over it during the course of the week, like an early morning frost that never thaws (p106).
 - o A strangehold of tension gripped us all on the stretch from Ingham to Cairns like a headlock in a wrestling match (p114).

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- o ... he'd gone a bit wild and the afro was buzzing about his head like a halo of fleas (p118).
- o The lack of hot showers and proper shade had seen us all fraying and fading like old beach towels (p119).
- o There was a sadness that hung about his face like invisible jowls (p252).
- Hunter begins to wonder if he's addicted to Facebook when he has withdrawal symptoms. How would you know if you're addicted to social media? What are the implications of this? Hold a 'campfire' discussion about the impact and role of social media in your life. What are its advantages and disadvantages? How would you cope without it for six weeks?
- Why does Hunter get annoyed when Step answers his mother's general knowledge questions? Why does Hunter find this, 'sad and yet amusing' (p8)? What does this reveal about Step's personality?
- Hunter describes himself as a 'fish out of water' (p12). What does he mean by this?
- Hunter is embarrassed by his name. Why is this? What would he rather be called? How important are names? Discuss.
- Why is Hunter angry with Pippa for accepting Step so readily? Why does he think she has betrayed their father?
- The journalist Hunter S. Thompson, about whom a film starring Johnny Depp was made, is often mentioned in the text. Find out more about Hunter S. Thompson. Use a mind map to compare his life with Hunter's.
- Reread the description of the landscape on p24. Comment on the language features used to create this scene. Write a landscape poem to reflect this scene, using some of the imagery from the passage as stimulus.
- Create a character profile of Hunter's mother. What are her personality traits, likes and dislikes? What obstacles has she had to overcome?
- Certain parts of Hunter's journey north lead to pivotal moments in his acceptance of what has happened. Keep a journal to show where, why and how these moments occur.
- Have you ever felt lost like Hunter? Write a reflection to express these times.
- How do the new people Hunter meets help him to grow and heal?
- Using the description of 'the pimple' on p80, sketch this scene. Write a reflection of the impact of this moment on Hunter's life.
- Why does Hunter feel his dad's presence at 'the pimple'? How does this help him to process a myriad of emotions whilst there?
- Why is it important that Hunter cried on p82? Discuss.
- Hunter calls himself an agnostic. Why does Hunter define himself in this way?
- Why does Hunter begin to think that because his dad's not around, it's more difficult to accept Step?
- Write a journal to respond to Hunter's statement that, 'in the big picture, I was a dot. A spot' (p102).
- Why does Hunter compare himself to Shakespeare's Hamlet? After learning the premise and storyline of this play, make this comparison on paper.

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- Write your own essay in response to the topic 'something that changed my life'. Alternatively, write this response in the role of Hunter.
- What effect does Beggsie's impending fatherhood have on Hunter?
- Reread p137 in which Hunter wonders if his reluctance to talk about his experiences is holding back his recovery. Do you agree with Hunter? Discuss.
- Hunter comments that, 'if there was a defining moment that made a boy into a man, I think it was that particular moment ... on the side of the road ... on the way to Cairns Hospital' (p221) ... What does he mean by this? Why does he think that this is his 'defining moment'?
- How does Hunter's relationship with Step evolve throughout the text?
- In what ways is the theme of hope woven throughout the text? Use the following extract from *Sandy Feet* as a reference to help in your response: 'Hope that all the crappy things about life might start making way for some new growth, like green shoots sprouting up from the ashes after a bushfire' (p86).
- Create a 'wardrobe' for Hunter using the descriptions of his taste in clothing found throughout the text.
- Describe the relationship that Hunter has with his sister, Pippa. What examples from the text exemplify this relationship? How does their relationship reveal Hunter's true character traits?
- Retrace Hunter's journey on a map of Queensland. Annotate this map to show the personal journey that Hunter undertakes at each part of this journey.
- In what ways is Hunter's journey as much a personal journey as much as a physical one?
- Throughout the text, clues indicate what may have happened to Hunter's father. When the truth is revealed, are you surprised? Why? Discuss.
- Hunter comments that boys bottle things up while girls 'never shut up about their feelings' (p124). Discuss this comment and the virtues of communicating feelings to help process them. How has his reluctance to talk stopped him from moving on?
- Why is it easier for Hunter to talk about his dad to Sophie rather than his friends back in Brisbane? What role does Sophie play in *Sandy Feet*?
- Imagine you are Hunter. Write the letter to his dad that he wanted to write but never did.

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'While travelling with my husband and children on a three-month camping holiday through Far North Queensland, I was captivated by the idea of using the incredible backdrop of palm-fringed beaches and atmospheric turtle-filled waterholes as the setting for a novel. It was a few years later that the Queensland Writers Centre introduced me to a publishing mentor who encouraged me to write a young adult novel.

'As the mother of three teenage sons (as well as some younger ones!), it followed quite naturally that I would borrow their collective souls to breathe life into the character of Hunter and he did become a hybrid of my own young men. I sat down and wrote the story of an angst ridden teenager, dragged along on a family adventure that held no interest whatsoever for him. (My sixteen-year-old son Harry could well relate to such a tale and still has nightmares!)

'While the setting and, to a certain extent, the main character were drawn from life, the themes of blended families, absent fathers, mental illness, disability and self-discovery came from my years of study and work in the area of Family Dispute Resolution, listening to and counselling young people through the areas they found difficult to navigate on their own. Hunter now feels like my honorary, make-believe son and I love him almost as much as the others!'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikki Buick has had a varied career, from film and television acting to teaching to legal counselling. She lives in Queensland with her husband and children. *One Way or Another: The Story of a Girl Who Loved Rock Stars* (written under her maiden name, McWatters) was her first book. It was shortlisted for the Emerging Author Award in the former Queensland Premier's Literary Awards.